

A WORLD APART

“Where’s Mommy?” a soft voice implored from behind me.

I lowered the scraper that I had been using to coax charred burger residue from our Weber grill and turned to regard my six year old son, Bryson. He was looking up at me, brown eyes brimming with the wonder and exuberance that only youthful innocence could conjure.

In response, my attention shifted to the far corner of our spacious backyard; past the small koi pond that rippled with the early morning breeze, past the freshly trimmed hedge of arborvitae. I had seen my wife, Naomi, heading in that direction only a minute ago. It wasn’t long before I spotted her, walking side by side with her mother along a narrow footpath that wound its way through a lush garden awash with blooming tulips, rose bushes and lilacs.

“There she is,” I said, pointing them out to Bryson. His eyes lit up even brighter as he saw them. I sensed he was about to launch himself in their direction so I put a hand firmly on his shoulder. “She’s busy right now, Bryson. She’s talking with your grammy.”

“But I want to see Grammy too!” Bryson persisted.

“You know it doesn’t work that way. Grammy will come and see you sometime soon, I’m sure. Now go inside and play.”

Bryson spun on his heel and tromped back to the house. I smiled to myself and shook my head as I watched him go. I still marveled at how such visits seemed perfectly natural to children. They accepted them as a routine part of life. But I remembered the world the way it was before.

Feeling a chill, I glanced up at the overcast sky and mouthed a silent invocation that the clouds would recede before our neighborhood cookout got underway. I leaned back over the grill and continued scraping but soon found myself squinting out beyond the hedge, trying to catch another glimpse of my wife.

There she was, in the midst of the garden’s colorful splendor, seated on a stone bench beside her mother. Naomi was talking and gesturing fancifully as she often did. Her mother sat quietly, hands resting in the folds of her paisley dress, listening intently to her daughter’s every word and occasionally nodding her head in agreement.

Just then, as if in answer to my petition, the sun pierced the sky’s murky veil. Its intensity served to highlight my wife’s outline and throw her form into sharp relief against the foliage that surrounded her. At the same time, her mother’s form faded in the sudden golden brilliance. Facial features dissolved, bleeding into the greenery. The pale stone of the bench where she sat seemed etched with a subtle paisley pattern from the dress she wore. Had I not known to look

for the vague translucent silhouette of a woman next to Naomi, I would have had the distinct impression that my wife was talking to herself.

Naomi's mother had, in fact, passed away eight years ago. And she had been one of the first to return, a little over a month later. That was the pivotal stretch of time when two worlds had coalesced and the living had finally become aware, incontrovertibly, that death wasn't the end.

No one knew why it had happened. Scientists were understandably reluctant to discuss the matter, many of them still mourning the inexorable loss of their precious materialism. Not even the spirits themselves could explain why the veil had mysteriously lifted.

The sun slipped back under a cloud and I could once again easily discern two figures seated on the bench. Another chill shot through me. I wasn't sure if it was due to the sudden lack of the sun's warming rays or the fact that Naomi's mother had turned momentarily to look in my direction.

I wasn't even sure that she had seen me. The visitations were always intensely personal and the spirit seldom acknowledged the presence of others. Or so I had been told. I was one of the few people left who had never been visited.

Several factors contributed to my unique situation, not the least of which was the fact that my mother had deserted my father when I was an infant which effectively left me with half a family and, consequently, half of the opportunities to be visited by a deceased relative. There was also the fact that my father had been an only child which ruled out any visitations by aunts, uncles or even cousins. As for my father himself. Well, that was another matter.

A few minutes later and I had finished cleaning the grill. I walked out to the mailbox to retrieve the Sunday paper just as a man dressed in billowy white robes was passing by on the sidewalk.

"Good morning, Reverend Harris," I called out.

He paused, adjusting the scarlet stole emblazoned with a pair of Latin crosses that was draped over his shoulders. "And a good morning to you, Robert!" he replied jovially. "Will I be seeing you in services today by any chance?"

My eyes subconsciously shifted away from his gaze for a moment before I forced them back, hoping he hadn't noticed. "I'm afraid not today, Reverend."

"Ah," was all he said. His eyes narrowed as if he were trying to peer directly into my imperiled soul. I felt a sudden stitch of guilt over my defection from the good reverend's flock.

Truth be told, most religions had taken a big hit the last few years. The concept of spirits of the deceased freely interacting with our world didn't fit well with most of their biased, prepackaged

ideologies. Nor did the fact that people of every religion were accounted for amongst the spirit world's abundant ranks. Whether Christians or Buddhists or even Scientologists, they all seemed to flourish equally well on the other side. Even atheists, much to their own chagrin, returned in droves to commune with their loved ones and perhaps endure a little well deserved chiding for their former shortsightedness..

At that moment, it was my own shortsightedness for striking up a conversation with the overzealous reverend that concerned me. "We're hosting the neighborhood cookout today," I conceded truthfully. His gaze never wavered.

"And we don't have a minute to spare this morning, what with all the preparations and all," I added, a little less truthfully.

He eyed the paper I was holding suspiciously, then nodded his head. "Well, it's all good and right to congregate with one's neighbors. But just remember to keep the faith." He pointed a finger skyward. "He's still up there," he added with a wink.

I smiled weakly and waved as he took his leave; then ambled back to the patio, plopped myself down in a lawn chair and unfolded the paper in front of me.

As I perused the headline news, it occurred to me yet again just how much the world had changed in the wake of the appearances. Homicides were down tenfold. It had quickly become apparent to most would-be murderers that attempting to terminate the existence of another person was an exercise in futility. More times than not, the victim would simply return to haunt their own killer, imploring to know why they had committed such an unconscionable act. Surprisingly, there was seldom any animosity toward their assailant but more often a benevolent sentiment to forgive. Such gratuitous kindness was enough to bring most hardened criminals to their knees.

World events still figured prominently in the daily rag's pages. Countries would always have their disagreements and wars would always be fought, though perhaps less frequently and with diminished vigor. And even though terrorists had less to be fanatic about, the extremist mindset still bred its share of monsters. Obituaries, of course, could be found hidden behind the sports page where the casual reader could hastily bypass them. But they didn't hold quite the significance they once did, now that death had lost its fangs.

I was just finishing with the comics when Naomi walked up next to me, her face beaming. I snapped the paper closed and rested it on my knee.

"How was your visit?" I asked.

"Delightful," she said, sinking down onto the grass and stretching her legs out in front of her. "We had a nice chat about my new position at the firm and then we reminisced a bit about the

picnics we used to have when I was little and how we would lie there on the blanket and look up at the clouds and point out to each other all of the shapes that we each imagined we saw.”

“That sounds nice,” I said.

Naomi tilted her head, watching me closely. And for the second time that day I felt like someone was peering directly into my soul. “You know he would come and see you if he could,” she said.

My hand tightened involuntarily on the newspaper.

“He’s probably moved on already,” she offered. “They all do eventually.”

The deceased were notoriously elusive about providing details on their sojourns in the next world, perhaps out of concern that some natural order would be violated or perhaps just because there were no befitting words to describe their fantastical reality.

What was known was that they spent most of their time in reverent introspection of their former earthly life, reconciling transgressions and assimilating the lessons they had learned. When that process reached fruition they were free to move on, though a few chose to linger until their loved ones eventually crossed over. It was assumed that they transitioned to a higher plane of existence, perhaps even an eternal communion with God.

The river of time flowed at vastly different rates depending on which side of the veil you happened to be on. But the time it took for spirits to complete their pondering and atonement was seldom less than several years by our measure. Apparently the average person had much to atone for. In any event, my father had been gone almost ten.

“I suppose he probably has moved on but why didn’t he visit me before? Maybe he’s never really forgiven me,” I said, raking the air with my hand to dissuade a fly that was pestering me.

Naomi leaned toward me. “Forgiven you for what?”

“For getting sick,” I said. I brought my hand up and instinctively clutched my stomach just a few inches to the right of my navel. Even through the fabric of my t-shirt I could feel the ten-inch long ridge of fibrous scar tissue that served as a constant reminder of the battle I had fought as a teenager. Some likened such scars to badges of courage. But mine I regarded as a badge of shame.

Naomi waved her hand dismissively. “That’s silly, Robert. You didn’t ask to be born with kidney disease.”

“I didn’t ask for a lot of things,” I said, continuing to track the fly’s errant course around my head. I could feel the skin on my face tighten into a scowl despite my best effort to counteract it.

Naomi touched a hand to my knee. "Your father knew the risks. He wanted you to have a chance at a long healthy life."

I shrugged my shoulders and swatted at the persistent fly that buzzed me in a daring fly by. "And he ended up losing his own," I muttered.

"Sometimes life just isn't fair, Robert. Didn't your father once tell you that?" she asked.

Her stern gaze and the intensity in her tone forced me to relinquish my pursuit of the winged beastie and meet her eyes. Those words still echoed in my head, uttered by my father while he was lying in a hospital bed suffering from an infection he had contracted during the surgery that had bestowed me with a working kidney. "*Nobody ever said life was fair, Robbie, my boy,*" he had said in his droll, matter-of-fact way. It had been the last time I saw him alive.

"Damn right it's not fair," I said, perhaps a little too loudly. I glanced around to be sure no one was within earshot before continuing my tirade. "He didn't ask for a pathetic sick little kid. It wasn't his fault that my kidneys failed."

"It wasn't your fault either," Naomi, my wife and self-appointed therapist, said. "Don't punish yourself for things that you had no control over. He did what he did because he loved you."

My buzzing tormentor finally alighted on my knee and, with a well-aimed smack from my paper, I took him out of this world, perhaps to an afterlife where he could reflect on the folly of being relentlessly annoying. A fault that, at the moment, Naomi shared with the late insect.

"He loved me alright. Loved me so much he wouldn't even come back and visit me."

Naomi pulled in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut. I could imagine her counting to five in an attempt to maintain her composure. Then her eyes slowly opened and she raised her hands in resignation. "Okay, fine. I understand." She rose to her feet and bent to kiss my forehead. "You're incorrigible, you know," she whispered in my ear.

"I know," I said and smiled up at her meekly.

Our neighbors started arriving late in the morning and by noon our cook-out was in full swing. Naomi kept the women entertained with hors d'oeuvres and community chitchat while the men stood huddled in small cliques, beers in hand, discussing the merits of diagonal mowing and the latest debacles on the pro golf circuit.

Meanwhile, bands of rogue children prowled the yard, wreaking mayhem on hapless flora and terrorizing our pudgy yellow lab, Brutus, who wisely sought refuge in the crawlspace under our house. All in all, it was shaping up to be a typical summer Sunday gathering in suburbia.

I was content to take it all in from my duty station behind the sizzling, smoking grill. The first hour I catered to a steady line of ravenous revelers. There was no time for socializing so I settled for exchanging pleasantries and occasionally some light banter as I doled out juicy slabs of ribeyes and chicken dripping with thick barbecue sauce. The more adventurous souls chose to partake of my specialty: roasted bell peppers drizzled with olive oil, served with a dollop of ranch dressing and topped with a sprinkle of feta cheese.

Once the majority of appetites were appeased and my line of customers dwindled to an occasional drifter, I cracked open a Michelob and slid the frost-caked bottle across my sweaty brow.

“What’s up, Rob?” I heard from behind me. I turned to see Phil Krantz who lived directly across from us. He was dressed in the baggiest t-shirt and cargo shorts I could ever remember seeing. Perhaps it was a futile attempt to cover up the paunch that bulged from his midsection. His mouth and chin were smeared with congealed brown patches of Sweet Baby Rae’s finest.

“Did you enjoy the chicken?” I asked, tapping the side of my own mouth.

He took the hint and hastily swabbed his face with a napkin. “To die for, bud. To die for.”

“How’s Mary?” I asked.

I noticed his smile waver for a moment. “She’s fine,” he said, nodding his head vigorously, seemingly more to convince himself than me.

I swept my gaze across the crowded backyard, trying to pick out his wife’s tall, thin form. Phil noticed and his eyes widened. “Oh, she’s at home.”

“Doesn’t she like my cooking?” I joked.

“Oh, no. Nothing like that,” he said. “She’s talking with...Evan.” I sensed his reluctance to speak the name which surprised me. Evan was their son. He had died a year ago at the age of twelve from a congenital heart defect.

“Nothing wrong with that. Naomi just had a nice visit with her mother this morning.”

Phil’s vacant stare drifted past me and settled on his house across the street. “It’s different with Mary. She’s not herself anymore.”

I leaned back against the grill. “How so?” I asked.

“I guess you’d say she’s obsessed.” I watched as the faint lines in his brow became deep jagged

trenches. “She doesn’t sleep much, doesn’t eat much. She hardly says a word to me anymore. She’s constantly looking for Evan. Even when he’s not there, she still talks to him.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe she needs to see someone about it.”

Phil grunted. “I’ve mentioned that. She refuses. Evan told me he’s concerned, too. He’s tried to convince her to go on with her life and not worry about him. That he’s beyond all the pain now. He’s tried to prepare her for the time when he’ll be moving on.”

“He couldn’t get through to her?” I asked.

Phil shook his head. “It’s sort of like this world doesn’t matter to her anymore. And when you really think about it, does it matter? Who wants to live in a world filled with greed, hatred and pain when you know that, without a doubt, a better world is waiting for us on the other side?”

“There is that,” I admitted.

Phil remained quiet for a moment but I could see the gears turning, steam building. I sensed he was holding back the words he desperately wanted to speak, his cheeks puffing out slightly as they piled up. Then, in one violent fusillade they burst forth and tumbled from his quivering jowels.

“Where’s our motivation for making the world a better place? Where’s our motivation for doing anything?” he half-shouted, his arms and hands gesticulating wildly as he continued his tirade. “Did you ever think that maybe there are fewer wars and fewer crimes now not because we are somehow better people but because there is less to fight for? This life has turned into nothing more than a pit stop to eternity. I think we were far better off before the veil lifted and we were still in the dark. You know? When the world mattered because that just might have been all that there was. When we were mortal.”

Phil’s cell phone chirped from his pocket. He clumsily fished it out and slapped it to his ear. “Hello? Yes, honey,” I heard him say before he spun around to exclude me from the conversation. I took a long pull on my beer, reflecting momentarily on Phil’s words, knowing they held more truth than I cared to admit.

Phil finished his call and turned back around. “Gotta go. Mary was wondering where I ran off to.”

“Say hi to her for me,” I called after him as he hurried away.

“I will. I certainly will,” he shouted back.

As I watched him rush off, my heart went out to him and Mary. I had heard about such fixations on the afterlife but they didn’t occur all that frequently. It was far more common for people who

still adamantly refused to believe in the great beyond to develop psychological problems when their disincarnate loved ones came calling. In a tragic twist of irony, the well-intentioned spirits who sought only to provide solace and proof of their continued existence, frequently drove their surviving kin into a full blown psychotic break with reality. Apparently, where the implications of life after death were concerned, some people preferred madness.

I had just started on my second beer when I spotted Vernon Dean, my old high school shop teacher, ambling slowly toward me. The years had not been kind to Vern. He was in his sixties and suffering from stage four pancreatic cancer. He was a shadow of his former self. His t-shirt and khakis hung from his meager frame like laundry on a sagging clothesline. Yet despite his haggard appearance he was smiling ear to ear. He swung his arm up high in a vigorous wave that momentarily sent him staggering off balance.

By the time he wended his way through the crowd he was spent. He placed a sallow hand on the grill for support. I quickly snatched a folded lawn chair and snapped it open next to him. He nodded his appreciation and sank down into it.

“How are you, Vern?” I asked.

“That’s Mr. Dean to you,” he said with a smirk. “What’s the matter? No respect for your elders anymore?”

“I call you Vern now because, first and foremost, you’re my friend. But, deep down, you’ll always be Mr. Dean to me.”

He laughed hoarsely. “I guess Vern will do then.” He leaned back and pulled in a deep breath. “Mercy, these hot days are hard on a fella. Especially one in my condition.”

“How’s the chemo?” I asked.

Vern wrinkled his nose. “What chemo? I quit that crap last month.”

I frowned at him. “You don’t seem the type to just give up.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s not so much giving up as it is facing reality and letting nature take its course. Put it all in God’s hands.”

I raised an eyebrow. “In case you haven’t heard, even the dearly departed haven’t met the Big Guy yet.”

Vern crossed his legs and wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. “Well, we already know this life isn’t the end. How long did we have to listen to the heathens who told us that it was? God’s real alright. He just hasn’t seen fit to step out of the shadows yet.”

I took a swig and then remembered my manners. I held up the bottle. "Beer?"

Vern perked up at the thought. "Don't mind if I do," he said.

I popped open a fresh bottle and handed it to him.

"Still drink your dad's favorite brew, eh?" he asked between swallows.

I glanced down at the Michelob I was holding. "I guess you could say I've developed a taste for it. How did you know?"

"Your father and I went fishing together once or twice. Long time ago. You probably don't remember."

I took a moment to sort back through my childhood memories but couldn't recollect ever having seen Vern and my father together. "Can't say that I do," I said.

"Well, he didn't exactly have much time for recreational activities after you were born, raising you all by himself and all. The man did have his priorities straight. But we kept in touch."

I nodded and shuffled my feet nervously, eager to change the subject. "I'm glad to see you made it here today," I blurted out.

Vern smiled slyly. "Oh, I've still got a little life in me. Going to Tennessee next week. See the Grand Ole Opry. Maybe even Graceland. I hear tell Elvis still shows up from time to time. Guess he just can't stand to move on and leave all his adoring fans behind."

"You believe those tabloids?" I asked.

"Well, at least they don't try to print those cheap doctored photos of ghosts anymore."

I chuckled, recalling some of the laughable spectral photographs that had appeared on the covers of the tabloids back in the day. Once it had become apparent that actual spirits didn't appear in photos or video but only to the naked eye, such hoaxes had quickly ended.

It had also spelled an end to more than a dozen highly lucrative paranormal reality television shows. No longer did the public have the craving to sit on the edge of the sofa, waiting to catch a glimpse of a wispy apparition or hear a garbled, all-but-unintelligible disembodied voice on some celebrity con artist's state-of-the-art ghostbusting equipment. Yet more evidence that the world was a better place.

"How's the family?" I asked.

Vern uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "Oh, they're doing fine. My daughter, Joan, and her family moved to New York years ago. Haven't seen much of them since. Always too busy to come and visit and I never had the money to go visit them. Now, of course, with my...condition... they're constantly calling me, asking me if I need anything, and pestering me to come to the big city and move in with them."

"Are you considering it?" I asked.

Vern lowered his head. "Indeed, I am. Even though it's the last thing I need right now. I've got no time to deal with grief, regrets and pity. And this town has always been my home. My friends are here. It's where I belong. But I love them and I don't want to take my last breath with them feeling guilty on my account." He scratched his bald head and peered up at me. "Does that make any sense?"

"It does but I can't say I agree with your thinking," I began, never one to sugarcoat my opinions. "They're the ones who deserted you. If they feel guilty over that, then so be it."

Vern nodded. "You're right. Ain't denying that. But I'm her father." He patted his chest, producing a dull, hollow sound that made me cringe. "And a parent will always put the needs of their children before themselves, even when you could argue that they don't deserve it. So I'll take my little getaway next week. My last hurrah you might say. Then I'll go out there to that damnable overcrowded, polluted burg and spend my last days with them and in so doing, allow my family to appease their own consciences. Best for everyone that way."

I took another swallow of beer and focused my attention past Vern. "I guess we can just agree to disagree on that one."

Through my peripheral vision I could see that the corners of Vern's mouth had curled upward in a lopsided grin. "Funny thing about guilt is that it can build a wall around your heart and shut out the ones who love you the most if you let it. I'm lucky though. I've been blessed with the time and opportunity to make sure that doesn't happen. Sometimes it doesn't turn out that way."

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable again and glanced over at the still smoking grill. "It was nice talking to you, Vern. But I really have to get some more burgers on the grill."

I turned away but when he spoke next, the pitch and tone of his voice sounded oddly foreign, yet eerily familiar. "Nobody ever said life was fair, Robbie, my boy," he said.

An overwhelming sense of déjà vu washed over me and I felt a sudden weakness creep into my legs. I tried to brace myself on the small grill-side table but it tipped, sending a spatula clattering to the patio. I regained my footing just in time to see Vern wink up at me.

“How...,” I started to say.

Vern motioned toward three small forms crouched on the lawn near the arborvitae. I squinted and realized it was Bryson playing with two other children from the neighborhood.

“Your son?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes. That’s Bryson.”

“I wager you’d take a bullet for that boy. Just like your father took a proverbial bullet for you. Would you want your son to live the rest of his life hanging his head in shame or would you want him to hold his head high knowing he had a father who loved him so much that he was willing to give up everything for him? To celebrate your sacrifice with every new day.”

I looked at Vern not knowing what to say or just how the conversation had taken such a sharp, intimate and distressing turn.

“There’s a lot to be said for honoring your parents, Robert. Do you know how you honor your parents best? By living your life to the fullest. Your father gave you back your life. Honor him by making the best of it. I still intend to make the best of mine. Good seeing ya, Robert.”

I watched numbly as my former shop teacher climbed shakily to his feet and ambled off into the crowd. It took a few minutes for me to regain my vigor. The rest of the afternoon swept by in a blur. Eventually the guests dwindled to just a few friends who stayed to help with the clean up. Then they, too, made their way home.

The sun was still hovering just above the horizon when I covered the grill and made my way to the patio door. I poked my head in to see Naomi tidying up the kitchen.

“All good in here?” I asked.

She smiled and hung the last pan back on the pot rack. “Just finishing up. Then I’m going to take a nice warm bath. How about you?”

“I think I might take a drive,” I said, making a spur of the moment decision.

“You be careful,” she said.

Traffic was light as I left our subdivision and pulled out onto County B, one of the more scenic roads in our area which wound its way past sprawling verdant pastures, towering stands of pine and a pair of quaint farming communities. It was a drive that I made often, usually just to clear my head but from time to time I would make a right turn onto a desolate country road where a quiet little cemetery sat. I wasn’t sure just yet which of those occasions this particular drive

would turn out to be.

My head definitely needed some clearing, congested as it was with thoughts and impressions from the past day's inordinately disconcerting encounters. I had the windows down and the rush of early evening air felt cool and refreshing as it surged past my face and tousled my hair.

Such pleasant physical distractions usually served as a kind of white noise for my mind, drowning out the day's misfortunes and allowing my pummelled wits to rally. But this time, several issues continued to nag at my psyche. Words had been spoken and thoughts had been evoked that I needed to somehow make sense of.

It had all started with the morning's semi-heated exchange with Naomi. She had meant well and was all too aware that I still blamed myself for my father's death. She also had come to accept the melancholia that, from time to time, clung to me like a thick, dark fog.

What I found even more troubling was my chat with Vern. His words and the way that he had spoken them reminded me so much of my father. They further reinforced in my mind just how much I still mourned him. But they also forced me to consider just what his sacrifice had meant.

I had my father to thank for my wife, my son and for the pleasant, comfortable life that I led. I had him to thank for countless treasured memories and for every breath that I took. It occurred to me then that I had been so obsessed with what I had lost that I had never really taken the time to acknowledge what I had been given.

A side road was fast approaching. My hands tightened on the steering wheel as I deliberated. At the last moment, I braked hard and swung a right onto the narrow rutted drive. I followed it for another half a mile, then pulled to the side and parked next to an aging wrought iron gate that marked the entrance to Ashton Heights Cemetery.

Dew glistened on the freshly cut grass as I made my way down the familiar row of headstones. It was that magical few minutes in a summer evening when birds had only just ceased their chirping and crickets had yet to begin their nightly serenade. I let the raw silence envelop me and continued on.

At the foot of a gentle knoll sat a pale granite pillar that marked the final resting place of my father. I paused before the stone and bowed my head reverently, waiting for the words to come as they always did and fully realizing that my only audience would be that polished shard of cold rock. What I had to say, though spoken aloud, would ultimately be for myself.

"I'm here, dad," I began. On most such visits I would simply rehash all of the recent events that had transpired in my life. But such mundane drivel somehow seemed hollow now. I had more important things to say.

I breathed out a deep sigh. "It's hard to believe you've been gone almost ten years. So much has happened in my life since then. Good things. Wonderful things, actually. I'm proud of who I've become and I think you'd be proud of me, too."

I could feel hot tears begin to pool and sucked in a quick, deep breath to reign in my rampant emotions before continuing.

"I don't know why you never came back to visit me. I've always assumed it was because you were somehow disappointed in me or angry for what happened to you. But now I'm not so sure. Maybe it was because I just didn't have the courage to face you."

I winced, surprised by own sudden and unexpected revelation. Then I relaxed and let the words take me where I needed to go.

"You told me that life wasn't fair and that's true. But I think I've made the best of mine so far and I have you to thank for that. I don't think I've ever told you that before. All I've ever felt was guilt and shame because I felt responsible for your death. And while I'll always mourn losing you, that sadness shouldn't be tarnished with guilt or shame but tempered with gratitude for giving me a chance at life. I truly wish you were standing right here so I could thank you for helping me become the man that I am today."

A breeze sprung up and I thought I caught a whiff of sandalwood that instantly reminded me of my father's favorite cologne. Then I glanced upwind and saw a stand of cedar with several freshly trimmed boughs lying nearby. I chuckled at my own self-delusion.

The dew laden grass glistened in the last rays of the setting sun. The shimmering rippled up the hillside behind the headstone and, for a moment, I could have sworn it traced the outline of a human form. I dismissed it, knowing my mind was just playing hurtful tricks.

Feeling a chill, I shoved my hands deep into my pockets and turned to make my way back to the car. The crimson gleam of dusk was quickly fading and I was eager to get back home.

"You're welcome, son," came a voice from directly behind me. I froze, thinking it must have been the rustling of leaves in the evening breeze. Yet another cruel trick that my senses were playing on me.

As I turned back around I found myself staring slack-jawed into the smiling countenance of my father. But this wasn't the weak, haggard vestige of a man that I had watched breathe his last all those years ago. This was my father as I imagined he was in his prime.

He stood tall with not a trace of the potbelly he had carried the last few years of his life. Gone, too, were the age lines that had etched his face. He wore the clothes he had favored most in life; a sweatshirt, a pair of jeans and loafers. But what I found most striking of all was the subtle

intoxicating radiance that he emitted from head to toe. Even the pale granite of the headstone glowed in its unearthly brilliance.

“Dad,” I mouthed, the single word catching in my throat.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment, Robbie,” my father said in a soothing voice that brought to mind the delicate harmonics of a tuning fork softly set in motion.

“But how...I thought...you would have...moved on...by now,” I stammered.

My father glanced up into the twilight and from the look of bliss that swept over his face I had the distinct impression he was witnessing much more than just the night sky.

“We are free to move on to the next plane of existence when we feel that our presence is no longer needed.” His gaze shifted back to me. “But I had some unfinished business that I needed to attend to.”

Dismayed, I pointed at myself.

“That’s right,” he said. “I couldn’t leave until I knew you would be okay.”

My first impulse was to shout that I hadn’t been “okay” for the past ten years. But I suppressed the urge and chose a more subtle line of questioning. “Why now? Why after all these years?”

“Strange thing about spirits,” he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “We can’t make our presence known unless we’re invited. You never invited me, Robert.”

My eyes widened. “Yes. Yes, I did,” I insisted.

He shook his head. “No. You only thought that you wanted to see me.”

“I don’t understand,” I softly confessed.

My father folded his hands together and tilted his head slightly, regarding me with a gentle, caring expression that projected untold love and patience. “It wasn’t about me needing to forgive you because of your sickness. It wasn’t even about you forgiving me for dying and leaving you alone. It was about you forgiving yourself. Guilt is a very strong, very negative emotion. It can muddle your thinking. And it can close your mind and keep you from seeing the things that you really need to see.”

I felt tears well up and blinked to clear the sudden blur, half-thinking that he would be gone when I again opened my eyes.

“So it was me?” I asked, my voice quivering.

“Yes, it was you,” my father said matter-of-factly. “But just like I gave you that second chance at life, I found a way to give you another little nudge to help you see things more clearly.”

I thought to myself for a moment and quickly discerned his meaning. “Vern?” I asked.

My father nodded. “He and I were good friends a long time ago. I’ve been back to see him a few times. When I mentioned my scheme, he was only too happy to oblige.”

I wiped at the tears and let out a soft chuckle. “Good ole Vern,” I mumbled to myself. Then I noticed my father staring amusedly at the stone monument at his feet.

“Do you miss it?” I asked. “Your old body I mean.”

He snickered. “That old broken down heap of flesh and bones? No. Those worms are welcome to it. Never much cared for it, even when I was living.”

I reached up and touched my scar. “I know what you mean.”

My father smiled. Then he lifted the shimmering fabric of his shirt to reveal a matching scar on his otherwise blemishless ethereal body. “I chose to keep it. As a tribute to my love for you.”

“I love you, too, Dad,” I said, doing my best not to crumble into a sobbing wreck. Then the realization hit me that I finally had my father back. I smiled and let out a sigh. “We have so much to discuss. So much to catch up on.”

My father’s expression remained placid but I sensed a sudden tension in the air. “You will be around, won’t you?” I asked cautiously.

He took a step toward me, his warm gaze on me never wavering. “I’ve stayed this long just so I could have the chance to see you one last time. Now I have and it’s time for me to move on.”

“Move on? Move on to where?!?” I snapped.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what’s behind the next curtain any more than I knew what would happen to me when I died. But I’m still here though. Besides, you’ll always carry a little piece of me with you.” He tapped his side. “In more ways than one.”

My mind raced, searching for some compelling motivation that might convince him to stay. It didn’t take long to devise one. “Won’t you at least come and see my son? Your grandson?” I implored.

“I’ve already seen him, Robert. Just because you couldn’t see me, doesn’t mean that I haven’t been around.”

“I guess this is goodbye then,” I said.

“Not goodbye, Robert. Just until we meet again.” He winked. “Have a little faith.”

I stood and watched as he lifted two fingers to his brow and issued a parting salute. Then he faded from this world and I was left there standing alone. I looked up into the twilight sky where the moon was just finding its place amongst the swimming stars. It occurred to me that I knew where my place was, too. With a final glance back at the stone marker, I headed for home.