I Should Be Dead

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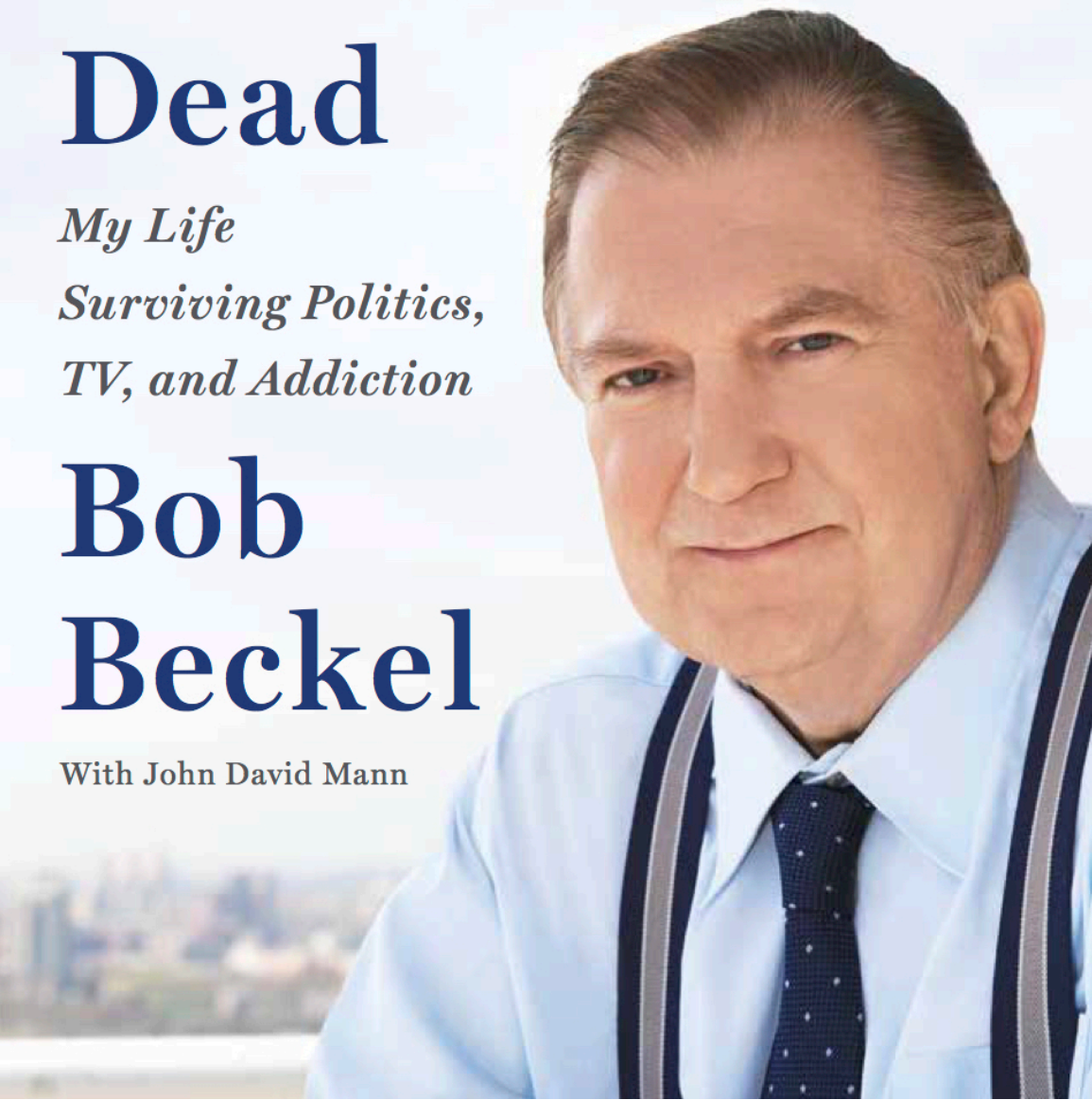
—CAL THOMAS

My Life Surviving Politics, TV, and Addiction



Bob Beckel

With John David Mann

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To my friend Cal Thomas,
whose persistence made this book possible
and whose friendship helped me get my life back;
and to my children, Alex and MacKenzie,
who taught me to love.

Contents

Author's Note

This book doesn't aim to be a Washington tell-all, but in the course of sharing my story I will say a lot about the players and some of their habits. Over my career I've come to know hundreds of politicians and dozens of TV personalities. Bits and pieces of some of their stories are included here. Some folks may not be too happy with these stories, but they are all true and, to my mind, worth telling. They are not meant to embarrass, and I was a participant in each one. If it's any solace to those mentioned here, I am much tougher on myself in these pages than on anyone else.

I am recounting all these stories to the very best of my recollection, which, with the passage of time and the toll of addiction, is far from perfect. If I misremember a name, date, or location, I ask your forgiveness in advance. In some passages I have used fictitious names and altered personal details (sometimes indicating as much and sometimes not). The sum and substance of everything in these pages is true, and that's ultimately where I hope the greater power of my story resides.

This book is not meant to be an exhaustive autobiography. I chose to include the stories that would best help my readers understand where I came from, how I got to where I am today, and, most important, what it means to be a survivor. My story, regrettably, is not unique. For those of you who have survived childhood abuse and addictions, the illusion of success, and the paralysis of failure—and your number is legion—I hope you will find kinship in these pages, and maybe even some answers. Some of the stories here you may find informative, some funny, and some tragic.

This is also the story of a journey of faith—or more accurately, a halting, stumbling journey *toward* faith. Through my first half-century the only

thing I believed in was my own ability to negotiate the rocks and rapids of life. That single-minded focus on myself as sole architect of my fate brought me through a difficult childhood, yet ultimately proved empty and very nearly fatal. It was only through the grace of God, along with the constancy and devotion of true friends, that I escaped that self-engineered path of self-destruction and found my way to an abiding faith in something greater.

Prologue

July 2014

Sitting outside Studio D at the Fox News building, in the open-air walkway between Forty-Seventh and Forty-Eighth streets in Midtown Manhattan, I am smoking my regular preshow cigar. It's a half-hour before my daily cable show, *The Five*, goes on the air. I smoked a cigar before the very first episode of *The Five* when it premiered on July 11, 2011. It's now three years later, and I have smoked one before each show since, every day, Monday through Friday, no matter the weather. Call it a habit; call it a good luck charm. So far it seems to be working.

Some young people, probably college kids sightseeing in the Big Apple, stop and ask if they can take a group photo with me. Of course, I tell them. I put the cigar down, get to my feet, and take my place in the center of the group so a recruited passerby can snap a few shots.

When you're a public figure people see you as a public utility, like it's perfectly all right to walk up to you on the street and start asking for favors, for a picture or an autograph, or just to converse. Most people in television savor this kind of celebrity. For me, it's still difficult. When I was a drunk and a drug addict I didn't want anyone paying attention to me. I wanted to melt into the wallpaper, be the guy behind the scenes. But now I do it, and with grace and good humor, as best I can.

One day not long ago while walking down the street I heard a voice going, "Bob! BOB!" I turned and saw a complete stranger trotting toward me with his phone in his outstretched hand. "My wife watches you every day," he

said. I started to ask him to thank her for me, but he cut me off. "I've got her on the phone right now. Can you talk to her?"

I looked at the guy. "You want me to talk to your wife on the phone?"

He nodded, eagerly. Like this was the most normal request in the world. Of course, why wouldn't I? I took the phone and said into it, "Hi, this is Bob Beckel."

The woman's voice was laughing on the other end. "I don't believe it. No, seriously, who is this. Is this *really* Bob Beckel?" I told her it really was. "I watch your show every day!" she said.

"Yeah, I heard," I said into the phone. "Is this crazy guy who put me on the phone actually your husband?" She said he was. "Well, I'll tell you both at the same time: You could do better. But he couldn't." They both got the biggest kick out of that.

I smile now, thinking about it, as the kids rearrange themselves around me for another pose. I feel the warmth of the New York sun on my face.

We snap the photo and the group of college kids drifts away. The passerby who took the shot grins at me and says, "Bob, I gotta tell you, I completely disagree with everything you say. But my wife and I—you're *our* kind of liberal, and we're about as conservative as they come!"

Nodding, I say, "If I had a nickel for every time…" He laughs. The truth is, I do hear that comment a lot, and never get tired of it. *We disagree with you but we love you.* Can't ask for anything better than that.

I retake my seat, reach down to the ashtray on the ground, and get my little cigar going again.

One of our producers, a young lady who couldn't possibly be a day over twenty-three, pops her head out the door. "Ten minutes, Mr. Beckel!"

Ten minutes. A world of time.

A man who works at the office across the way waves at me as he passes.

"Beckel," he calls out, "I have to say, you're looking excellent—for a beat-up old guy. You look like you're enjoying life."

He stops a few paces away, expectant.

This has become a little ritual of ours. We've had this same exchange, or versions of it, countless times before. My guess is he keeps saying it because he likes hearing my answer. Okay with me. It's a story I don't mind telling.

* * *

For most of my adult life, politics has been my business. For most of my childhood, survival was my business.

My life in politics has been exciting and rewarding. I was honored to be named the youngest deputy assistant secretary of state in history at the time, and privileged to serve President Jimmy Carter in the White House. I have been involved in close to a hundred political campaigns, including a stint on the national stage managing the presidential campaign of Walter Mondale to the biggest loss in American history. Politics and government led to a second career in television and radio as a political analyst. (Only in America can a guy manage a presidential candidate to a forty-nine-state rout, then go on to be paid very well to dispense political advice on TV and in lecture halls. What a country!)

I am also a recovering alcoholic and drug addict.

Much of my professional success, I attribute to my childhood. I grew up in an abusive, dysfunctional family. We lived just north of the poverty line for as long as I can remember. Both my parents were alcoholics. My father beat on me regularly, both verbally and physically. My mother was too abused and disempowered (and too drunk herself) to protect us. It was a living hell. I hated it. But it also shaped me into who I am.

In my house you didn't learn how to live so much as how to survive. During those early years I developed what are now clinically called "resilient survivor skills." I'm not proud of it. I'm not ashamed of it. It is what it is. And it wasn't a choice, really. Either you developed skills and survived, or you didn't. If you did, there was some hope for a successful future. If not, your soul got stamped on and broken along with your body; you became mired in despair, anger, and perpetual retaliation; your future was bleak, if you had a future at all.

Only God knows why some kids learn survival skills and others don't. It's not a question of intellect; there are plenty of smart kids who end up with wretched, miserable lives. Many die young, some by their own hand. I was among the lucky ones who learned survival skills early. These included, in no particular order: thinking quickly on one's feet; being a fast and smooth talker; hiding from trouble and avoiding conflict; the ability to broker deals

and break up fights; and, when the occasion demanded, lying with finesse. I learned how to wear a mask at all times and reveal my true feelings to no one.

In other words, I learned the perfect skills to become a very good politician.

Nor am I alone. Politics is riddled with successful survivors whose early years were spent in some degree of dysfunction. From Bill Clinton to his nemesis, Republican congressman Dan Burton of Indiana, Teddy Kennedy to Newt Gingrich, Richard Nixon to Lyndon Johnson, all are products of dysfunctional—often severely dysfunctional—childhoods.

Virtually all survivors carry a vast load of baggage with them. The more successful they become, the more that baggage seems to resurface. I've yet to meet a political survivor who hasn't experienced the return of childhood monsters as his or her public success grew. Some realize that to hold on to their success, they have to come to grips at last with those monsters. Some remain unwilling to do so and keep on using their survivor skills to avoid the reality of their escalating self-destruction, plunging further into their secret personal hells, losing themselves in alcohol, drugs, or other physical escapes by night while clinging desperately to their masks of respectability by day.

Some have come to realize that living life behind a survival mask is a losing game. Most have sought to save themselves in spite of the public humiliation that often follows. I've seen many of them at AA meetings or in rehab programs. For some, sadly, the last time I saw them was at their funerals.

It still amazes me that not one of those funerals was mine.

* * *

"You look like you're enjoying life," my studio neighbor has just said. That's the cue for my response, like the priest saying, *The Lord be with you*, and now it's the congregation's turn to say, *And also with you*.

"I am," I tell the guy. "I'm enjoying the hell out of it." And it's one of the truest things I've ever said. There isn't a lot that bothers me these days. My answering machine (I know, it's voicemail, but old habits die hard) says, *There's no such thing as a bad day*, and I believe that one hundred percent. I look at each day as a gift. A gesture of divine reprieve.

"Hey," I add, "given what I've been through, by all natural and mortal logic, *I should be dead*."

As I said, it's a story I don't mind telling. Though I've never told the whole story, until now.

January 20, 2001

How the hell did I get here?

I wake up with a blinding hangover, the kind that requires opening the eyelids one at a time, and very slowly. As my eyes come into focus the first thing I see is a grizzly bear.

I saw a grizzly once. Up close, near my summer place in Jackson, Wyoming. They're even bigger than you think.

The initial surge of terror passes as my poisoned brain gradually comes to a realization: The slow-moving mass at the foot of my bed is not a grizzly, but a person in a white uniform.

A nurse.

She may well be the largest woman I have ever seen. She doesn't say a word. Seems in no rush to leave, either. She settles herself down into a ridiculously tiny chair by the door of the room and begins to methodically turn the pages of an old issue of *People* magazine.

My eyes turn to the window by my bed.

The weather in Washington is awful. Cold and rainy with a brutal west wind sheeting off the Potomac. The great obelisk of the Washington Monument disappears into low clouds, all but the bottom 100 of her 550 feet of white marble swathed in bales of slate gray.

The Big Pencil, my kids used to call her.

I love that monument. Seeing it—whether from a plane, a train, a car, or on foot—has always told me I was home. I love this city. It's always taken care of me. Here was where I escaped who I'd been. Here, I became *somebody*. Somebody other people liked and admired.

My eyes ache. My head aches. Everything aches.

My soul aches, if there is such a thing.

George W. Bush is an hour away from taking the oath of office as the forty-third president of the United States. This is not a happy thought, at least not for me. On the plus side, I do have my own VIP room overlooking part of the inaugural parade route. I'm sequestered under an assumed name in a guarded room at the George Washington University Hospital psychiatric ward.

Welcome to the nuthouse.

With the foresight that has made our nation's capital so friendly to those in power, hospitals here have rooms set aside in their psych units for VIPs—rooms located at some distance from those for the ordinary nuts. The thinking, I suppose, is that no Washington big shot should be made to feel like a garden-variety fruitcake. It might harm their chances of recovery.

The nurse doesn't say a word. I watch her for close to an hour. The periodic, deliberate movement of her right arm, back and forth, as she turns those damn magazine pages, is as relentless as the turn of the seasons. No other movement, no other sound. Finally I screw up the nerve to ask her why she doesn't go take a walk or something.

" 'Cause I'm a suicide nurse," she replies in a don't-fuck-with-me monotone, her eyes never leaving the magazine pages. "All's I need is for your fat ass to jump out that window while I wasn't around and that's the end of my job." You can't fake compassion like that.

Her next move sets me off: She suggests we watch the inaugural on TV. As she reaches for the remote I struggle upright to stop her. "You put that shit on TV and the only dead body here will be *yours*! That jerk and his thugs are the reason I'm in this place—*so back off*."

It isn't true, of course. George W. Bush isn't the reason I'm here. *I'm* the reason I'm here. But I'm in no mood for honest introspection, not right now.

The nurse backs off.

Settling back against my mound of pillows, I try to reconstruct the events that landed me here. When you're a drunk, recollection is a futile exercise. Short-term memory is elusive at best. Besides, anything a drunk needs to struggle to remember the day after is probably not worth remembering anyway. But I try.

The election, Florida, *Bush* v. *Gore*... my insane plan to persuade a few pro-Bush members of the Electoral College to change their minds... scandal,

hate mail, vandalism, death threats against my family… Oh yeah, it's all coming back to me now.

But last night. How exactly did I wind up in here?

The details start floating back from the haze.

When they wheeled me in here last night (discreetly meeting my ambulance at the rear entrance, VIP treatment all the way), I had a blood alcohol level of approximately a hundred thousand. The ambulance guys had found me that way when they scraped my unconscious body off the asphalt in the back parking lot of some lowlife dive in Maryland. And before that? *Think, Beckel. Focus.*

I'm at the bar. I'm drunk, maybe drunker than I've ever been before. I'm propositioning the woman on the barstool next to me. Turns out she's married. Turns out her husband is behind me. I swivel around to look.

The guy is sticking a loaded .45 in my face.

Then he pulls the trigger.

How am I not dead?

Bob Beckel

CHAPTER ONE

Surviving Childhood

Alcoholism is a progressive disease. It grows, stealthy and relentless, consuming more and more of the host's health and well-being. Like all addictions, it is also most often an inherited disease. The role of heredity has been roundly debated in the addiction community for decades, but the evidence now seems persuasive that for most addicts, addiction is indeed a condition passed down from one generation to the next. Personally, I have all the evidence I need. I come from a long line of addicts stretching back generations on both sides of the family.

Alcoholism is not only progressive, and inherited, but also deadly. Over the years I've watched it claim the members of my family, one by one.

My father, his three brothers, and one sister came from a fairly prosperous Ohio family. His ancestors built the Beckel Hotel, which still stands in downtown Dayton, a dump on the corner of Third and Jefferson. The Wright Brothers assembled their first successful airplane in a garage adjoining the Beckel Hotel. The family's fortunes went down from there. My father and his father were both alcoholics, as was his mother. All five of the Beckel children were Ivy League graduates; very smart, athletic overachievers who in time mastered the art of underachievement through dissipation.

My aunt Barbara was an accomplished poet in New York City. At age thirty-six she checked herself into a flophouse in Hell's Kitchen with a case of gin and drank herself to death.

My uncle Frank was a doctor in North Carolina, and a good one, but a terrible drunk. He developed cirrhosis of the liver from vast consumption

of hooch over many years. If you have cirrhosis and don't stop drinking, as I've since been told by doctors who've seen it happen, you'll reach a point of no return and the disease will kill you in a very painful way. Frank belonged to the Hemlock Society, whose members preferred to put themselves out of their misery rather than suffer months or years of pain. When he realized that cirrhosis was going to kill him, he asked his younger brother Bill, probably the least accomplished of the Beckel kids but nonetheless very smart (and a superb golfer), to come do it first. With much reluctance, Bill put Frank out of his misery. After administering the hypodermic, Bill wandered off into the woods of North Carolina and eventually reappeared in Ohio, where he drank himself to death.

Frank also had a twin brother, Sam, who was my favorite uncle.

Sam was a bright light. He graduated from Harvard, spoke seven languages fluently, and could play concert piano by ear. He was also a superb bridge player. Everyone who knew Sam loved him. I say he was my favorite uncle because he moved in with my family when I was eleven years old and took me under his wing. When his wing wasn't flopping from drink. In the summer of '63, when I was fourteen, the state cops came and took Sam away for busting up a local bar. I'll never forget his mournful face, looking at us out the back window as they drove off; ever since that moment, I've had a hard time trusting cops. Despite his drinking problems, Uncle Sam was always kind to me and never yelled or hit me. Later, when I was in the Peace Corps and for years afterward, he would write me very thoughtful letters. I went to visit him twice in Ohio, when he moved back to be near a VA hospital and his favorite bars.

Uncle Sam died a drunk in the streets of Dayton at age fifty-nine.

Sam was a dignified, eloquent man who radiated intelligence. In the mid-1980s I found Sam in a flophouse, living with another man in a filthy one-room apartment. By this time I'd begun my TV career, and Sam took me to his favorite neighborhood bar to proudly introduce his accomplished nephew to his "friends" in the bar. You could not imagine the riffraff that were regulars at that bar. But in deference to Sam I treated them all with respect and spent several hours hearing about Sam's exploits and the long list of things he had done to help other people in the community. None of this came as any surprise to me. I miss him and always will.

I was thirty-eight when I visited Sam and knew by then that I had the

disease, too. At that point I was covering it up quite well, although this was not hard among Sam's crowd. In that joint, I probably seemed the epitome of self-possessed sobriety.

At the time I could not imagine myself ever ending up in such a place. In the years that followed, though, I would find myself in places just like that, and worse.

* * *

And then there was my father.

Cambridge Graham Beckel, Jr., was born in Dayton on Christmas Day, 1913. The Beckels then moved to Pennsylvania, where he grew up, became a high school history teacher, and enlisted to go off and fight the Nazis in Europe. Returning from World War II he taught high school in New Jersey, then became a professor at Queens College and New York University. In New York he bumped into a woman named Ellen Gilliland, whom he'd known back in Pennsylvania. Ellen, who was exquisitely beautiful, was now working as a model in Greenwich Village. Before long her name was Ellen Beckel and she was pregnant with a daughter they named Margaret, soon followed by a son they named Robert Gilliland Beckel. That would be me.

In 1954 my father wrote a textbook on the United Nations called *Workshops for the World*, and in a radio interview to promote the book he advocated admittance of Red China to the U.N. Under the dark cloud of the McCarthy era that was not the politically correct thing to say. He lost his teaching job. Whether that was the direct result of his controversial comments, nobody's ever said, but I've concluded that it was.

In 1956, now with a wife and three kids—my sister Peggy, little brother Graham ("Buddy"), and me—he left New York City and moved to Connecticut, to a beautiful little New England town called Lyme, today known mainly for the disease that bears its name. Lyme then had a population totaling about 950, a stark change from New York. We moved into a farm that sprawled over 448 acres; the farmhouse itself was a rambling wreck of a place that had served as a tollhouse back in the old Boston Post Road era. At $125 a month it was the only thing we could afford. In New York we'd had dozens of neighbors in the same building. Here there were no neighbors for a mile on either side. I was seven.

My mother dressed us in our church clothes for our first day of school. I remember my heart sinking when we got there and saw that all the other kids wore jeans. The teasing that started that day never stopped.

My father was deeply unhappy with the move. He later said his time at NYU was the most rewarding experience of his career. Life in Lyme was a huge comedown. The only work he could find was a job selling textbooks, and he hated it. Already a drinker, he now began boozing more and more. When he drank he got ugly, and that ugliness manifested most often as shouting, yelling, and sometimes beating. Before long I was wearing bruises to school to go with my jeans.

I don't want to give the impression that my father was a one-dimensional brute. Quite the contrary. If he had been, things might have been easier, because I could simply hate him. The reality was more complicated.

The same violent-tempered and abusive man who would terrorize us at night was a helpful, funny, nurturing father in the morning. He would get up every day to make us breakfast, pack our school lunches, and check our homework. For many years our dad had been a teacher and a very good one. I still have letters from former students, praising his teaching skills and saying what a positive impact he had on their lives. He had a way with words and told very funny stories. Everyone said so.

That was the man I came to think of as Morning Dad.

On the mornings our father was being particularly kind and funny, it would put a spring in our step as we walked to the school bus. We would ride away to school each morning, confused but hopeful that the morning dad who saw us off would be the same one who would come home that night.

It never was. At night that funny morning guy always morphed into a slurring, threatening animal. After work he would stop at his favorite bar and get shit-faced drunk. Exactly how shit-faced could be determined by the sounds of his footsteps when he arrived at home at night. Some nights he dragged himself in, screamed at my mother, and passed out. Then there were the nights he would come home looking for a fight, either with me or with Mom. He used words with her, fists with me. And I would take it, thinking, *Better me than Peggy, or Buddy, or Mom*.

Someday I'm going to be big enough to fight back, I promised myself.

I would spend the next forty-five years fighting back.

* * *

My childhood was so dominated by my father's presence that it's difficult for me to remember much about my mother.

I know she missed New York terribly. I recall her reminiscing often about Bedford Street in Greenwich Village and her modeling days. She was a social person who loved to dress up and go out. But those days were behind her now. When we moved out of the city and resettled in Connecticut, she hated it. To her the life of a housewife, having coffee in the mornings with the other moms and keeping house, with little in the way of intellectual challenge, was hell.

She tried very hard to fit into the Ozzie-and-Harriet household ideal of the times. One day a week, she was a Cub Scout leader. When I later went off to boarding school, she hand-sewed my name into my clothes. She cooked; she kept house. But the façade never quite worked. She loved my father very much, but she was also frightened of him. In the late afternoon, no doubt to fortify herself for the storm that would soon blow in the front door, she would start drinking. By the time the old man showed up, he would be roaring drunk—and she'd be well on her way, too. They would start to fight, and she would eventually run off to her room, leaving us without any cover. The old man didn't want to pick on his only daughter, and he wouldn't go after his youngest. You can do the math and guess who ended up as the habitual target for his rage.

My mother not only retreated into her room at night, she also retreated into a shell that increasingly walled her off from the world. It certainly walled her off from me. As I said, I don't have many memories of her. The old man showed up at my ball games sometimes; I don't remember her ever being there. My father, not my mother, would do the parent-teacher meetings. When I went to have my tonsils out, it was my father who took me.

Which goes back to the most confusing and, in a way, the most difficult thing about those years: When my father was Morning Dad, the good dad, he was a *very good* good dad.

* * *

Morning Dad was also a man of uncompromising principles and compassion for the downtrodden; it may have been his greatest quality. For as long

as I can remember, the civil rights movement was my father's passion. On sober mornings he would teach us about the movement, and especially about Martin Luther King, Jr. And he didn't just talk the talk, he also walked the walk, on the front lines at Birmingham, Montgomery, Stone Mountain, and Skokie. He paid an enormous physical price for his convictions, as they led to his being beaten and jailed numerous times. That kind of thing takes its toll on you, as I would later learn the hard way. He worked for Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference for several years. When Dr. King moved his family to Chicago in 1966 and marched to protest discrimination there, people threw bottles, rocks, and bricks at them. King later said, "I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I've seen here today." My father was part of that march and took a brick in the head for it.

I was proud of him for his commitment to civil rights. I was also grateful for his involvement—it took him away from home on many weekends and sometimes for weeks at a time, giving my mother, brother, sister, and me a brief respite from the sound and fury of his drinking and anger. For his part, I suspect those civil rights protests also gave him an excuse to get away and drink; I don't know this for a fact, but even if it's true, it doesn't lessen my admiration for his commitment to the cause.

One cold late-autumn night, just a few weeks before my twelfth birthday, my father and I drove about an hour from our home to Waterbury, Connecticut, where we got out of the car and joined a throng of people standing outside in the cold night. It was November 6, 1960, and John F. Kennedy was supposed to stop by and speak to the crowd. Kennedy had promised John Bailey, then Democratic state chairman of Connecticut and a strong supporter of Kennedy's, that he would campaign in Connecticut at least once before the election. (I didn't know any of this background at the time.) The last campaign stop on the candidate's itinerary was Waterbury.

Kennedy was everything to us. My mother had gone door-to-door for him. Our household was as pro-Kennedy as you could get.

I'll never forget that night. My father, to my surprise and relief, was not all that drunk. We spent hours standing in the rain as the crowd swelled to some fifty thousand people. Finally, at about three in the morning, Kennedy appeared. His voice was hoarse, it was the middle of the night and cold as hell—but still, it was *Kennedy*. The crowd went nuts. Pierre Salinger, JFK's

press secretary, later said it was the greatest night of the campaign. It may have been the greatest night of my childhood. I don't remember anything he said, but I remember how I felt.

Two days later I came downstairs in the evening and found my father watching TV. There were pictures of Kennedy and Nixon and all these numbers on the screen that kept changing. Once in a while they'd cut over to individual states. It was not the way it is today, with all the sophisticated graphics. It was more like a simple football-stadium scoreboard, with Walter Cronkite and other newsmen running commentary.

Normally I would never be in the house around the old man on purpose, especially not at night. But this was Election Day.

"Exactly how does this work, Pop?" I asked.

He said, "Well, people are going to their polling places all across the nation, in all fifty states, and every single vote has to be counted before we know who's going to be our new president."

"Wait—in one day?" I said. Somehow it hadn't yet sunk in that this entire nationwide process could all happen in a single twenty-four-hour period.

"Yeah," he said.

I said, "In one day, you know whether you win or you lose?"

He said, "That's right, one day."

I sat down in front of the little black-and-white TV set, captivated by what was happening on its screen. It was cathartic, the way it drew me in, the hypnotic progression of vote tallies, how close they were.

The old man had been drinking, and eventually he got up and crashed off to bed.

I stayed.

If I close my eyes it still comes back to me now, as vivid today as it was then, half a century ago: the shades-of-gray images of the newscasters in their jackets and ties, Cronkite's soothing, grandfatherly voice, the rows of slowly rising numbers, the electric crackle of suspense. The sense that in these mundane images and sounds passing through our darkened living room, history was being shaped before my eyes.

Everything about that scene imprinted itself on my being.

I stayed up all night, watching the returns slowly rolling in. The race was extremely close, and it didn't become clear who would win until the hours of the early morning. When Illinois finally went to Kennedy and put him

over the top—he won with a margin of one-tenth of 1 percent of the popular vote—I went running upstairs, woke my father up, and said, "Kennedy won! Kennedy won!"

The old man was lying in bed, already hung over from the night's drinking, and mumbled, "Get the fuck outta here . . . tell me about it later."

I didn't care. I was elated. Kennedy had won!

After JFK's victory my dad got very excited and immediately turned his attention to the connections he had in the Kennedy operation to push for civil rights legislation. Kennedy, though, proceeded very cautiously. He was mindful of the midterm elections coming in '62; the South was all Democratic and Kennedy didn't want to upset that. This royally pissed off my old man. His drinking got steadily worse.

Meanwhile, mine started.

* * *

As with most alcoholics and drug addicts, my addictions did not arrive in full force all at once, like a bolt of dark lightning. They started out as a seemingly innocent pattern of recreational use. As a teenager, I believed that my drinking habits were no different from those of my friends. Looking back on it now, I realize they were quite different. The first clue should have been that despite all the beer I drank—usually a significant amount more than my friends—I never had a hangover. My friends sure did. They would hug the porcelain goddess for hours as I drifted off to a dull sleep.

It was during my high school years, as my drinking increased, that my father's drinking was at its worst. He was constantly screaming at my mother and now hitting her, too, on occasion. As I grew, he and I got into it both verbally and physically more and more often. My brother and sister would hide under my bed until the shouting and fighting stopped.

We had left the farm and moved into a house we couldn't afford on the wishfully named Honey Hill Road, a little gravel country road. My mother had a friend from her modeling days in Greenwich Village who drank herself to death and left her money to my mom. It wasn't much, and the old man blew it all on a down payment for his heavily mortgaged "dream house," which now became a chaotic, brutal, out-of-control madhouse.

In 1963 my father lost his job, I believe (though this was never stated) because of his drinking. He opened his own business in Old Lyme,

Connecticut, called Educational Consultants, where he ran a summer school and consulted with the schools in the area. It didn't last long.

One morning that February, on one of those biting southern New England days that starts out cold and gets colder, my old man and I piled into the car. He was taking me for an interview at Choate Academy, an exclusive boarding school for boys in Wallingford, Connecticut. Why we were even making this trip was beyond me. We could barely afford the gas for the old Studebaker, let alone pay for tuition at one of the most expensive private schools in the country. The fact was, my parents didn't call Choate, they called us.

Why me? Granted I was a good football player, but my high school GPA was terrible. I was always in trouble and had put in hours in the principal's office waiting for one of my parents to get sober enough to come pick me up.

Both my teachers and my parents thought I was far too intelligent to be getting such lousy grades, so they sent me off to Princeton, New Jersey, for a series of state-funded tests. "Very high IQ with verbal skills well above average" was the diagnosis. A direct result, I figured, of learning how to talk my way out of trouble at home. My math was better than average, too, though not by much. The conclusion: I was bored and unchallenged in public schools. The truth was, I just didn't give a shit. All I was trying to do was survive long enough to get away from Connecticut and start over.

It turned out that some of New England's best private schools, those bastions of old money and spoiled children, had gotten together and decided to recruit students from poorer neighborhoods around the region. They were now looking for students who had "potential not yet developed" and couldn't afford private school. Their effort at diversity, I supposed.

So the old man and I were off to diversify Choate.

I hated the whole idea, but my feelings didn't seem to factor into it. I figured my parents wanted bragging rights with their friends. I could hear them now: "Our son is at Choate, and where is yours?" So I'd put on the only sport coat I owned (handed down from my uncle Sam), a pair of patched chinos, and my "good shoes," the ones with gaping holes in the soles and heels worn down to the nails, and gotten myself ready for my interview.

Choate was about an hour from our house. Our appointment wasn't until 11:00 a.m., but my dad wanted to get on the road by 8:30 "just in case it snows, or we get lost." The look on my mother's face should have been a tip-off that there was more to the old man's early start than the chance of snow.

The road to Choate went right through Middletown, a once-booming manufacturing city. Hard against the Connecticut River, Middletown was a place of closed mills and people on the dole, heavily populated with Irish, which meant it was also heavily populated with bars and taverns.

The old man took the Middletown exit and I (stupidly) asked him why. "To get directions to Choate," he said.

"Everyone knows how to get to Choate," I said.

"Well, forget how to get there right now," he shot back. "You got that?"

"I got it," I muttered, knowing the only good news here was that this little diversion meant there was a very good chance our visit to Choate was toast.

My dad parked about a block from Front Street, which ran right along the river. He got out, told me to stay in the car, that he'd be back soon. A cold wind off the Connecticut River sliced through the streets with a fury that somehow seemed right for this broken-down old town. The old man headed straight for Front Street, where every other building seemed to have a bar or tavern sign out front.

I didn't have a coat, and once the car cooled down it felt like being locked in a refrigerated meat truck. After sitting there and freezing my ass off for an hour and a half, I got up the nerve to get out of the car and head over to Front Street myself.

Sure as hell, there he was, sitting on a barstool at the first tavern I found. I looked through the plate-glass front window. He pretended not to see me. The bartender, on the other hand, did. He said a few words to my father and pointed at me. My old man looked at his watch, held up ten fingers, and then, gesturing at me with a clenched fist whose meaning I could not possibly miss, he motioned for me to go back to the car.

Ten minutes went by, then twenty, then another hour. The whole time I sat there shivering in our old Studebaker, the angrier I got. He was the son-ofabitch who wanted me to go to private school, and now he was over there in a bar getting drunk while I sat and froze.

When you come from an abusive home, you learn to stuff your anger. The alternative is a confrontation you are sure to lose. But I couldn't stay in this car another minute without some heat. So I got out and walked back to the bar again, my rage now properly stowed away in the repressed and crowded anger vault deep inside my mind. Now was not the time for anger. It was showtime.

I put on a mask of helplessness and stood outside the bar's front window. I must have looked really desperate, because the bartender took one look at me and started yelling at my father, meanwhile reaching for his glass. Before he could get his hand on the glass, though, the old man grabbed it and smashed it on the bar, lurched to his feet, and came roaring out the door.

"I thought I told you to wait in the car!" he bellowed.

"But, Daddy" (sometimes it helped to call him Daddy), "I was freezing in the car. I couldn't take it anymore." He gave me a look that had ass-kick all over it. I added sheepishly, "I guess we're not going to Choate."

He looked at his watch, cursed, and, stumbling like a sailor just off a long ocean voyage, staggered off in the direction of the car. "We're going to tell your mother that we got lost, and if I'm lucky it'll start to snow. Got that?"

"She'll know you're lying," I said.

"She's not going to think I'm lying, 'cause you're going to tell her. And if you don't stick to the story, I'll kill you." Pretty good incentive to stick to the story.

In fact, it did start to snow. By now the temperature had fallen to below twenty degrees. About two miles from our house he stopped the car, turned to me, and told me to get out and walk.

"Come on, man," I protested, "it's snowing out there! It's freezing. I got no coat, no boots, and no gloves."

He ignored my protests and said, "You go tell your mother that we ran out of gas, and you walked home while I went looking for help. She'll feel so sorry for you, she might even buy it."

With that he closed the door and drove off. I tried to hold back tears, but they came anyway, freezing down the sides of my cheeks.

God, how much I hate him.

God, how much I love him.

By the time I made it home I thought I was dying from exposure. I was so angry and so sad that I really didn't care one way or the other. My mother came to the door, looked at me, and screamed, "What the hell happened?"

You would think that after all I'd been through, I'd tell her the truth. Not me. I stuck to the old man's story. Why? Not for fear of getting beat up; I was used to that. I lied to her because I didn't want to hurt her. Kids from dysfunctional families don't like to see anyone in the family get hurt, especially their mother. There'd been so much hurt already, why heap more shit on the pile?

She heard me out, a look of hurt disbelief on her face the whole time,

then told me to go get into a hot bath. It would be decades before the truth of what had just happened dawned on me: She knew exactly what went on out there with my dad, and my not telling her the truth had hurt her far worse than the old man's behavior or our missing out on Choate.

But at the time I didn't know that and sure didn't stop to think about it. Right then, being left by my old man had made me so furious that I'd had to work really hard to keep it all stuffed down inside. As I ran my bath it all came bubbling back up, like a toxic geyser, and I made a promise to myself: I would never, ever, let anyone abandon me like that again.

* * *

Although I never made it to Choate, I did get accepted at another private boys' school, Moses Brown Academy, in Providence, Rhode Island. I started there in September 1963. I hated life at Moses Brown. The place was full of kids with too much money and too little concern for other people. I barely had enough clothes and felt constantly ostracized. I was playing some good football, but I didn't do well in my classes.

One day that fall my roommate barged into our room and said, "They shot Kennedy!"

My stomach lurched. I bolted from the room and went tearing down the hall to the hall master's apartment. Each floor in our dorm building had a professor and his family living in an apartment there. I found him sitting in front of his television set, glued to it. He was crying. I sat down next to him and watched. I was crying, too.

A few minutes later we heard a bunch of kids tromping by the open door. One of them said, "Yay, yay, they killed Kennedy!" The professor and I were both up and out of our chairs in an instant. He put his hand on my shoulder and said firmly, "You let me handle this, Bob." He went out into the hall after the kid. I don't know how he dealt with that little snot when he caught up to him, but it's a good thing for the kid that it was the professor coming after him and not me. I would have hurt him, and not just a little bit.

Leaving the dorm building, I walked into downtown Providence in a daze. Providence was heavily Democratic and, more significantly, heavily Catholic. There were cars stopped in the middle of the street, people standing there openly weeping. Churches were packed. I wandered around town for hours, stunned. Everything came to a standstill in Providence that day.

When I finally returned to the dorm I found the professor back at his black-and-white television, and I asked if I could watch with him.

"You can watch all you want," he said. We stayed glued to the TV together throughout the whole weird, tragic aftermath of the assassination. Other students came and went, but he and I were alone there two mornings later when Oswald was shot at point-blank range by Jack Ruby right smack in the basement of the Dallas Police Department.

I turned to the professor and said, "How in the world can a guy who killed the president of the United States be brought out in the open like that and just shot?" It made no sense to me.

He said, "You know, I agree with you. Something here's not right."

In the wake of that horrible weekend I became a devoted student of the Kennedy assassination and its investigation. Another guy who was very strong on that was Dan Rather, with whom I later became friends. Rather was down there in Dallas when the assassination happened, and it was a turning point in his career. He and I spent hours talking about the assassination. Neither of us believed the Warren Commission report, at least not in its entirety, and felt there was a good deal more to the story that has still not come out.

That entire four days—the assassination, Oswald, Ruby, the funeral—felt like one long nightmarish day that went on forever and kept getting sadder and sadder. You couldn't help but be moved by John-John's salute to his father. It was the kid's third birthday. Those black-and-white images were so stark and so painful, and they burned themselves into my heart. To us, it was like what 9/11 must have been like to kids who were early teenagers then. To this day, I haven't gotten over it.

* * *

One day in early 1964 my mother told us kids that she had something important to talk to us about. The three of us panicked. We'd all been worried lately. My father had been away on a "business trip" for almost a month. None of us bought the business trip line. Our best guess was that Mom was about to tell us she and the old man were getting a divorce.

They'd been fighting for months before he left. The arguments were vicious and loud and plain scary to us kids. My brother and sister took to hiding in my room with pillows over their heads to muffle the sounds of battle, although it didn't work. Each night we heard the old man threaten to

kill our mom. "But first I'm going to teach those kids a lesson." Doing nothing for her was unthinkable. With my brother and sister hiding in my room I would go out and confront him, begging him to stop. For that, I got beaten.

About a month earlier, my father's boss, John Esher, picked him up early one morning. Mom said he'd be gone for a month. "Business trip." Great. The war would stop for now and Mom would be safe. As days turned into weeks, I started thinking maybe the old man was dead. Either he'd died in a drunken car wreck, or else someone had shot him in some low-life bar. I had wanted him dead, and now maybe he was. The guilt crushed down on me like a heavy stone, and I couldn't get out from under it.

Once my mother had us gathered together on the front porch, her message was a complete surprise. Dad hadn't been on a business trip, and they weren't getting a divorce. For the past month he had been in a hospital, learning how to quit drinking. "He's coming home today," she said. "And from now on he'll be a different person." She had even promised to stop drinking herself, as long as my father stayed sober.

After my siblings left the porch, she pulled me aside and said she knew he had been especially hard on me, but that I needed to support him now. "Your father can be a decent man," she said. I could agree with that. That's what made life with him so damn hard and confusing.

So now he was supposedly coming home sober? I didn't give it a week.

My brother and sister were much more hopeful than I was. They wanted their daddy home. They wanted a happy family. I played along. As far as I was concerned, what they wanted was a miracle. Me, I didn't believe in miracles. I didn't believe in much of anything beyond my own chances of surviving this hellhole. Every day I got a little better at it, learning all the survivor tricks. The more I learned, the more convinced I became that I'd make it out of there, eventually. I didn't expect anyone to help me. I wanted to be sure my brother and sister and mom were safe, but beyond that, I wanted to be on my own.

When the car pulled up a few hours later and my father got out, we were shocked. He looked ten years younger. He'd lost weight and was smiling—a real smile, not one of those evil "I'm going to teach you a lesson" grins. He hugged us and seemed genuinely happy to see us. I waited for the pitch. He'd had a month to practice, so no matter what he said, I wasn't buying. But the pitch didn't come.

He stayed sober for a week, and then another. It was the weirdest thing:

We would leave for school in the morning, and when we came home in the afternoon . . . Morning Dad was still there! It was so strange it was disorienting. What made it worse was that it was so tempting to believe that this was real, that this was the way it was going to be from now on. And I damn well wasn't going to let myself fall for that shit. *No way,* I told myself.

After a month, though, I started feeling the faint rustle of hope stirring inside me. Not only was he sober, he was being a seriously great father. He took a renewed interest in our schoolwork, helped revive the Little League on the Connecticut shore, and got active in politics again. He opened a school in Old Lyme called the River School, renting the basement of our Episcopal church during the week. This was actually a very good idea. They needed a private day school in that area. And he was good at it.

It was like a dream come true. No, not "like"—it *was* a dream come true. Suddenly he was Morning Dad twenty-four hours a day, day after day.

He never apologized for the past. The arguments, the beatings, the nights under pillows, it was as if none of it had ever happened. I figured he thought that by not talking about it, we'd forget. Honestly, I didn't mind that much. At least the trouble had stopped, even if it was only for a while. That was good enough for me.

He kept going to his meetings. Being who he was—smart, verbal, charming—it wasn't long before he was elected chairman of the local AA group.

At six months, my expectations started growing. To a kid, six months is a lifetime. Maybe, just maybe, this time he meant it. This time, maybe, it was for real. It wasn't any Ozzie-and-Harriet life we were living, but compared to the last few years it was damn close.

* * *

After JFK's assassination, Lyndon Johnson took up the cause of civil rights with a vengeance. In his first address to a joint session of Congress on November 27, 1963, Johnson told the legislators, "No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long."

This was music to my father's ears, and by 1964 he was more involved in politics than ever.

That June three civil rights workers who were helping register African-American voters were shot to death by Klan members in Meridian, Mississippi,

an event that became known as the "Mississippi burning" incident. National outrage helped passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act a few weeks later.

My father decided it would be a good idea to organize a caravan of blacks and whites to go down to North Carolina, where his brother Frank was still living at the time, and help register voters there, too. What's more, he thought it would be a great idea if I joined them.

"Why don't you come along with us?" he said to me.

I said, "Pop, I really want to play baseball." I wanted to play collegiate baseball, even if I wasn't nearly good enough.

He said, "No, come—this will be a good civics lesson for you." I was fifteen.

We piled into four or five vans and went down to North Carolina to register voters. As soon as we pulled into a church parking lot, a swarm of angry white locals descended on us, began banging on one of the vans, and rolled it over.

Everyone in our group was terrified, me included—but not my father. He was a big man and not afraid of anything, as far as I could tell. He got out of the van and started going after these guys. My father had tremendous leadership ability, and others in the group soon got over their own fears and followed his lead.

The cops showed up—not to stop the mob who were beating us up, but to stop *us* from fighting back. With their arrival the scuffle only got worse. At one point in the general melee my father broke away from the fighting to come looking for me and make sure I was okay. I was—still terrified, and furious at him for bringing me down there into this insanity in the first place—but okay.

Eventually the police had us rounded up and took us down to the police station. They did not arrest us, but just said, "You guys get out of this state and get out now. We're taking you to the border. Do not come back."

My father said, "We've got every right in the world to come here and register people. It's the law." The cop slapped my dad across the face. My father started back at the cop, but he was restrained by the other cops before he could do anything else.

They escorted us back out. They had picked up the flipped-over van and tipped it back up onto its wheels, but all the windows were broken. Just as we were about to climb back in I turned to my father and said, "Hey, Pop, how about next year we go to the beach?" I was very proud of him for standing up to those cops, but still angry at him for dragging me into it, and too young to really understand what we were doing there. That understanding would come later.

* * *

When fall came, I went back to Old Lyme High School. One miserable year at Moses Brown had been enough for me. The holidays came and went, and still my dad stayed sober. By the time his one-year anniversary approached, in early '65, even I was convinced he must be cured. Not only was I no longer humiliated by my father, I was becoming *proud* of him. A completely foreign and unfamiliar sensation. I even brought a few friends from school home.

I started thinking, maybe there *was* a God.

To celebrate his first anniversary being sober, Mom made him a big cake with a single candle on it. The three of us kids each made him a handmade card. I wrote in mine, "I'm so proud of you. You did it. The past is past, and I can't wait for tomorrow—your loving son, Bob." After dinner my father drove off to his AA group to celebrate with his sober friends.

He didn't come home that night.

As we later learned, he went to the AA meeting that evening and gave a heartfelt speech—then left the club and went straight to a bar. When the police eventually found him he was passed out in his car at a rest stop somewhere up on the interstate.

All the relief, all the hope, all the new belief came crashing down around me that night. It would be the last time, for a very long time, that I would ever let my expectations run ahead of me.

It would not be accurate to say that after the old man fell off the wagon, things deteriorated rapidly. It wasn't rapid. It was instantaneous. It was like that North Carolina mob tipping over our vans and smashing all the windows: The dream was flipped upside down, and everything broke. My father had flipped a light switch and plunged our bright lives back into darkness. Overnight, the dream was a nightmare again.

Once he fell, he fell hard. It was as if he hadn't been sober at all, as if his condition had been busily declining for that whole year. He was worse than ever.

This is something most people have a hard time grasping about drunks. Time off for sobriety doesn't make the condition ease up. When you go back, it's worse, not better. For a recovering alcoholic, if you pick up a drink anywhere down the road you're going to be drunker than you were when you stopped drinking.

Many years later, as an adult, I heard about a guy who had been going to

AA meetings for two decades. Sober twenty years, and a sponsor for an awful lot of people. He was considered a real pillar of AA. Then he lost his job and his wife divorced him. For the next week, he didn't show up for meetings. One day he drove down to the liquor store, bought a quart of vodka, drank it down in the parking lot, backed out, and ran over a nine-year-old kid, killing him. The guy was never seen or heard from again.

Alcoholism is a progressive disease. You can be sober for a month, a year, twenty years. It doesn't matter—when you take that first drink, you fall farther than you've ever fallen before.

As I would find out, many times over.

* * *

The River School ended up in disaster. The old man's drinking had gotten so bad it now spilled over into the daytime as well. He quickly became an embarrassment to the whole family. After he fell down drunk several times in the playground by the church, the parents decided to pull the plug. After a year of operation, the River School closed.

There are so many bad memories from that time, but one in particular haunts me to this day.

My father had been invited to speak to my tenth-grade history class. This should have been a good idea—when he was sober, he was an accomplished historian with an uncanny ability to make history come alive in a classroom. But it filled me with dread. Sure enough, when he showed up in my classroom that day he was very, very drunk and everyone knew it. He was slurring his speech and having trouble coordinating things like walking and standing. It was so bad that my teacher asked him to step out into the hallway so they could speak out of the students' earshot. He did not return to the class.

More than all the beatings I took, all the direct abuse and physical suffering, this event stung the worst. Sitting there watching this disaster unfold, feeling the other kids' eyes on me, burned worse than any physical punishment he ever inflicted. The scars from that one day lasted for years.

That's a point I want to emphasize: Being physically hit was not the crux of the nightmare of childhood. Cruel words and constant criticism can bite even deeper than fists or whips; so can silence and neglect. Children who are never hit may still suffer the terrible scars of abuse.

I played football. I was used to getting physically pounded. When the old

man beat up on me it scared me and I didn't like it—but that was the smaller part of it. Over the years, my old man's words hurt me a good deal more than any physical confrontations. He would call me "dumb," "a loser." "Your grandfather would be so embarrassed if he saw your grades," he would say. Part of me thought, *Fuck you, I'll show you*. Yet some part of me believed he must be right. When I said I felt the other kids' eyes on me that day in class, that wasn't my imagination. My dad's drinking was the source of much bullying directed at me by many of my high school classmates. For years, I'd ignored it. One day, not long after the humiliation of his school visit, I snapped.

One of high school's biggest bullies called my father a dirty drunk and starting hurling insults at my family. I was used to kids insulting my dad, and didn't care that much what they said about me, either—but I was very protective of my family. Slandering them was a major error in judgment on his part.

The guy had four inches and close to fifty pounds on me. A crowd gathered behind the school to watch what they assumed would be a slaughter. I was way outmatched, and terrified. Then a sudden rage came over me. All the abuse my old man had heaped on me and my mom went surging through my fists like lightning bolts. An eerie calm settled in, and the big boy, seeing the change in my eyes, started to back away, suddenly not so confident. As I would learn over many fights in the years to come, when I get out-of-control angry my eyes go from blue to black and my face turns to a mask of rage.

I beat the crap out of that boy. Some of his teammates tried to pull me off, but I was strong and wouldn't stop hitting, my fists smashing into his face again and again. Two of his friends grabbed my arms. Big mistake. I turned my rage on them. I didn't know where the strength was coming from, but I easily threw them both to the ground, gave one of them a vicious kick to the face and locked the other in a chokehold with one arm while making mincemeat of his nose with the other. The poor kid's nose was obviously broken, but I kept hitting it anyway as the blood gushed. I choked that kid to within an inch of his life, until two coaches came running over and hauled me off.

Although the fight was over I was still in a rage and left school grounds with a gang of kids who were constantly in trouble with the law. We dropped in on a local store, E.J. Korvette's, where I shoplifted a ski jacket out of pure spite and self-destructive fury. On my way out of the store, a security cop stopped me. Two cop cars showed up. The cops hauled me out of the store

and threw me against the side of one of their cars. I turned around and told the cop he was a dumb redneck with an ugly whore for a wife.

Ever eloquent, even in the midst of the fray.

The cop slammed into me with his nightstick and threw me into the car, bound for the New London jail. It was far from the last time I would be cuffed and bludgeoned by a cop's nightstick.

The old man came to bail me out and I wanted nothing more than to grab a nearby cop's gun and shoot the sonofabitch. On the way home he had the nerve to tell me that he "just couldn't understand" where all that anger came from. Was he kidding me?

I was suspended; both of the guys I'd beaten up ended up in the hospital. The saddest thing about it was, I felt no remorse—at least, not at the time. That would come only years later. Fortunately I dodged any legal charges. From the day I returned to school after the suspension, no one there ever tried to bully me again. My anger had scared everyone. Hell, it had scared me. I tried to let it go, but I couldn't. I became a one-man anti-bully patrol. Whenever I caught someone bullying a kid who couldn't stand up for himself, I'd beat the crap out of the bully. Taking on powerful assholes who preyed on weaker people became an important part of my value structure for years to come. In some perverse way I suppose I could thank my father for that. If the rage he instilled in me was expressed only against bullies and powerful people doing unfair things, maybe it would have been in some way a good thing. But too often the rage I felt for decades would only cause me and others around me great suffering.

* * *

Shortly after my suspension the old man left for good. One day that spring, the spring of '65, he and my mother got into a huge shouting match out on the driveway. The argument turned violent. He smacked her. At sixteen, I was old enough now to make good on my promise to myself that someday I would defend her. I grabbed up a good-sized stick of wood from our woodpile and went after him.

He jumped in the shitty old Studebaker and took off. He never came back.