

# In My Father's House

Shortly after my father died, I traveled to his house to claim whatever possessions of his I wanted for myself, arrange an estate sale, and put the house on the market. Though I had inherited a substantial amount of money from him, I also had been unemployed for some time and had accumulated a large amount of debt, so I was hoping to net enough from the sale of the estate to get back on my feet and maybe even put away a small cushion of savings against future trouble. It was out in the country, surrounded by a wooded lot of sixty odd acres, accessible only from a county highway by a mile and half of gravel road. Dad was well off; for a good part of his professional life, he ran his own engineering firm and contracted projects throughout the upper Midwest. But right before he started his own firm, he was involved in a scandal that nearly ruined his career. A bridge he helped to design collapsed, killing forty-seven people. He was cleared of all wrongdoing, but I think dealing with the judgments of those who were quick to blame him instilled in him the desire to live in isolation. My mother, who was a bank teller, went along with him, but she must have gotten tired of living out in the middle of nowhere, because she left my dad a couple of years later.

The house was unique; Dad had designed it himself with the help of an architect from St. Louis who oversaw its construction. Facing it from the road, you will see a sprawling one-story, loosely based on the Craftsman style. It has a pointed roof with a shallow grade and a broad porch which runs along the front of the house, wraps around to the left and extends to the rear walls. To the right is Dad's greenhouse, taller than the house itself, with jade trees, chrysanthemums, climbing vines, and some small, tropical trees. The greenhouse provided Dad some relief during times of stress, but he did not keep it up himself; he paid two or three gardeners to take care of it. The windows of the house are tall and narrow, divided vertically and horizontally by thin iron frames, but for a large picture window that looks out from the living room onto the woods outside. The front door is paneled, its top third taken up with a window of beveled glass. It opens into a narrow vestibule then to the living room. Beyond the living room is a maze-like jumble; there are no hallways, but one must go from room to room to get from the living room in front to the extra bedrooms and kitchen at the back. In fact, it took me several visits to find the path from the front of the house to the guest bedroom through the master

bedroom, the study, the kitchen, and the back storage room. My dad's home office was in the center of the house and had no windows. Most of the other rooms had windows facing outside.

It was night when I arrived—the drive from Chicago was a long one, so I got some take-out and a bottle of bourbon and settled in for the night. I couldn't bear the thought of sleeping in my dad's room, so I took the guest bedroom next to the kitchen. After eating, I took a quick inventory of the house's contents. My dad was not a pack rat or a hoarder, thankfully, and most of the rooms were sparsely furnished and free of clutter. His office was an exception. The desk was piled with books and papers, there were four filing cabinets and three computers counting the laptop. But I was in no rush. I intended to put the office in order at the end of my visit. I made a quick mental list of tasks for the next day, went out to the back porch and had a bourbon, then I retired for the night.

I was awakened at about two in the morning by a series of strange sounds, scratching and metallic scraping coming from the garage. I picked up my phone, turned on the flashlight, and went to check. The garage was detached from the house, on the opposite side from the greenhouse, connected to the gravel road by a short cement driveway. I opened the side door and peered in to see Dad's old Corvette, which I had forgotten about completely (I'm not really car guy). On the floor near the passenger rear wheel was a metal cage with an elaborate set of springs attached to one end, and in the cage was an opossum. It opened its toothy mouth and hissed at me. I assumed the trap had been built by my father, and I wondered if he might be testing a new design, as it seemed to me a bit idiotic to trap animals in a garage in the middle of the woods. Or perhaps Dad was not quite as sharp as he wanted me to believe. I found a pair of work gloves, took the cage outside, and let the possum go. He trundled away slowly, as if taking his freedom for granted.

The next morning, I started in on the living room. There was a sofa, three easy chairs, a television and stand, and some bookcases. In the center of the room was a model of the swing bridge Dad had built for Popple Rapids, constructed of balsa wood painted white, showing the hills over the Popple River and the bridge between them, beginning its rotation away from the road. This was the project that launched Dad's company, and he often told me it was one of his proudest achievements. The original design, the one that had collapsed, had been a bascule drawbridge, with two levers that raised and lowered. Dad had pushed the new design initially, but the city turned him down, finding his proposal too expensive. I knew the model had been

important to him, but there was really no place for it in my small condo in Chicago, so I made a mental note to research institutions to which I could donate the thing, then went to the bookshelves. I was looking over the second case, pulling out a few volumes I wanted take with me, when I heard a knock, a loud, sharp rapping on the front door. Through the vestibule, I saw the face of a man, bald, clean shaven, perhaps in his early or mid-sixties. He was peering in through the glass, shading his eyes with his left hand. As I opened the vestibule door, I experienced a sudden jolt of recognition. The man was Nick Tuffle, one of my father's employees. Well, I think he was also a friend—they had worked together at Dad's old firm, and Nick had been with Dad's company right from the beginning. I barely knew him, but an unpleasant memory shot up from the back of my mind. It was from the old house where we all lived together before I left home and Dad built this house. Mom and Dad were hosting a cookout, something they did frequently before the Popple Rapids bridge collapsed. Nick had come, and with him was a beautiful young woman with long, curly red hair. I think I was too young at the time to connect the attraction I felt to her with sex, but I was definitely entranced. She wore a bright blue, tight fitting dress printed with red anemones. At one point during the party, they were at the side of the house, and Nick slapped her face. Did that really happen? I never saw the girl again, never even knew her name, but I distinctly remember them standing under the bay window at the side of the house, away from the other guests, Nick slapping her face, she crying. Nick was over to the house occasionally after that, but I tried to avoid him.

“You look almost as old as me,” he said when I opened the door.

We went into the kitchen, and I gave him a cup of coffee.

“So, you're raiding the place,” he said.

“Slowest raid in history.”

“I'm really sorry about your dad. He was good people.”

“Thanks.”

“I'm really sorry, too, that I didn't make it to the funeral. I had obligations I couldn't break.”

“The arrangement you sent was really beautiful.”

“Yeah, I have to admit, I had the florist do that. Not exactly my strong suit, if it doesn't have wire and steel in it, I'm hopeless. And, you know, I'm still single, so I don't have a woman

to help with those things. After your dad retired, we kind of hung out like a couple of old bachelors.”

“Really? You were never around when I visited.”

“Well, you know, I’m still working, so I could only make it here a few times a year.”

“Right.”

“Look, Chris, I don’t want to be the asshole here, but, uh... you know... when I’d come by and visit, your dad and I, we’d drive into the towns around here, have dinner, and we’d take the Vette. Towards the end, your dad wasn’t driving, so I would be the one, and anyway, your dad, he... he wanted me to have it. The Corvette that is.”

“The Corvette?”

“Yeah, he wrote to me last month. I know there’s nothing about it in the will, but he sent me a letter. I think he meant to change it, the will, I mean, but you know, he went down before he had a chance to do that.”

Nick reached into his shirt pocket and handed me a piece of paper folded neatly in four. I opened it. It was typewritten, clearly printed off a computer, but the signature at the bottom was original and unmistakably Dad’s. In the letter, Dad said something about me not appreciating the Stingray, which I have to admit was true.

“I’m depending on you to do the right thing and honor your dad’s wishes. I mean, if you tell me I need to get a lawyer, I’ll probably lose, I know that.”

“So you’re still working?”

“So far.”

“Give me ten K, and it’s yours.”

“You want me to buy it?”

“Nick, I hardly know you, and you come in here with no notice, with a letter claiming my dad made a deal with you that I don’t know anything about. And that’s probably about a quarter what you’d pay at a dealer, right?”

He looked at me for minute without moving then rolled his eyes and nodded.

“I’ll need to move some money around,” he said. “I’ll come back tomorrow and maybe we can talk some more.”

Nick shook my hand and left. I couldn’t read his stony expression.

That afternoon, I finished cleaning out the living room. My father was not very interested in art, and most of the figures that hung on the walls of the house were floorplans, specs, and circuit diagrams, and these were of little interest to me. In the evening, I poured myself a glass of bourbon and went out to the porch. The drone of the cicadas was abating a bit, against the lavender sky I could see some bats drawing crazy flight patterns, and, every once in a while, I could hear an owl hoot. I found myself thinking of one incident in particular with Dad. It was the summer before my last year of high school, and Blue Oyster Cult was coming to play at Alpine Valley. I desperately wanted to go, but I had no money. My parents gave me a small allowance, but they had discouraged me from working so that I could concentrate on school and get into a good college. I asked Dad for money to buy tickets for me and my girlfriend at the time, but Dad told me that nothing came for free. I would have to pick something I owned that was valuable to me and give it to him in exchange. I didn't have much that was worth anything, so I chose my leather jacket, motorcycle style, black, with a plethora of zippers and chains, and BOC's logo painted on the back by an artist friend. I believe I'd taken it for granted that my father was just trying to teach me a lesson, and that he would return the jacket a couple of weeks or a month after the concert, but I never saw it again. At the time I assumed he had simply forgotten and was not trying to be cruel. At any rate, the lesson I learned was that a thing that is important to one person will quite likely mean absolutely nothing to another.

Nick returned the following afternoon. He had a twelve pack of beer which I put into the refrigerator, then we sat in the living room on imitation van der Rohe chairs.

"I could only scrape together eight," he said. "I'll have to owe you the rest, if that's all right."

"I didn't expect it all right now," I said.

"I wonder if you might do me a favor," he said.

The image of Nick slapping the young, red-headed woman came into my mind again. I wanted him out of the house. But apparently, he and my father were close, and he had a right to his own grief. I shrugged.

"If I can," I said.

"I'd like to just look around for a few minutes. If that's all right."

Nick wandered through the back rooms. I could hear his footsteps in the office, the study, and the kitchen, then I didn't hear anything. About twenty minutes later, he came back to the

living room, thanked me, shook my hand again, and left the house. Through the picture window, I watched him steer the Vette down the driveway to the gravel road, and I found myself wondering idly how he'd gotten out to my father's house that day.

I got up late the next morning, feeling sluggish and disconnected. I made a pot of coffee and decided to take a day of rest. But when I took my coffee out to the porch, I saw that every single pane of glass in the greenhouse had been shattered, leaving its steel and aluminum frame standing empty and skeletal. What is more, all of the plants were brown and withered, though it was summer, and they should have been able to withstand a single night in the open air. I had slept soundly through the night and hadn't heard a storm or anything else that would cause such destruction. I walked through the shattered glass looking for some clue as to what had happened but found nothing. Feeling a bit overwhelmed at the thought of cleaning up the mess, I searched on my phone for service that would do it. There was one in one of the towns nearby, but when I called, they told me they would not be able to come out until the following week, after I was planning to leave. I went back to the porch to finish my coffee, but it seemed to me the ruins of the greenhouse were silently cursing me, so I went inside.

That evening, sometime between five and six o'clock, I heard a car coming down the road, then the skid of tires on gravel followed by a loud crash. I ran outside. My dad's Vette was accordioned against a tree, its front end collapsed. The driver's door was open, and Nick was standing at the roadside, staring at the car. Then he fell to the ground. I went over and put my hands on his chest—he was breathing normally and didn't seem to be hurt, but it was impossible to know for sure. An alcoholic stench wafted from his body. He lay on the ground for a minute or two, then his eyes opened, and he rolled over onto his side. I helped him up, and we made our way into the house where I put him on the living room sofa, took off his shoes, and got him a pillow and a blanket. When I offered to call a doctor, he just laughed, so I left him on couch, ate dinner in the kitchen, and had a bourbon on the porch. As I was sitting there, Nick emerged from the house. Stumbling slightly, he passed by without looking at me and wandered over to what was left of the greenhouse.

“This is a waste,” he muttered. “What a waste.”

He bent over, plucked a withered chrysanthemum blossom from its stalk, and popped it into his mouth. He chewed exactly four times, swallowed, then grabbed another and did the same.

“You should help me,” he said. “We can get something out of this.”

I walked over to him, put my arm around his shoulder, and gently led him back to the living room. He didn't resist, but he snatched one more blossom along the way. With Nick on the couch once more, I finished my bourbon and went to bed.

In the middle of the night, I awoke again to more odd noises drifting from somewhere in the house. I got up, put on my pants, and went through the kitchen. From there, I could tell the sounds were coming from my father's office. File cabinet drawers were open, furniture was overturned, and there were papers strewn across the floor, the desk, and the drafting table. Nick was kneeling on the floor, holding a sheet of paper rolled up into a tube about two feet long.

"What the fuck, Nick?"

He turned to me, stood up awkwardly, called me by my father's name, then shoved me out of the way and ran out of the room. A moment later, I heard the front door slam shut.

I was shaken and unable to sleep, so I poured myself another bourbon and sat on the porch for an hour or so. The next day, thanks to the whiskey and lack of sleep, I was in a fog and didn't get much done. Nick had left my father's study in even more of a wreck than it had been before, but I did not have either the emotional or physical strength to put things in order, so I just wandered numbly through the house. In the room across from the kitchen, which had served as storage, a room with no furniture other than a stack of shelves with old paint cans and a few hand tools, was a trap similar to the one I had found in the garage on my first night there. The trap was stuck in a corner, and I had not noticed it before. In it were the bones of an animal, too large to be a squirrel or chipmunk so probably another possum or a raccoon. Behind the trap was a ragged hole in the wall about four inches wide with steel wool stuffed into it. I carried the trap outside, emptied the bones in a pile on the ground about a hundred yards away, then stored it in the garage.

That night, I abstained and went to bed early. I slept soundly until I was again awakened by strange noises, this time coming from the ceiling. At first, I thought it was just another raccoon, but as I lay in bed trying unsuccessfully to ignore it, I realized the sound had a steady rhythm belonging to no animal's footstep. Unnerved, I climbed out of bed and walked through the house, trying to follow the path of the noise. However, the arrangement of rooms made that impossible, so, finally, I went outside. The moon shone brightly in the sky throwing colorless light over the house and trees. The noises were coming closer to me, but because of the pitch of

the roof, I couldn't see anything. Then Nick came into view, a gray silhouette against the moon. He walked to the edge of the roof, turned at a right angle, walked three paces, moving slowly to keep his balance, arms outstretched, counting quietly, then he turned at another right angle and started off across the roof in the opposite direction. I shouted at him, but he didn't respond. I ran to the other side of the house in time to see him walking down the slope, then he turned again, walked along the edge for three paces, then turned at another right angle. When I shouted again, he turned toward me, paused for a second, then disappeared over the peak. I ran to the side of the house he was moving towards. By the time I got there, Nick was on the ground. He rushed towards me and put his arms around me, locking me in a vicious bear hug. I tried to fight back, but it seemed that I had no strength at all in my arms, and my legs buckled under me so that Nick was practically holding me up.

The door of the shack was locked. The light was on, a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling by a thick cord, and there were no windows. On the walls were several beer posters showing young women in bikinis wading in the surf and drinking from bottles, and along one wall was a set of jars containing brackish liquids of varying colors. On the floor near the wall opposite the door was a generator, its alternator on the floor. After a few tries, I managed to kick the door open. I didn't remember this place from the times I had visited my father, and I did not know where my father's house was in relation to the shack. The moon was low against the horizon. On one side of the shack was a field of soybeans, on the other a copse of trees. I set off through the trees, thinking that if I was even still on my dad's property, the farm would mark the boundary.

After about an hour of walking, I reached the gravel road. By the time I got back to the house, the moon was down, the night was pitch black, and I was making my way slowly by feel. Nick was in the living room, which was dark except for the beam of light coming from a Super 8 projector, and on the screen, a family scene, my mother, my father, and me in the yard of our old house, sitting in lawn chairs, drinking lemonade. Then, in the background, the girl with curly red hair from my memory appeared, wearing shorts and a halter top. She lingered for a moment, then vanished. So Nick must have been filming. There was no sound, only images, flickering and slightly out of focus. Nick turned to face me, and in the light reflected off the screen, his face had a distorted, monstrous look. He stared at me for a long minute, then turned back to the screen which now showed a bridge spanning a river, the shot taken from far away so that the entire



bridge was in the frame, a line of cars stopped at each end. Slowly the bridge divided into two, each side lifted up, and three sailboats moved past it. Then the two sides joined, and the cars started to cross. In silence, one side of the bridge pitched then collapsed into the river, cars falling with it. From the distance it almost looked like a child's playset, falling apart from overuse.

"You were there?" I said to Nick.

"Your dad took this," he said.

"He was there when it happened? He never told me that."

"He wasn't just there, he knew it was going to happen, he planned it."

"Fuck off."

"See that model there? That was the design he wanted to use. We were contracted by Popple Rapids to build that bridge, but they didn't want to pay for your dad's design, it was too expensive. He was obsessed with it. He built a flaw into the bridge, and no one noticed."

Nick stood up and walked towards me. I stepped back defensively, but he held up his hands, palms out and cocked his head to the side. I stopped moving. Nick started explaining to me the workings of the bridge, and why it collapsed, something about a faulty counterweight, but I'm not an engineer, and couldn't follow what he was saying. But I knew in that crushing moment he was telling me the truth.

"Let me show you something," he said.

We left the living room, Nick leading, and walked towards the back of the house. In the storage room, the room that had held the trap full of bones, a large hole gaped in the wall, roughly circular and about four and a half feet in diameter. Nick bent over and stepped through it. I followed.

The room behind was very narrow, only about ten feet wide, and about fifteen feet long. It had no doors or windows and was hidden by false walls between the storage room, the kitchen, and Dad's office. Enough light came in through the hole in the drywall for me to see the awful things the room contained. On the floor on a tall stand in the center was a model of the original bascule bridge. On the wall was a list of forty-seven names, some with photos next to them and biographical details—age, profession, marital status, hometown. Opposite the list of names was a steel case standing open.

“The proof was in here,” said Nick. “Original plans. I knew he’d hang onto them. He didn’t feel any guilt at all, he was proud of the fact that he’d pulled it off. It killed him that I was the only one he could brag about it to.”

He took a step closer to me and lowered his voice. “I kept my mouth shut all this time. And you want to fucking *sell* me that Vette? Asshole? And now I’m going to need a bigger piece of the pie than a wrecked car.”

He had a packet of papers under his arm. He turned and walked out. I followed him down the hall until he left through the front door.

If Nick thought I was weak, he’d stick to the gravel road. The Vette wasn’t drivable, which meant he was staying somewhere close, maybe even camping in the woods. I went to the garage and grabbed a shovel, then went out to the trees. There was a narrow line of pink and orange light shining through a thin slit of dawn when I walked out of the house, but it wasn’t enough light to reveal my location or the path I took through the woods. I was right about Nick—he was walking down the middle of the road. I stepped out of the trees and hit him in the back of the head with the shovel. He went down more easily than I thought he would. I hit him three more times, then dragged his body back to the garage. I spent the rest of the day recuperating.

Youtube is an amazing resource. You can find instructions on almost anything, including how to repair drywall. My work was far from perfect, but with a new coat of paint, the wall of the storage room looked passable at least. I sold the Corvette for parts, and when Bill from Bremmer’s Garage came out to the house to get it, I told him I had crashed it myself, inexperienced as I was with sports cars. As for Nick, 60 acres is plenty of space for one person. I spent the following two weeks fixing up the house and arranging the estate sale. By the time the local police tracked me down, I was back in Chicago. I told them that Nick had come to the house for the Corvette, but when he learned I had driven it into a tree, he got angry and left, and I didn’t hear from him again. To my surprise, that was the end of it. If Nick had a hiding place somewhere near the house, neither I nor the police ever found it.

I have no idea whether my father felt remorse for the people who died on the bridge. Perhaps he did. Perhaps he thought it was a necessary sacrifice. The event occurred long ago, and in truth, I barely remember him showing much emotion over it, but fathers rarely show their worst emotions to their sons if they are worth anything in this world. In any case, it is his affair,

and any atonement would have been his responsibility. Yes, I have inherited a substantial legacy from my father, but whatever crimes he committed to build that have nothing to do with me.