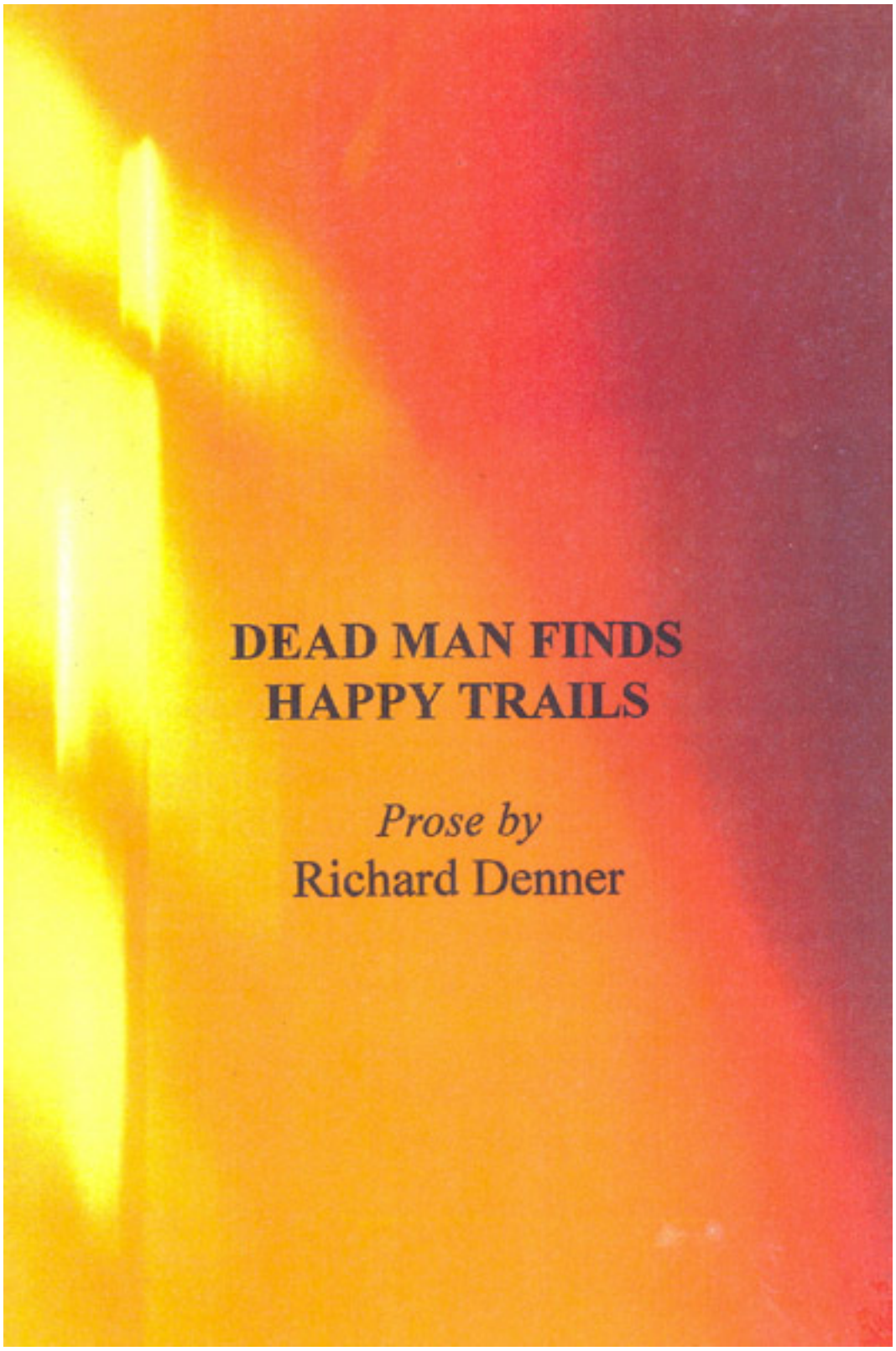


Dear Man Finds Happy Trails

*for Pat*

## DEAD MAN FINDS HAPPY

Retailing at Christmas time gets hectic. I was in my bookstore, taking a short break, drinking an espresso with my friend, Webster Hood, when the phone rang.

"Four Winds. Richard, here. How can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Sally Macdonald. I'm a reporter for the *Seattle Times*, and I'm trying to find a Roy Rogers lunchbox. I've been told you have such an item in your store. Is this true?"

"Yes, I've got a Roy Rogers lunchbox. It's a Roy Rogers/Dale Evens Chow Wagon. Why do you ask?"

"Is it for sale?'

"No, not really. I have been asked several times if I would sell it, but I have told people it is not for sale. Everything in the store is for sale, but the buck stops there. Are you scouting for a certain antique dealer who persists in asking me to name a price?"

She laughed. "Goodness, no. My situation is entirely different. May I explain?"

"By all means, go ahead."

"A couple of weeks ago, the *Times* ran a feature article on Roy Rogers. The story was a reminiscence of growing up with Roy Rogers and the gang at the Double R Bar Ranch. It was a full page spread with pictures, and soon after the article appeared, a letter arrived from a lady, who asked if anyone might know where she could get a Roy Rogers lunchbox. She said she and her friends had been scouring antique stores without luck, and that she was getting desperate. I asked her why, and she told me it was for her husband's ashes. I said, "What!?" She told me she wanted the lunchbox because it was her husband's wish that his ashes be stored in a Roy Rogers lunchbox. I was incredulous, at first, and she said she knew it was a strange request, but she had been looking for six months, and she wanted to give her late husband this last gift after twenty-five years of marriage."

I said, "I don't believe a word of this. I bet you are trying to trick me out of the lunchbox by concocting this story."

"Really, Sir, this is the truth. She says she will pay almost anything for an

authentic Roy Rogers lunchbox. I asked around the newsroom, and a colleague of mine, Randee Fox, said she had seen one in your bookstore when she was visiting Ellensburg. Believe me, although this story seems farfetched, it's true."

"I think I will have to talk to this woman in person, just to be sure. Can you give me her phone number?

"Yes, I can give you her number. Really, this is on the up and up. Trust me."

She gave me the lady's name and her number, and I said, "Ok, I'll give her a call, but this sure sounds bizarre."

"I know," she replied, "but you'll see I'm telling the truth."

After she hung up, I said to Webster, "You won't believe what I just heard." I told him the gist of the story and, then, I dialed the number I had been given.

"Is this Mrs. Beverly Gibson?"

"Yes, I am Beverly Gibson. Who is calling?"

"My name is Richard Denner, and I am the owner of the Four Winds Bookstore in Ellensburg. I just received a call from a Sally Macdonald, who says she is a reporter from the *Seattle Times*, and she told me you were looking for a Roy Rogers lunchbox. Is this true?"

"Oh my, yes. I have been looking everywhere. Do you have one? I need one, ever so bad."

"Yes, I have one. It's been in my store for years. It's sort of like a mast head. I keep pennies in it."

"Did Miss Macdonald tell you what I wanted it for?"

"Yes, she did, but I had a hard time believing the story."

"Mr. Denner, my husband, Bruce, was a great fan of Roy Rogers. As a kid, Roy Rogers was his idol. He always had to be Roy when the neighborhood kids played cowboys. He sang "Happy Trails' as his own theme song. He told me, ‘When I die, skip the funeral urn and just keep my ashes in a Roy Rogers lunchbox.' Is there any chance you would sell me your lunchbox?"

"Excuse me for a minute, Mrs. Gibson. Let me consult with a friend."

I looked at Webster, who was listening to my conversation and smiling. "Webster, you teach ethics, if I've told people I won't sell the lunchbox under any circumstances, I shouldn't back down, should I?"

"You should stick by your guns, or in this instance, your lunchbox, Roy," he said.

"Mrs. Gibson?"

"Yes?"

"I have made my decision."

"Yes?"

"This lunchbox has sat on a shelf in my store for twenty years. My ex-

mother-in-law found it in a secondhand store and gave it to my son, Theo. After he grew up, it wound up in the store. It sits with some Old West books in a little display. Once, a friend was going to a Roy Rogers Show, and he asked if he could take the lunch box with him to get it autographed. I don't think it was actually signed by Roy, probably by his son. It's signed ‘Roy Rogers and Trigger' in green ink. The signature has faded to where you have to know where to look to see it. An antique dealer offered me $300. She said in New York, it would fetch more, but I told her, ‘No deal. It's a keepsake.' So, I don't think I can change my mind about selling it, now."

At the other end of the line, I could hear a sigh of disappointment.

I waited a beat, for dramatic effect, and then I told her, "On the other hand, I could give it to you."

"My goodness," she exclaimed, ‘do you mean it? You would give it to me? Oh, that is marvelous."

"Give me your address. I will wrap it up and mail it to you."

"Mr. Denner, you are just too kind."

"Don't mention it, Mrs. Gibson. It is my pleasure."

I wrote down her address. I dusted off the lunchbox and put the pennies in a jar. I found a cardboard box and some bubble wrap, and I made a tidy package for Beverly Gibson. And for Bruce. I mailed the box that afternoon, and I thought no more about it.

A couple of days later, I got another phone call from Sally Macdonald. She was full of enthusiasm about my kind-hearted gesture, and she asked if she could write a story about what I had done.

I said, "Sure," and I told her pretty much what I had said in my conversation with Beverly. I concluded with, "I'm an old hippie. It seemed sort of cosmic to me. Now, Bruce can rest in peace, and I won't be bothered with people always wanting that lunchbox."

That was a week before Christmas. I should have anticipated what the newspapers were going to do with this story. The next day, on the front page of the *Seattle Times* there was a picture of Beverly holding the Roy Rogers/Dale Evans Chow Wagon and a story by Sally Macdonald entitled, "Roy Rogers Fan gets Last Wish." Then, the phone began to ring.

Associated Press picked up the story, and it was run as a piece to make you feel good in every newspaper in the country. People phoned to thank me for being an angel. A guy phoned wanting to know if I wanted to buy more Roy Rogers paraphernalia. I got cards and letters from everywhere.

The tabloids competed. *The National Enquirer* wanted a story, but *World News* beat them to it. I reiterated what I had previously told the *Seattle Times*, and at the check out counter in Safeway I saw a piece on the back page of *World News* under the heading "Dead Man Finds Happy Trails" next to a sighting of Elvis. It was surreal. They didn't change a thing.

The TV program, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, contacted Beverly, and they

filmed her in her home in Federal Way. She was standing by her mantelpiece. She took down the Chow Wagon with Bruce's remains, and she told the interviewer about how her husband had had several surgeries and painful chemotherapy and that his last wish was to be kept in a lunchbox. It was a brief interview between pictures of the smallest park in the state of Washington and the largest apple.

My uncle, Remos, phoned from Albuquerque, to tell me that he had read the story, and as soon as he saw "bookstore in Ellensburg" he knew it had to be me.

## PLANTING THE BLAST

Theodore Dylan Denner was a more reasonable name to give a boy than Allen Ginsberg Denner. Hippies bestowed weird names. Cheri and I decided on *Theo* because we had an attachment to the name of the trawler that carried cargo between Ketchikan and Matanuska Island along the Alaskan Panhandle.

Our experience with the trawler began after Cheri got off work as a barmaid at the Frontier Bar. We walked down to the pier and cuddled on the deck of the *Theo* and drank from a bottle of wine. Then we made love under the stars. The waves lapped the hull. The deck smelled of fish. The air was chilly. If it sounded like heaven and smelled like heaven, then…

Cheri had a great uncle named Theo. Theodore Palm was a poet in Stockholm. There was a family legend that he walked off the end of a pier into the bay because he was engrossed in his reading of Shakespeare. He was the brother of August Palm, the revolutionary who brought Socialism to Sweden in the 1880s.

Theodore in Greek means *Gift of God*. The name, Theo, is composed of the article *the* and an o. The O— has a Zen "ring" to it. Dylan is, of course, the last name of the folksinger, Bob Dylan, as well as the first name of the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, whose name Bob expropriated. Dylan is Welsh for a devil. A Gift of God Devil— Theodore Dylan is a mix of light and dark.

Today, Theo is a hardworking businessman and husband and father of four. He operates the Four Winds Bookstore and Café in Ellensburg, Washington, which I sold to him before I left for Tara Mandala Retreat Center in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. He is respected now in the community, but there was a time when he was the terror of the town.

In the summer of 1992, when he was 24, Theo asked if he could borrow some money. He had to leave town in a hurry. I didn't ask the reason. My dad always came to my aid out of a sense of duty, but I always helped my

son out of a sense of guilt. My dad did not understand my behavior, but he felt a responsibility towards me. I understood Theo. He was like me, and I could see he was having the same problems with the Law.

For reasons I can't remember now, I was ready to split town myself. So we split together, father and son on the lam, as it were. We took the orange GMC van I had been awarded in my divorce settlement with Alia. The van was what the tree planters call a crummy. It had a strong engine and lots of room, and it was only slightly beat up. I had lived in it and hauled dozens of crews of tree planters around logging roads. It would get us to California.

We threw our belongings in the back and, as rosy-fingered dawn tickled the sleeping town awake, crept out of town.

Theo's plan was to start a new life on the mean streets of an Oakland crack neighborhood. He had romantic notions of being a big time dope dealer. I was raised in Oakland. I graduated from Oakland High School. Hell's Angels, Black Panthers, the Raiders, Oakland's a tough town. I preferred Berkeley next door. But I was just going along for the ride. For the time being, I would smooth the way with the food and gas money.

We drove to Berkeley and hooked up with my friend, Luis Garcia. Lu had a painter friend in Oakland whose studio was in just the kind of neighborhood Theo was looking for. When we pulled up in front of Eric's studio in West Oakland, a full-scale gun battle was in progress between the police and an army of crack dealers. Theo was pleased by this welcome to the neighborhood.

Eric led us into his studio. His windows were barred. His door was an assemblage of locks and chains. We smoked some pot and drank a little wine, while the gun battle raged. Eric showed us his paintings. By the end of the day, the gunfire subsided.

Theo realized even if he had needed to cool his heels for awhile, in comparison to this ring of the Inferno, Ellensburg was not such a bad place to live. We pulled out of the war zone and retreated, pointed the Jimmy north and started our return trip.

Our plan was to join T.G.T.B.T., a tree planting crew, on the slopes of Mount Saint Helens. The initials stood for Too Good To Be True. We knew the planters were on the backside of the mountain pumping plugs into the volcanic ash.

Outside Roseburg, the engine developed an ominous noise. I hadn't suspected the engine was low on oil, but the light flashed and the rods knocked with persistence. Maybe I was tired of this van. It reminded me of my ex-wife.

Theo asked what the noise was. I told him it was the sound of the engine about to blow. He asked if we should stop, but I said I wanted him to have the experience of driving the van into oblivion, to hear what it sounded like

when a piston cracked the engine block. We drove with the banging and clanging getting louder and louder until the engine gave out. I coasted to a halt along the side of the road. It was foggy, and we were both exhausted. Theo curled up on the front seat and I curled up with a blanket in the back.

We tried to sleep, but the passing trucks rocked our vehicle. We dozed fitfully. At dawn, I sat up and looked out the window. A dense Oregon fog surrounded us. A few feet ahead, a road sign read Seattle, 262 miles, Curtins, 2 miles. From the front seat I heard Theo: "It sure looks like Curtins for us."

We hitched a ride to a gas station and arranged to have the Jimmy towed in. The mechanic got it into his shop and announced his diagnosis. The engine was totaled.

There was a Greyhound Bus Terminal down the road, but the northbound bus had just left. By the side of the gas station, a battered Fiat had a *For Sale* sign in its window. The mechanic would take $300 for it, and the remains of the truck. We shook hands and exchanged pink slips. Theo and I were on the road again, to Mount Saint Helens. I found myself back to the day of the eruption.

On the morning of May 18, 1980, I looked out the window and wondered why there was a sunrise in the south. Alia and I drove into the country to get a better look at the dark cloud advancing over Umptanum Ridge. The air was filled with static electricity, and in a field near us young colts frolicked. The dark cloud began to move with creeping fingers around the perimeter of the valley. Lightning bolts struck the ridgeline. Then the ash began to drop, and it had the stench of sulfur.

We stopped at a friend's farmhouse. No one was home. I helped myself to some water to wash off the windshield. When the water hit the windshield it caked into a sort of plaster. A pick-up passed us and stirred up more ash. We drove on back roads back to Ellensburg. It was chaos. I could hardly see my hood ornament, let alone if a car was coming. A Highway Patrol car with lights flashing and siren blaring passed us, with a hose poked out from under the hood. The ash cloud thinned. I crossed the avenue, parked, and we dashed inside the house.

When I walked across the street to get some supplies, I found quite a scene at Joe Albertson's. People in different outfits— a man with a towel over his head, wearing swimming goggles and holding a case of beer. Another man with a surgical mask carried an umbrella. A woman in a burnoose had a bundle I assumed was a child. I bought some groceries and went home. We stayed indoors. We listened to a recording of Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* and let the pyroclastic debris settle on our town.

The next morning, there was a gray pallor to everything. Alia and I decided to flee the Burg. We got in our van and headed up to Cle Elum to plant trees. Out of town, on the highway north, we looked back and saw a

blanket of ash where normally we would see the fields and roads of Kitittas Valley.

The eruption had sent a half-million tons of ash into the stratosphere. The ash was measurable nine hundred miles in the east and one hundred miles north in Ellensburg.

Now, twelve years later, Theo and I were on the backside of Mount Saint Helens planting the blast. The forest had been cremated by hot gases, the trees blown over and burned to a crisp. There was two feet of volcanic pumice on the ground; the land was a barren moonscape. An occasional stalk of reddish-purple fireweed was the flora; a single spider represented the fauna.

We met up with the tree-planting crew outside the village of Cougar in a Forest Service campground. There were about a dozen guys, including the boss, Doug. There were no tourists. Theo, having studied the culinary arts at South Seattle Community College, appointed himself cook. He got up early and prepared a four star breakfast with a side of *Jack Daniel's.* Then Theo and I followed the rest of the crew, fishtailing up the winding logging roads with AC/DC blasting from the Fiat speakers.

Trying to plant trees in ash was a new experience for me. When the hole was opened, it filled with ash before the tree could be planted. I developed a technique I called pumice pumping. Arranging the tree roots flat on the ash, I placed the tip of hoedag blade on the roots and pushed the roots straight down, sinking the tree past the tree collar and up to the needles. After I removed my hoe, I pulled the tree up slightly to straighten the root ends underground. This method was a little rough on the tree but it allowed us to get the trees in the ground and pass inspections.

We were in camp when the folks from Arkansas arrived. Two rough-looking men in their twenties, two women, a baby, and a pit bull. They were driving a black Pontiac fastback and the guys seemed antsy. They said they were looking for a Mexican crew. If there was a Mexican crew on the mountain, I didn't know where. I knew they were newbies because they didn't have the right gear for camping.

But we needed more planters, so we hired them.

To get them started, Doug advanced them some money against their wages. They drove to Cougar, returning with a tent, raingear, and a Coleman stove and lantern.

I had a frustrating day training the two men. At one point, I was so deranged that I climbed up on a tree stump and shouted that I would shove a hoedag up my own ass if they didn't follow the line.

The next day, on a trip back to camp, we passed through Cougar and spotted their Pontiac sitting by the road with the hood up. We stopped and were surprised to find the engine burned. Back at camp, the two women said they had driven to town to get some diapers. As they were pulling into

the gas station, the car burst into flames. One of the guys had drained some gas to prime a campfire. He had unscrewed the gasline, and he reattached the line insecurely. Gasoline had poured out over the engine and caught fire, burning up the wiring and melting everything made of plastic.

The next morning both women had black eyes. Theo was more disconcerted when he found his tape collection and a carton of cigarettes missing. He had noticed several packs of his brand on the dashboard of the burned Pontiac. Theo insisted something had to be done.

Doug was willing to cut his losses and let these people go. However, without a car, how could they leave?

I thought about it. The Fiat had been trouble from the start. The electrical system was wacky. The brake lights would go on when you put on the blinkers, and the headlights would go on when you put on the brakes. This was OK in the daytime in the woods, but I didn't want to try driving on the freeway at night.

I told them I would sell the Fiat, cheap. They had a couple of hundred dollars in wages after deducting their draws. I took $150 and the Coleman lantern. I considered it a good deal to be free of these walking soap operas.

One guy fixed the Fiat's wiring. They loaded their gear on the roof, tying some to the top of the trunk. The women, the baby and the pit bull crammed into the backseat. They drove around the campground with the pit bull's head sticking out the window. The two guys flipped us the bird. It was an upbeat moment, but my immediate problem was what to do for transportation.

## A WEDDING & A WAKE

Lucienne Dorrance Denner. *Lucienne* means light, and the *Dorrance* is a river in France. Both are names on Alia's side of the family. *Lulu*, that's the name I liked. "Lulu is back in town," and "She's a lulu." Associations with Wolcek's opera, *Lulu* and the "Lulu" in Strindberg's movie, *Pandora's Box*.

Lulu and Kirsten were half-sisters. When Kirsten set the date for her wedding, Lulu was invited to be a flower girl. Lulu was 12. We flew from SeaTac to SFO on a Friday morning in summer, taking the Airporter to Santa Rosa. I picked up my dad's Ford LTD and headed for the coast.

Kirsten's aunt Rosie, my ex-wife's sister, has a house in the redwoods next to a meadow. We pulled into the driveway and parked next to the garden. I saw Mama, my ex-mother-in-law, and her sisters, Angie and Mary, standing on the porch side by side. They were dressed in black, and I had a feeling something was wrong. I hadn't seen these ladies for twenty years. I was apprehensive. I imagined Papa standing behind the door with a

shotgun. I had divorced his youngest daughter, Patricia, after getting her pregnant and marrying her before the eldest daughter was wed. Bad form in a Sicilian family.

The sisters embraced us. I was treated like I was a lost son. They were glad we were there. They told us Papa had died, and they needed my expertise. The family was Roman Catholic, but Papa had been a Mason. They had planned a service at Saint Anthony's in Mendocino, but they felt it would make Papa happy if there was a piece of the ritual that was Masonic. Since I was a member of the Order of Free & Accepted Masons, they asked if I could say something at the grave. I was confused. I thought I had come for a wedding.

The whole clan had assembled for Kirsten's and Bill's wedding. They had been having a wake. Papa was in a coffin in the main room. He had been in state for a day. The coffin was filled with mementos. There was his walking stick, a hand-carved fishing boat, family photos, the apron he wore in the kitchen when he prepared calamari, and his Masonic apron, his lambskin, the badge of a Mason.

He looked good in his dark suit and tie. There was a firm set to his jaw. His massive hands were folded on his barrel chest. At 95 he was still built like a redwood tree. He had fished for albacore in the Pacific on a boat out of San Pedro until he was 75. Then he and Rose had moved into an apartment attached to the main house of their daughter, Kirsten's Aunt Rosie, in Little River. He had a heart attack and died, and now we were having a wake and getting ready for a wedding.

I asked Lulu if she was up to this, and she said, "Yes."

"Mama, we are going to stay and help," I said. "I will phone my chaplain in Ellensburg and get the appropriate words to say for Papa."

A wedding feast was being prepared in the kitchen. There was the rustle of bags and the banging of pots and pans, the stirring, sifting and shaking that goes into creating a banquet. I stood with Lulu on the deck, looking into the house through the glass doors.

"Look at this scene, Lulu. At one end of the room there are cooks bustling to prepare food for the wedding, and at the other end there is a corpse being prepared for the grave."

Lulu followed my eyes. "This is my first wedding and my first funeral," she said.

The wedding was planned for the next day, Saturday. The funeral would be held on the day following that. The mortician was directed to remove Papa's body in anticipation of the arrival of the wedding guests.

There was already activity in the garden. Patricia's third husband, Kevin, had constructed two Doric pillars from the cardboard cores used to ship carpets, and fabricated a latticework bower between them, now covered in flowers. A truck arrived with tables and chairs. Bill, my future son-in-law,

was a colorless young man, but well built, with a high forehead. We stored them in a shed without speaking.

In the afternoon I called the chaplain of my Lodge in Ellensburg. He told me, "There has always been a conflict between the Freemasons and the Catholic Church. You'll have to play this by ear." He gave me an abbreviated text to memorize for the graveside ceremony.

My ex-wife, Patricia, had baked and decorated the wedding cake and prepared the entire wedding banquet in the midst of great sorrow. I sat down at the kitchen table with her. "I'll need a sprig of acacia for the burial ceremony. It's traditional to place a piece of acacia on the coffin of a brother Mason when he is lowered into the grave."

"There's an acacia tree near the graveyard," said Patricia. "But why acacia?"

"Acacia is evergreen, a symbol of the immortality of the soul," I said.

Saturday, the day of the wedding, the sun was shining. We set up the tables in a U-shape, arranged the chairs in semi-circular rows, and laid a large Persian rug on the grass in front of the pillars. The area was festooned with twisted pink and white crepe paper streamers. The house was abuzz with activity. We were getting a good start.

Kirsten, the matron of honor, and the bridesmaids were fussing with their gowns in the back bedroom, when Lulu came out with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Dad, they're smoking marijuana."

"Don't be upset, Lulu. They're just excited about the wedding."

"But, Dad, you can die from drugs. I want to go home."

"Lulu, I know you're told this in school. But it's not true. Don't let this spoil your sister's wedding day."

"Take me home!" she wailed.

Aunt Rosie, overhearing this, took Lulu into the bathroom. What transpired I don't know, but when they emerged, Lulu was smiling. Women's talk.

I took this opportunity to have a heart-to-heart with my soon-to-be son-in-law, Bill. I know it's not what you say that counts, it's what you do. But if some things aren't said, they may never be known. Bill was looking good in his tux—he looked a little less colorless, but a lot more nervous. I told Bill it was an honor to give away the bride, and that I was proud to have him for a son-in-law.

"I'm jumpy," said Bill.

"It's natural for a groom to be jumpy on his wedding day."

"I think we made a mistake. By having this big wedding."

I could see the guy was nervous. "I think your wedding should be a fine thing," I said to Bill. "All the trimmings. Something to remember when you're old. We better get back to work; we've got a lot to do."

Bill didn't look any better.

The pastor arrived, a young woman in a flowery dress, her blonde hair in a bun. The guests took their places. The bride and groom exchanged their vows; the woman pastor pronounced them man and wife. The deed was done.

That evening after the guests had gone, the family celebrated alone. The dinner dishes were removed and we toasted Kirsten and Bill. Emotions ranged from elation to sorrow.

"Oh, isn't the bride lovely!" And we laughed.

"Oh, if only Papa were here to see her." And we cried.

I danced a waltz with my daughter to the third movement of Brahms' 4th Symphony. In my mind I was Michael Corleone, dancing with his daughter in Godfather III.

The next day, Sunday, was the day of the funeral. In the morning my ex-wife drove me to the graveyard along the highway, overlooking the ocean. We found the acacia tree she had remembered, and I cut a sprig from a bough.

The family met at Saint Anthony's Church for the service. Saint Anthony's was a fisherman's church with primitive paintings. Papa liked this church; he and his friends had once taken an organ to a small fishing village on the coast of Mexico and installed it in just such a chapel.

The women sat in pews on the right, the men, in pews on the left. Everyone was in black. The young priest waved his sensor and intoned, "Te Deum, Te Deum." I saw Lulu sitting with Mama and Aunt Rosie. Lulu was looking straight ahead. Suddenly it hit her—the man in the coffin was dead. Tears exploded from her eyes.

The annoying sound of a chainsaw in the woods punctuated the solemnity. The pallbearers raised the casket and carried it to the hearse, and we followed the black Cadillac to the Little River Cemetery. I parked Dad's old Ford LTD. Lulu and I walked toward the gravesite. Then Lulu said she had to pee. There was no restroom, so I took her hand and we crossed the field to a tree. I waited for her in the tall grass, thinking, "Someday I'm going to be buried myself, and someone will be squatting nearby taking a pee, and perhaps someone will be standing here, waiting, thinking about the inevitability of death."

I stood there, floating in that emptiness.

Lulu emerged, sobbing. "I peed on my tights."

"Lulu," I said, "Take off your tights and give them to me. It's no big deal." I tucked the tights in my pocket and took her hand. As we walked back across the field, I saw the mourners gathered near a mound of dirt.

A gravedigger had excavated a hole with a backhoe. The casket rested above the grave on two poles. When everyone had assembled, the young priest canted his final prayers. I stepped up with my sprig of acacia and laid it on the closed coffin. The priest darted at me a glance of disapproval.

Maybe he only questioned the need for my involvement. I recited my memorized text:

> *The Acacia, which once marked the temporary resting place of one illustrious in Masonic legend, is an emblem of our faith in the immortality of the soul. By it we are reminded that we have an imperishable, immortal spirit, which survives death, and which will never, never, never die. By it we are admonished that we, too, like our brother, whose remains now lie before us, shall soon be clothed in the habiliments of death; yet, through the loving-kindness of the Supreme Grand Master, we may confidently hope that our souls will hereafter flourish in eternal Spring.*

Having fulfilled my duty as a fellow Mason, I stepped back. The priest said nothing, although a look of suspicion remained on his face. The coffin was lowered into the grave.

There were shovels lying nearby, and Bill, and the other men, shoveled the dirt into the grave. They formed a tableau of figures in black against the ocean skyline. I thought of *The Seventh Seal*— the black figures outlined against the sky.

Then I thought of Papa's words to me when we first met. I was 19, and we had shopped together at an Italian grocery in San Pedro. He showed me how to clean and cook the squid. We had made a calamari sauce together. After dinner he turned to me. "Richard, I know what you want to be. You want to be a bum."

Now I felt absolved of guilt. Papa and I had fraternal bonds.

## WHEN GIRLS COLLIDE

"Hi, Dad, would you come down to Mendocino and build me a coffin?" It was Kirsten on the phone. Kirsten Erica—Kirsten, whom we named after Kirsten Flagstad, the immortal opera singer, that Pat and I were listening to her sing the role of Isolde in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* the night our Kirsten was conceived. Erica, because it sounded good with the name, Kirsten.

My daughter had AIDS. She was 33, and she had known about her condition for eight years. Her liver was failing, and she had jaundice. She told me she had decided to quit taking her meds and wanted the disease to take its course.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "I know it sounds vain, but I want to die while I still have my looks."

I laughed at this, although, really, it wasn't funny. Kirsten was my first born. She was a love child of the sixties, a baby born to Pat and me when we were in college at Cal. Pat and I divorced. Pat remarried and moved with the kids and her new husband up the coast to land near the picturesque town of Mendocino. They lived in a teepee to get back to nature, and later they established themselves in town, where they started a bookstore and a pottery gallery.

Kirsten and her sister, Gina, attended an alternative school, where Kirsten developed an interest in music. She aspired to become a rock star and wrote her own lyrics and played bass guitar. She connected with a couple of school chums to form a band named *Jain*, and they began performing in the Northern California clubs at fourteen. Girls on the loose.

When her telephone call came, I was in my bookstore in Ellensburg, Washington. I told her, "I'll be there as soon as I can." I started making arrangements. I planned to drive the *LTD* I call "My Banana Boat" down Hwy 101 and stop off in Santa Rosa to say hello to my folks. From there, it was a two-hour drive to Mendocino. Anne Gilbert said she would like to come along to help with the driving and keep my spirits from flagging. Her husband, Steve, agreed this was a good idea. Anne is a school counselor and my friend, and I admitted I could use her companionship. I was not reading any hidden agenda into her offer. We had been lovers, but we had developed into confidants.

It was May. We made good time, spending one night in Crescent City. We walked on the beach and talked of the euphemisms for death—The Big Sleep, Buying the Farm, Passing Away, Gone to the Other Side, The Final Sting.

I said, "There is no Death. There is only the absence of Life."

"Then, what is Life?"

"A succession of moments before The Big One."

The lapping of the waves was reassuring, even if my ideas were only lacerations of the mind. We agreed the body is imperiled.

Pat and her partner, Doug, had recently moved into a large farmhouse to accommodate everyone who wanted to see Kirsten before she died. Kirsten was determined to party down her final days. The farmhouse was warm and full of people when we arrived. Pat's aunt, Mary, and her husband, Dick, represented the older generation. Rosi, Pat's older sister, and her partner, Ron, and Rosi's daughter, Leslie, and Leslie's husband, Michael, had just arrived. Gina was there with her son, Gabe. Her husband, Sasha, was expected to arrive from Boston in a few days. The whole Turrigiano clan, as well as childhood friends, and friends from the San Francisco rock scene. Also, a mysterious blonde girl from Germany, waiting to have an audience

with Her Majesty. I tried to catch her eye without success.

I cannot forget Kirsten's yellow complexion. Her strong profile was still in evidence, but her complexion had changed. I stiffened when I saw her. I could tell she was in the process of a transformation, perhaps setting forth to enter the sun.

Her husband, Bill sat near her, yet he was aloof. I had the feeling he was experiencing guilt and was depressed because he couldn't do anything to help his wife. He had shut down and spent his time making small wire sculptures. I talked with him, and I confided that I had also felt alienated in the heavy Sicilian atmosphere. He said he felt the family blamed him for withdrawing emotionally from the marriage.

He had married Kirsten, knowing of her condition. They had lived together before the marriage. I think he married her, first, because he loved her, but secondly, because it was wrong to desert her in her time of need. Yet it must have been difficult to maintain an enjoyable sex life with the high risk of catching AIDS. He told me Kirsten had been infected from a previous boyfriend who shot drugs.

I remembered the day Kirsten began to worry about whether or not she had AIDS. I was visiting her and Bill in their Stanyon Street apartment in the Haight. We had gone to Fort Mason to view the collection of quilts that had been made by the friends and families of AIDS victims. As we walked back to our car in the parking lot, Kirsten said she thought she would get a test to be sure she was free of the virus. I said it would be a good idea for all of us. We had all been sexually promiscuous.

She phoned a few weeks later to tell me her test was positive. I was dumbfounded. I was sure there was a lesson in this, but I could see no reason for the outcome to be that she had to die. I was angry at the Universe. And I was ashamed. In the early 80s, the experience of having a friend or family member infected was new. There was a stigma attached to the victim. Much of the public believed this disease was a plague from God to punish homosexuals. I began entering into a state of denial.

Kirsten and I talked on the phone more often now than we had in the past. Although we talked about her condition, I did not want to believe she was dying of AIDS. Kirsten wanted me to grasp the reality of her situation. On one of my visits, she took me to a clinic to meet her doctor. He gave me a thorough breakdown of the progression of the virus in Kirsten's case, the risks she was running, the treatment options, the overall bleakness of the situation. He praised her for her courage and spirit. He explained that she was a part of a community that supported her and that she in turn gave support to. This knowledge made me more comfortable and at the same time more anxious. Kirsten had a terminal illness—no shit—there was no avoiding this. I was frightened, but I was also proud of how brave she was being in this world.

I practiced Vajrayana Buddhism, and I could see the transcendent quality in Kirsten's view of life. She was showing me the preciousness of being incarnated in a human body, the transience of living beings, the need to make the most of every minute. She was also showing me that it was possible to transform negative experiences into positive experiences. She was not going to let dying get her down.

Kirsten was a powerful inspiration. She was approaching Death without flinching. Of course, she had her days of anger, fear and frustration, her days of guilt and disgust, but she went on with her work. She developed Her House Productions, laying down music tracks on a video game. She adjusted to the routines necessary to avoid infections. This was hard, but she went on, knowing her time was limited. We all continued with our lives and tried to make every minute be a full experience. We grew into new habits, and habits become a deadener. Then, Kirsten phoned, and I was propelled back into the realization of the imminent.

"Yes, Kirsten, I will build you a coffin."

Kevin was at the house. Kevin was Pat's third husband. Since he was a journeyman carpenter and I just a jack of all trades, I let Kevin design and direct the construction of the coffin. The coffin was not fancy—a pine box, but a box made with skill. William Carlos Williams speaks of the craft of poetry and admonishes the new poet to take the same care in the making of a poem as a good carpenter would in making a box. There is understatement in this esthetic. A good carpenter uses all his skill in every project. The lines and joints were precise, and we inscribed poems on the inside and on the outside of this box.

Kirsten's final directive was to be cremated, but she wanted the coffin to be filled with her personal possessions and burned on a hillside overlooking the ocean come her birthday following her death. For now, she wanted us to place her in the coffin so she could spend a night in a dark room to get a taste of eternity.

Having the house full of people created minor problems. Different generations, different lifestyles. Those that liked opera, those that liked rock ‘n roll. So, we played Puccini's *La Boheme* back to back with tapes of Kirsten's present band, *When Girls Collide*. We performed rituals. I read from *Seven Arrows* and *The Bardo Tödrol*. I burned incense. I did *Chöd* and *Xitro*. We built a rock labyrinth.

Rosi had been elected "Woman of the Year" in Mendocino County for her work establishing a hospice program. The hospice team was made up of boddhisattvas, and her doctor was an angel. He understood Kirsten's intent and supported her decision to stop taking any medication. He informed us that Kirsten's liver was failing and that, although he couldn't be sure how long it would take for Kirsten to die, he wanted us to know that her deterioration would begin as soon as the meds were suspended. The hospice

nurse prepared us for the final days. There were gloves, masks and smocks to wear in case Kirsten should expel blood during the last stages of her dying process.

On a lighter note, every evening we sat down to a table with silver, candles, and linen. Friends brought prepared foods to make our work easier. Still, it was easy to see Kirsten slipping away. Her hunger was diminishing, and her concentration was faltering, yet each morning, she would awake and shout, "Yippie! I'm still alive." Then, she phoned her friends and had conversations. She thanked us for our kindness and explained that she was tired of trying to prevent her death, that she wanted to live what life she had left without fear. Day by day, she became weaker and slipped closer to the edge where everything becomes dim.

Anne volunteered to go to San Francisco to pick up Sasha. While she was gone, I spent some time with Vicki, the mystery girl. She was tall and blonde and a bit stoop-shouldered, but she looked chic in her leather coat. Her English was good, and her smile was very welcoming, but I could see a distancing in her eyes when she told me she was Kirsten's lover. They had met in Berlin, when *When Girls Collide* did a tour. The group had success, and it was reasonable to expect a star to have both male and female lovers in that milieu. Vicki said she lived next to The Wall. I said that the walls around my knowledge of my daughter were crumbling. How silly of me not to guess. Absurd of me to be putting the make on my daughter's girlfriend. It's hard to stay hip.

Before Kirsten became too weak to get out of bed, we sat on the back porch and discussed things in our lives that made a difference. Joys—music and ice cream and sex and movies and people and everything. She said, "I'll miss everything."

I have a picture Anne took of us. Our profiles are side by side. Nose, cheeks, chin, brow, we were a pair. She was my face. She was my voice. We sat for a good, long time looking at things and sharing our aloneness. She bent near me and whispered, "Dad, I'm just you with a cunt."