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## Fireweed – Rebecca Faulkner

On the 26th night of bombardment I shake  
the stench of gas from brocade curtains

wipe brick dust from porcelain  
contemplate gingerbread baked without eggs

at the all-clear  
every stem in the garden has its neck broken

from the safety of the patio we watch  
the evening shuffle in a nightgown dances

in the hedgerow poplars painted pitch black  
I want to tell you about your son

his freckles the color of burnt straw  
about fireweed crouched in the dust of the dead

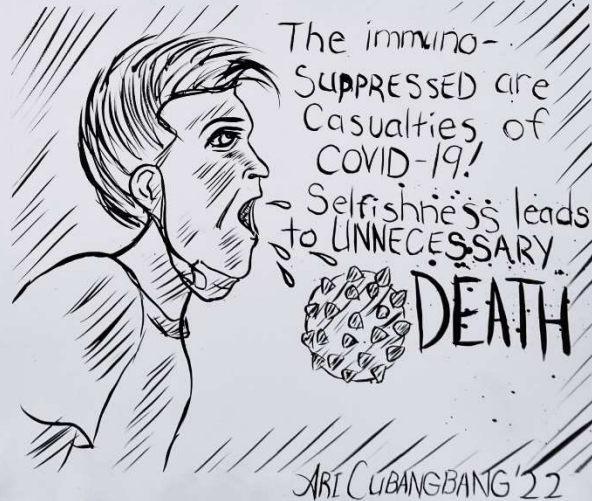
their magenta spires resolute  
nudging cracks in next door's fence

but there is no more room inside your busted skull for us

only silence and burning fuselage  
on the far edge of an ocean

your feet crumpled against the cockpit  
as the air empties I watch weeds lay low

their roots breathe in and out  
while I light the stove



## Trafalgar Square – Rebecca Faulkner

my first mistake was kissing you  
at the riot/blood on stone steps  
stained purple from headwounds  
my lipstick smeared/bricks hurled  
as the crowd swelled/we crouched  
behind bronze/my body pressed  
against lion's flanks/felt your sneer  
& the pavement's tug/hoses slippery  
tasting truncheons & broken glass  
the air cracked/cops kettle/hoooves  
like trucks with boarded up faces  
I didn't run/my first mistake  
when the man screamed/his jaw  
at the curb/dying to be close to you  
to shelter in the clamor/cannons  
from ships at my fingertips/I can keep us  
safe/leave it to pigeons to fix the country  
& that man's teeth/my first mistake  
believing pain has a decade/men who serve  
will protect/our bodies/made for ambulances  
hoping you would take my hand/believing  
there was something left to mend/my first mistake



## Dress Rehearsal – Rebecca Faulkner

The action takes place in a German concentration camp

The action takes place in her marital bed

The action takes place at her ex-husband's funeral

*spotlight stage left*

The actress shivers before the firing squad

The actress stands naked from the waist down

The actress delivers a eulogy she immediately regrets

*cue rain*

The audience gasps, craves ice cream at intermission

The audience loosens their ties a litany of overcoats

The audience weeps & love has nothing to do with it

*lights fade*

The woman tastes sulphur & mud (if she can stand it  
she will survive)

The woman fakes an orgasm (if she can stand it  
she will survive)

The woman counts mourners slowly (if she can stand it  
she will survive)

*the curtain falls*





## **EXPLOSION WITHOUT SOUND – Lawrence Bridges**

Splice out the flash and report  
and feel the slow receding aftermath  
of shock, minute hairs bent like palms  
and thunder hunting for mountains to echo

against, but none are there.

No hearing loss when so edited,  
only the unwombing of all sense  
down to nerves of emptiness.

Don't you ever feel how bad things could get  
at your happiest? Imagine a million  
glasses of cool water spilled on the desert  
under a blue sky that absorbs my diminishing

echo while I quiet myself and roll up  
my limbs and memories and picture  
a missing echo, if only to cushion  
against the next blast, probably soon.



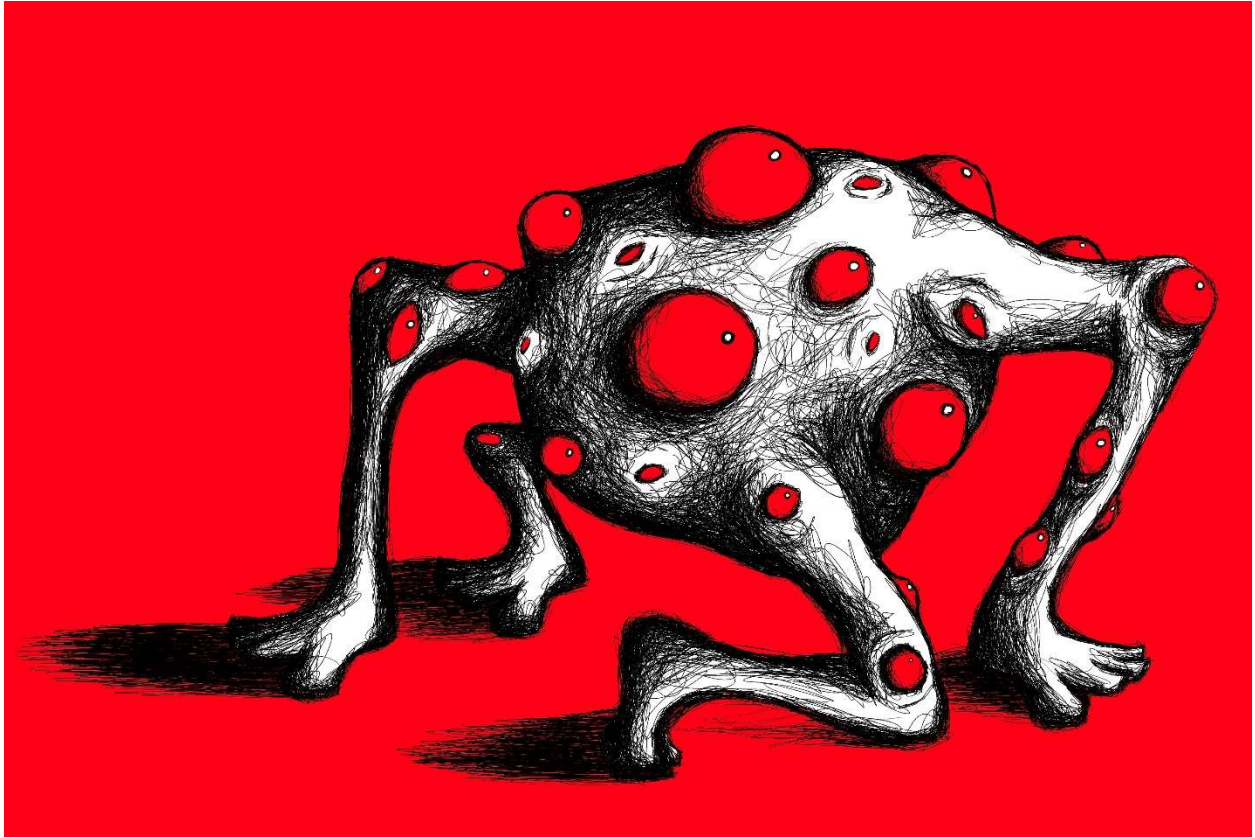
**mishpacha – Sara Gilbert**

I used to clamber onto kitchen counters to cook with Bubbe after mass. We'd take off rings: one large gold star of David, one small silver cross. I'd ask "Bubbe, why don't

you use recipes like mom?" she'd respond, "Saraleh, we don't need recipes, food is in our blood. Your mom is a *shiksa*, she doesn't understand." Bubbe would follow with *mishpacha*, Yiddish for family, but family doesn't

mean we're the same. Mom baked boxed cake mix with secret ingredients. Bubbe made make matzo brei, kugel, kreplach, knishes, hands covered in noodle scraps, flour pastes sticking between fingers, measure vanilla by

smell, cinnamon by heart. Mom read boxes, set oven timers, one hour for kugel, two and a half for kreplach. Bubbe and I didn't listen for beeps, we knew it was ready when spicy-sweet smells of cinnamon vanilla hit the front door.



## Michael is Gone – Victoria Rocha

“Where do you think Michael is?” I asked my brother Shane quietly.

Shane and I laid in my mom’s bed, listening to the sounds of the living room TV. I gently interlaced my fingers into my 36-year-old brother’s hand.

On December 5, 2020, our stepdad passed away, almost exactly one month after a cancer diagnosis. It was difficult to comprehend the loss of the man who strengthened and stabilized our family over the last 24 years and the implications of that loss. He was gone so quickly, there was barely time to say goodbye.

“Hospital,” Shane responded to my question with some trepidation, not quite a question, but not fully confident.

I’ve spent my life wondering about the interworking of my brother’s thought processes and emotions. As my older brother, Shane was my first friend, our chronological birth order the foundation of our closeness, but Shane and I are deeply tied to each other in a way that I’ve only seen within dynamics where one sibling has had to be a pseudo-parent or caregiver as often happens in relationships when one sibling has a disability.

Shane has Down syndrome.

Our conversations are not necessarily deep, probing, or poignant, yet a lifetime of loving Shane is a lifetime of knowing Shane understands and feels more than he can articulate.

In the days after Michael’s death, Shane had asked my mom: “Where’s Michael?”

“He’s gone,” my mom would respond quickly, with a tone of finality – whether about Michael or the desire for the conversation to be over, I was never sure – often throwing her hands up to emphasize said finality.

I wondered if maybe when my mom said “gone” and not dead, Shane was confused on his whereabouts. So, after another day of my mom and I taking private cries in between the business of death, my mom fell asleep in utter exhaustion on the couch and I rested with Shane in the bed, taking the opportunity to ask him where he thought Michael was.

“Hospital” was not the correct answer of Michael’s whereabouts.

I just did it, said it, “Michael is dead, like grandpa.” Tears welled up in my eyes from the flood of memories of both men.

Shane questioned my choice of words, and I said it again, “Michael is dead.”

Shane seemed unruffled, neither of us moving, but he changed the conversation to “Inspector Gadget,” his latest movie obsession and I accepted the transition. Like many people, Shane is not a fan of discussing uncomfortable topics and has become increasingly so with age.

I’ve always been afraid of death. As I get older, as we all get older, death becomes a more prevalent part of our lives. I hate it. Adults grow melancholy, maybe even subconsciously, because with each death there is something in our lizard brain that recognizes that death is the mirror of our own mortality. As with many children, my first encounter with death was with the passing of a pet.

Shane was 12 and I was 10 when my mom and stepdad married. Michael inherited two young kids in this union, whereas we inherited an elderly Michael’s elderly Portuguese water spaniel named Dandy.

Dandy lumbered about crookedly from old age and near blindness. His ears smelled of sour wax and wet blanket. My mom struggled with the smell which made it difficult for her to accept Dandy. I was mostly indifferent, too involved with my own pre-teen self and obsessions to pay attention. Shane loved that dog, LOVED. He could care less about the smelly ears, and Dandy’s speed was perfect for Shane – slow, non-threatening, easy to love and lavish with petting.

Four years later, I was in the garage with Dandy as he laid on his side, clearly in his last days.

I had gone out to grab something from the refrigerator when I noticed Dandy’s labored breathing was accompanied by a strange high-pitched wheezing. Crouching down, I ran my fingers through his soft curly fur and peered deeply into the creamy eyes that didn’t register my presence. Being so close to his face, I saw that his nose was covered in a mat of dirt and mucus. Dandy’s inhalations were having to pass through a thick filter that resulted in the whistling and could not be comfortable.

Not wanting to hurt Dandy, but desperately desiring to give him fresh clean air, I picked at the mat covering the nostrils and slowly peeled it away, revealing a fresh moist brown nose. Continuing to pet his belly, I smiled at my handy work.

Dandy took in a big gulp, air filling his lungs, my hand on his belly rising with his inhalation.

He exhaled. And the chest didn’t rise again.

Initially, I was confused.

“Did I have a hand in Dandy’s death? Had he been breathing this way for so long that a full rush of air was a shock to the system?”

I wanted to puke.

I hurried back into the house to tell Michael, “I think Dandy’s dead.”

Michael didn't believe me at first. I think as his owner he had wanted to be there in the end, the one to find him, to hold him. The pain in Michael's eyes said, "I thought Dandy would wait for me to be there."

And I stole that from moment from Michael.

Even now in adulthood, I'm racked with guilt when I think about Dandy's death. Rationally, I know death is unplanned but between feeling Dandy's last breath and Michael's obvious hurt, I still fight feelings of thievery.

As Shane's first death, the question, "Where's Dandy" was frequent. The discomfort with difficult topics hadn't developed yet. Shane asked about Dandy for years – YEARS.

My mom was initially patient in answering Shane. When Shane first asked about Dandy, she responded that Dandy was dead, but realizing that death may be a new concept, mom would go on to explain that "Dandy's gone and not coming back."

But as the years marched on, both my mom and stepdad would quickly answer Shane, "Dandy's dead," and then force any conversations forward. At one point, my mom informed him angrily that he needed to stop asking, leaving both of them visibly frustrated, but slowly the question came less and less.

Does Shane think this way? Does Shane recognize his own mortality? I don't know. I don't ask. I don't want to know.

The idea of non-existence makes me hyperventilate. Even my vibrant imagination breaks at an attempt to embody lack of senses, a body devoid of thought. My imagination starts to crumble trying to picture death, sending waves of nauseating panic throughout my body. I don't want to die but that overwhelming feeling of incomprehension in those moments is so wracking on my body, I feel like I am going to die, right then and there.

I don't want to know if Shane recognizes his own mortality because I worry that we are so related that maybe we even share in this paralyzing fear of death. Like a mom, I want to shield him from his fears, and I can't.

At the beginning of November 2020, our stepdad Mike, a man normally full of vitality and adventure, started to feel ill. He stopped eating because food just didn't taste right and started sleeping all the time as though no amount of rest was enough. At first, we thought it was COVID, but consecutive negative tests said otherwise.

Cancer. Lung, abdomen, kidney, brain. Tumors covering the whole brain and tumors in the spinal fluid. Those were the worst. All the other spots they had found could have had attempts at treatment because they were stationary, but tumors in the spinal cord fluid were insidious, ravenous to consume to the body - you can't treat a moving target.

For me, this news was a stomach clenching jolt. I knew that cancer could mean death. For Shane, who knew that my stepdad was ill, but not with the specific term ‘cancer’, initially adapted well. Maybe he thought “ill” meant temporary.

Shane was insistent with my mom that family hikes out in the grassland of Washoe Valley must still include Michael, even if it was just to allow him to sit in the front seat with the window rolled down for fresh air and sun on his face. But as his conditions worsened and paramedics would crowd their home, Shane would open his bedroom door to briefly observe the chaos of emergencies before shutting himself away.

Was closing the door Shane’s acknowledgement that ill might not mean temporary?

Michael was supposed to come home for hospice care sooner, but COVID delayed those plans. My mom wanted it to be as normal as possible for all of us. She had the hospital bed setup in their bedroom facing their TV. Her 4’10”, 90 lbs body pushed and tugged a giant recliner next to the bed with dreams of us kids and her watching movies, holding his hand, and writing notes on a mini whiteboard because, even though he couldn’t hear, he could still read. And we would get him a Christmas tree to light up the room warmly at night, his favorite holiday.

As hospice wheeled him up the walkway on December 5, 2020, I felt panic, and vomit rise in my body. Despite reported lucidity the day before, the figure in the wheelchair was distorted in odd angles, his eyes cast upward, unseeing of any immediate earthly reality. There wasn’t going to be movies or hand holding or Christmas trees.

Shane holed himself away in his room as my mom, stepsister, hospice nurse, and I huddled around Michael’s body, the nurse consistently watching his pulse, preparing us that his death was likely going to be within the hour. The reality was there no role for Shane in that room, but at the same time if Shane wasn’t going to witness Michael’s death, it would be on us to tell him the news.

Shane hid in the safety of his bed as we changed Michael from jacket to shirt, hugging him, stroking him, talking to him, his eyes never leaving the ceiling above. Then there is always the question of whether seeing Michael in that state would be helpful or harmful to Shane. Society wants to infantilize people with disabilities, as though they can’t handle complicated situations.

Sometimes I wish I could have avoided watching my wonderful parent die that day, maybe just been told over the phone of his passing.

Would I be less haunted by the vision of his distorted body and the memory of how quickly skin grows cold?

Shane shielded himself in his room as the last breath was taken, my mom and stepsister sobbed into each other’s arms.



I read a letter of my love and adoration to Michael's lifeless body. my precious gift that I had written for both of us to share while we still could.

*"Dear Michael, my most important parent,"*

My voice quaked, my hands shook, as I forced my voice to read my precious gift that I had written for both of us to share while we still could.

*"Life before you was tough. Mom, Shane, and I were a unit, no doubt. That woman would have murdered for her kids, but we all three suffered in that strength - intertwined rope knots so tightly gripped that our edges sawed into each other and frayed. But then you showed up, a knot aficionado."*

I needed Michael to know that from our knots he created a net in which mom, Shane, and I were able to safely land.

My mom dried her face as best she could and went to get Shane. Holding him by the hand, she brought Shane into the room and explained calmly, "Mike is gone." Shane sat in the recliner and touched Michael's hand, but he refused to look at his body, only steadily into my mom's eyes. The moment lasted seconds before he got up and left the room without speaking. None of us were sure what his comprehension or feelings were in that moment.

Shane is not much of a crier, at least not about things one might expect. Once he fell out of tree at my dad's house, no tears. But when we were little, I was sobbing at the Lady and the Tramp scene with all the animals locked up at the pound singing their sad songs. Shane took one look at his little sister crying and tears starting streaming down his face. We held each other to bemoan pound dogs.

Shane didn't cry in that room, even in the face of all these crying women.

Shane needs a lot of time to process, especially if his routines are interrupted, his network suddenly missing a friendly face. After 36 years of knowing this man, my mom is the most adept at responding to Shane's needs. It's that mother magic of knowing when to step closer or give space in situations.

For this, she gave him space to process by remaining consistent in their routines and answering his questions honestly. Each time he would ask where Michael was, without crying or flinching, she would explain that he was "gone" or "dead." I am always in awe at her ability to find strength for Shane. I understand why she does it; the few times in life that Shane catches her crying or upset, he feeds off her emotions. He'll stomp his foot, spit, cut himself, bang things - the two so tightly bound, they are each other's mirrors. I also worry, though, that in his constant asking for Michael, on the inside my mom aches under his words, maybe somehow it worsens her grieving. I don't know. I don't ask. I'm afraid of the answer because we both know there is no solution.

About three weeks after Mike passed, after our conversation in mom's bed, I walked into the kitchen to find Shane at the table, yellow tablet and pencil in front of him. This wasn't a strange sight. In the past Shane had filled up tablets with people's names, where they live, important dates, movies he loves. Shane

doesn't write long narratives. He's a man of facts, building the stories of the people he loves in his head instead of prose on paper.

But today his face was pink, the rims of his eyes red with pools of tears.

My voice showed surprise when I asked, "Shane, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied quickly, while wiping his face, then he burst into a singsong, "Toooooorrryyy!" Shane placates people by being cute. I think some would see this as simple, an "effect" of having Down syndrome. I think it's clever and protective. Be adorable, sing people's nicknames to them. Then they won't ask questions. Shane guards himself emotionally like any neurotypical person.

I was left wondering if Shane had just as many private cries as me and mom. Here we were trying to shield our emotions from him, even each other, trying to not feed into the grief when there was so much to do. Turns out, maybe Shane had been doing the same.

That evening, Shane asked my mom to write something new among the usual, "Victoria lives in L.A. Shane lives in Reno." My mom was taken aback by the request. And yet, after a moment's pause, she wrote it for him to copy. Tears sprung to my eyes, but she just watched him grip the pencil to write, "Michael is gone."

No ambiguity anymore about his comprehension of his understanding of the situation.

There is relief in knowing Shane understands that Michael will never return. Shane's disability does not preclude from understanding the complex human experience. I just wish we could sit down and talk about our emotions, that we could connect and rationalize our sadness. Instead, I have to wait for these reveals of Shane's depths in his own time and own way.

Shane wrote the facts to grapple his loss. And now, I find myself writing, a response to the reaching for my run-on sentences and long descriptions because I, too, need to process the Michael-shaped hole in our lives.

I had always known that one day Shane and I will only have each other. Shane didn't come from my body - I didn't carry him for nine months, feel his kicks, agonize over his health when he arrived prematurely. But Shane is an extension of my heart. He was my first friend as I came into existence. Despite being his younger sister, the roles slowly reversed as we grew up. Staring eyes in the grocery store led me to ask my mom, "Why do people look at Shane that way?" "Normal" is relative to the environment we feel comfortable in; Shane's having Down syndrome was merely a part of our everyday lives that I didn't examine as a child until people watched us, pointed, even commented. Around age 10, I acknowledged that Shane would one day be mine and it didn't scare me, but perhaps I also didn't know exactly what that entailed.

One day we will have to navigate our grief just as brother and sister. Maybe then I will have the courage to ask him about his understanding of his own death, even having the ability to ask him how he should be

celebrated, where his ashes be scattered. One day, I will find Shane hunched over yellow legal notepads and have to write for him, “Mom is gone.”

Right now, I can’t even imagine these interactions. The thoughts make my throat tighten, even worse when I imagine what happens if both my mom and I go before him - that thought is forbidden. My love for Shane is going to force me to face both our impending mortalities simultaneously and I will have to put my own fear aside to be there for him to reveal his own thoughts and needs in his own time and own way. I hope I can do it.



They fill up these spaces like you don't keep asking

for them.

you still feel

madness.

call it

for space but they

the fury of thoughts

that can't reach long ears.

You ask

air filtered this

Because even without

They call you mad

but say they don't

it. mean

## **ROCCO – David Joseph**

The only thing that had more grease than the grill was Rocco's hair. It was jet black, parted on the side, nice and tight. Rocco was in his early fifties, but it didn't look like he'd lost a hair on his head. Most men his age had either a receding hairline or some visible thinning, but not Rocco.

The grease in his hair was pretty incredible. He obviously used a healthy amount of product on it to hold it in place. But there was also the feeling that a fair amount of natural grease was present, the kind of natural grease that accumulates when you don't wash your hair for more than a few days. This created the sensation that even the coldest wind wasn't capable of making the hair on Rocco's head budge.

If our focus was on Rocco's hair, Rocco's focus was on the grill. This was a diner, a real diner. This was his diner. And he was a real grill man. Patty Melts. Omelets. Steaks. Hash browns. Rack of BBQ ribs. Rocco could make just about anything on that grill. It was the best kind of grill too, the kind where you could actually taste the volume of grease in each bite. And if you were lucky enough to have Rocco slide his hand through his hair while cooking your food, then you might end up with a little more grease than you bargained for, like it or not.

And that was the joint. That was Rocco's joint, and it was the place we went to. It was the only place. We went there after games, after school, after parties, after losing our virginity, after, well...everything. There wasn't anywhere else we would go, and there wasn't any place else we'd want to go. Rocco's place spoke to us. It spoke to us like customers instead of kids, and it spoke to us like nowhere else could.

After a big event, we might bring so many people into the joint that other customers might choose to go someplace else. We didn't take pride in people leaving, but we took pride in knowing the place was ours, that we were welcome there, and that we were welcome anytime. Rocco made us feel that way, and we gave him a lot of business.

Now, Rocco didn't give us special treatment, but he gave us equal treatment. And that was more than anyone else could say. That was more than enough for us too. We weren't looking for anything more. We just didn't want to be treated like kids. We wanted to be treated like equals, and Rocco treated us this way. Some customers told him to throw us out on our asses, but Rocco wouldn't think of it. We paid his bills like everybody else, and he knew it.

Rocco's place was special, but it was even more special because it was here, in this town, in our town—one of those American towns that was well past its heyday. We'd hear the old folks talk about those days when the town was booming, when steel mills and coal mines powered towns like ours all across the rust belt. When an honest day's work paid the bills. Those were the days, they'd say, even though it was hard for us to imagine it. In the wake of thousands of lost jobs, it had become one of those lonely, lost places strewn across the map that was barely hanging on, clutching to whatever it had left as the seasons turned and dreams disappeared. And, well, a place like Rocco's that stood the test of time when so many things had not, only took on greater significance here.

In the winter of our Senior year, Willie Morgan got killed in a car crash. It was a terrible tragedy. Willie was a friend of ours, and he was just stopped at a light when the guy behind him was going too fast, hit a patch of ice, and rear-ended Willie's car at over 50 miles per hour. The force throttled Willie's body, snapping his neck instantly, even though he was wearing a seat belt.

Our town was pretty small, and news of Willie's death spread quickly. The night following of his funeral, we all met at Rocco's, and it was the only time I can ever remember him not charging us. Not for anything. Sodas. Burgers. Fries. Everything was on the house. It was nice gesture. Rocco knew Willie a bit, but more than anything, he knew that we knew Willie well. That meant something to Rocco, because we meant something to Rocco.

And we really needed Rocco's when Willie died. Losing a friend when you are young is different. We were all pretty shook up, and Rocco gave us a place to get together. He gave us a place to mourn, to laugh, to reminisce, and even to contemplate our own mortality for the first time. I wouldn't say it was therapy, but Rocco's played a significant role in our healing.

Eventually, we all went away. Away to college. Away to work in other cities. Bigger cities. Start our own families. We never forgot about Rocco's, but we just weren't able to congregate there as often as we did when we were kids. We tried on holiday and special occasions when more people were back in town. It was still great to be there together, but it wasn't quite the same. But often times, the older you get, the more something means looking back, and that's how we felt about Rocco's.

A few years after college, I took a job back in town, and I stopped in to eat at Rocco's whenever I could. He still had the same menu, and nothing seemed to taste as good as that burger and fries sprayed with barbecue sauce in a white box. It brought back memories of those days in high school, those old friendships, and it

seemed to taste better with time. Rocco was a man of few words. In fact, he almost never spoke, with the exception of that time after Willie Morgan died. But he managed to acknowledge me each time I stopped in. He'd run his hand through his slicked hair and then bow his head ever so slightly in admiration.

Sometimes there'd be a new group of high school kids in there when I stopped by. They were the same as us, and different too. But Rocco took them in stride. Kids may have changed, but Rocco hadn't. And I think that's really what stood out. Of all the things in life, I think consistency, real consistency is the hardest to achieve. After all, so many unforeseen things are thrown your way. So many things that tear you off your axis. In the face of those things, the idea of utter consistency seems unfathomable. And nobody was more consistent than Rocco.

Not only did he never close, but he never missed a day. Never. Not on Christmas or Thanksgiving. Never. Not him personally. More than that, he never let himself be changed—by the seasons, by generations, rudeness, etc. He lived by his own code, and he just stuck to it. Day after day. Year after year. The decor never changed. His menu never changed. And he never changed. Some people say you either adapt or die, but Rocco made it clear that if this was the choice, he'd rather die than adapt. Adaptation would have been a compromise worse than death for Rocco, and so he never considered it.

The last time I saw Rocco it was a Thursday night. I was stopping in to get a burger box to take home after work, just before he closed up for the night. Only he was already closing up, and he had his back turned and his key in the door when I arrived.

“Rocco” I said warmly in hopes he would consider serving one more customer before heading home.

“Sorry, Son” he said with genuine apology.

He didn't speak often, but when did, he called me “Son” in a way that was endearing, even if from a different era.

“Have to close up early” he said. “My wife was taken to the hospital. Imagine I will be closed for the next few days, at the very least.”

I am not sure what possessed me to say it. Sometimes, you just say things, perhaps because the sentiment arises so naturally that you don't even need to think about it.

“You don’t have to close,” I said. “I’ve got it. I’ve got it, Rocco. I have a week of vacation time coming to me at work anyway. Don’t give it a moment’s thought.”

Rocco took his right hand out of his pocket and ran it through his hair. This time he was running his hand through his hair out of contemplation, and I could see him thinking, thinking hard, about my offer. He was in a hurry, and he was trying to process everything as quickly as possible.

“I can ask some of the guys, too” I added. “There are a few others still in town, and we know this menu cold, Rocco. Consider it done.”

Rocco looked down. He looked down like a man who was thinking hard. He looked down and then he grabbed me and hugged me. We’d never exchanged more than a couple of sentences before, and yet he hugged me like a long-lost brother. He hugged me as hard as man can hug another man. It was a reaction I couldn’t have predicted in a million years, but I hugged him back and patted his back to let him know everything would be okay.

After a moment or two, he stepped back, put his arms on my shoulders, and then patted me on the chest with his right hand. He dropped the keys to the diner in my left hand and shook my right.

“You know the hours,” he said, before turning and walking quickly to his car. I watched his taillights disappear as he drove off.

A week later, a man in a suit, who I had never seen before, came to the diner. He told me Rocco’s wife had passed away and that Rocco had decided to close down the diner effective immediately and put it up for sale. The man in the suit then handed me a note from Rocco. It said exactly what we should have said to him.

“Thanks.”



