

Linda Barnhart

The Tower

My father phoned the other day with bad news. His doctor is discontinuing his chemotherapy. It just isn't effective anymore. He sounded calm, blasé almost. In spite of the severity and implication of the words, he shook them out as casually as cereal from a box. But with him it's always been difficult to decipher what he's thinking. He's a man of subtle fluctuation in voice, mannerisms and facial expression. Then Aunt Kendra, Kenny, we call her, who looks after him, got on the line and failed miserably in an attempt to sound upbeat. She's his younger sister and a pleasant enough person when she's not running at the mouth about my cousin, Scottie, who's a county commissioner.

Now I'm on my way to Newlinstown, a three-hour drive from Philadelphia where I run a food seasonings company. We make custom blended and packaged spices for restaurants and institutions. Not bad for a brat who forty-five years ago was no stranger to detention or the principal's office. Of course, it didn't hurt that I married the founder's niece.

Though we speak every Sunday, the last time I saw Dad it was late spring. The treatment was a kinder, gentler version, immunotherapy, and not whacking him too hard since he was still eating well. The familiar flannel paunch was evidence of that. He was out back in the garage, building one of the log cabin dollhouses that he sells at festivals and craft shows as a member of the local guild. I used to wonder if they were the manifestation of an unfulfilled desire for a daughter since I'd brought him more than his share of migraines and probably an undiagnosed ulcer or two.

I'm heading in on Wilson Street, the main drag in my hometown. Solid nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings. Reproduction gaslights. But the stores where I spent my parents' hard-earned money on Levis and tooled belts are gone, replaced by vintage clothing and other specialty shops. There are new restaurants as well. Ethnic food once meant Greek. Now there's Moroccan, Indian, and a Vietnamese place on the corner where the newsstand was. I'll have to stop in and try their lemongrass and prawn soup.

I take a right on Powell Avenue and head toward the high school and the Victorian twin my folks bought before I was born. In the distance I can see the town's water tower looming like a spaceship or some giant insect from a B movie over the stubble of postwar housing. And just as pilots of small planes occasionally must navigate by sight,

using large buildings or bridges, the water tower and this town itself have been my landmarks, reminding me of who I am, drawing me down when I get too full of myself. Another lifetime ago I was accused of defacing that tower with an obscenity regarding a teacher, a history instructor, who'd given me a poor grade. I didn't have anything to do with it, but to this day, kind of wish I had, except for the fact that it cast suspicion on my father, who worked for grounds and maintenance in the district, and this, in turn, ushered in an ice age between parent and child that would be slow to melt.

I rap once then step inside. Aunt Kenny's loading the dishwasher. The coffee smells burnt. She and Dad drink it so watered down that I wouldn't touch it. She wipes her hands on her apron then wraps them around me. She's a tiny, energetic woman with the quick deliberate movements of someone who's used to taking charge.

"What's the prognosis? How long?"

"Two months, maybe until Christmas," she sighs. "He's watching TV. Oh, Scottie says hello. I know it's not the best time, but he'd really like to see you. Did you know he's saved this county three hundred thousand dollars since being elected? Three hundred thousand."

"Little Scottie, he's a big shot now. Tell him he can buy me lunch."

I'm thinking I should have come out more often after Mom died or hired a cleaning service. Though never the fussiest (her word) of housekeepers, she'd have a fit if she could see this. The place seems dingy. Nothing's been painted in ages. Here and there a cobweb festoons a corner. The stove's greasy. And on the floor—mounds of paper bags full of newspapers—someone's forgetting to put out the recycling. My ex-wife, Samantha, didn't care for Newlinstown. She called it backward. I said, "You mean provincial."

"No, backward," she repeated.

Samantha was sleek, fashionable and connected—her brother was on the board of the art museum. I thought I was marrying a partner who would transform my life. File smooth what was ragged. Raise what was depressed. And in a sense, I did. What I got was a mirror, a woman who reflected someone I didn't recognize—me.

I remember before Mom passed, the three of us went on a house and garden tour in one of the historic neighborhoods. It was Labor Day weekend. Samantha flew through the properties, rolling her eyes, refusing even to compliment the few that were tastefully if modestly decorated. Afterwards she said within earshot of my mother, "If I see another Welcome Friends sign, I'm going to be sick." I'm certain that she found my parents' ordinariness infuriating. Their

mundane questions and lack of artifice she read as sloth and stupidity.

“Dad, how are you?” I ask, entering through an archway that in more gracious times had held pocket doors.

“Hey, Jeff,” he grins, lifting his head from a bed pillow on the sofa.

“Relax, don’t get up.”

“I’m alright, not much of an appetite though. You drove all the way out here for the day?”

“No, I’ll be here until Friday.”

“What about work? The plant?”

“It’s in good hands.”

He’s thinner than I’ve seen him, his color poor, gray like pewter. And he has no hair, abundant hair being an attribute we Lutz’s have never lacked. By seventeen mine was below the shoulders and the source of far too many arguments with my mother. There’s a protein drink on the tray table next to the sofa and the *Rockford Files* on the television. It’s only late September, but as dark as a cave in here. The blinds are shut and a gas fire flutters in the hearth. The gas burner was my fiftieth wedding anniversary gift to them.

“Remember how you used to hate this show?” he says. “Too predictable you told me.”

Reluctantly I agree. He and Mom had this curious ability to recall the most insignificant comments I’d made as a kid, well after I’d chosen to discard them. Samantha, who enjoyed wordplay, put it like this, “Your wild youth aside, you’re still the only son in their little solar system.”

The *Rockford* comment was no doubt made when I was in my European phase. During the late seventies I made a habit of rejecting everything American. Books. Movies. I even dated a Vietnamese girl who’d been adopted by a retired army officer and his family. Mai spoke French flawlessly enough that, periodically, she found it necessary to correct our teacher. Ironically, she ditched me for a guy named Travis, a guy more blond, more built, more all-American than I would ever be. And so it goes for everyone I suppose, recollections that seem trivial and remote are nonetheless constant, dripping away in the background, pooling and leaching into the present at regular intervals.

“The divorce is final?”

“Four months now. She got the condo in Rittenhouse. I’m renting a place out in Horsham until I get a chance to look for something.”

“Well, it’s not easy. I went through it. I was a lot younger though.” My father’s thrown open a subject that I once understood to be taboo—unspeakable—that he had been married to a woman before my mother. He was just a kid, nineteen and about to be drafted for the

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Korean War. While he was off fighting, she left him for a chemist at the rubber plant where she worked making bicycle tires. I was apprised of the situation during the water tower debacle. It turned out that the young history teacher, Aaron Fuller, was the son of Dad's first wife and the rubber plant chemist. My mother was convinced my father had to suffer the indignity of being questioned about the tower because Fuller believed he might have had hard feelings.

"In the gun cabinet, the desk drawer, there's a billfold. Would you get it?" my father asks.

"Sure." This was one place my mother and I never went. When I was a kid, he kept it locked, even after I was older and, to his dismay, showing no interest in going hunting with him.

I return with a stiff, cracked piece of leather. He flips it open and removes an old driver's license. Behind it is a photograph of a brunette, also faded and creased with age.

"She's pretty," I say. He pinches it out of the plastic cover.

"Put it in the fireplace." I hesitate. "Do you have one of Samantha? We'll burn that too."

"I can't torch this," I say, waving my phone. "Besides what difference does it make now?"

"That's the whole point. It doesn't," he yawns. "I got it right the second time though."

"Samantha was my second." I kneel and place the brunette on an artificial log and she curls and browns in the flames. The credits and theme song are rolling for the *Rockford Files*. "Let me guess, he got beat up, thrown in a trash can and still managed to solve the case?"

"Yeah, I know, predictable. But I like him because he's a regular guy, not one of those secret agent dandies you always went in for." I smile.

I pick up the bottle with the protein drink. It's chocolate and half full. "Why don't we go get a real milkshake? Is the dairy bar open yet?"

"You mean Tommy's?"

"Of course."

"For a few more weeks."

"Feel up to a ride? It's nice out. The temperature's pushing seventy."

"I think I can make it."

We're heading down Powell toward the high school, the water tower growing larger on the horizon. Tommy's is only a few blocks south of here. I take a left on the road that cuts between the middle and senior highs. This is where my father was employed for thirty-eight years of his life—tending grass, shoveling and blowing snow, painting

in the spring and summer. These days, thanks to the school board, all that goes to private contractors.

The water tower is practically on top of us now. I come to a stop to let a crowd of girls in field hockey uniforms cross to the athletic fields. They're a leggy banner of tanned skin and highlighted mops. "God, what are they feeding them?" I ask.

"They were state champions last year," Dad chuckles. When they've passed, I glance off in the opposite direction at the tower.

"I see it's still here," I say.

"Huh?"

"The water tower."

"Oh yeah, it's not going anywhere."

The unquestioning reverence boys have for their fathers began to freeze over in me probably around the time I started tenth grade, and from that point on we looked at each other through a pane of misunderstanding and ignorance. The fact that he was a quiet man and not well spoken didn't help matters. And me? I was as sophisticated as a small-town kid could get from watching campy British shows on cable and reading the *New Yorker's* film reviews after which I'd sling words like anachronistic and derivative into my conversations, no matter how contrived or strained it sounded. "Oh, there's a dance tonight. How anachronistic. How fifties."

It's funny how it played out because back then I was interested in just about everything except grades. Music—politics—women—what else? Don't get me wrong, I wanted to do well, but I could accomplish that with a modicum of effort. However, to do too well was to conform. A group of us published an underground paper. We called it *The Bird* as in to flip somebody the bird. We wrote articles about legalizing pot and the inequity of the school dress code. Girls were allowed to wear slacks, but not jeans. Boys could wear jeans, but they had to be corduroy jeans. What are corduroy jeans? we asked. They're corduroy pants. It was arbitrary, if not downright Kafkaesque.

When Aaron Fuller started teaching history in the fall of 1976 (my senior year), he was fresh out of college, young, cocky, and killing time until he decided where he wanted to go to graduate school. The girls thought he was something to behold, whipping into class, heels snapping, in paisley vests and tailored shirts he'd bought in London during a year abroad, an experience and advantage he never tired of rubbing our noses in. It seemed as if he began every sentence with, "When I was in England." I suppose the truth of the matter was, that we were itching to get out and mark some new territory ourselves and found his panache, considering he was only five or six years older, a bit intimidating. But we also quickly discovered he was no disciplinarian.

And besides—who cared about Peter the Great anyway? The back of his room became the Algonquin Round Table, minus Dorothy Parker, for *The Bird's* press corps. It unraveled one afternoon when Fuller was attempting to explain a test he was about to distribute, and Bruce Corbin, Joe Stanhope, and I were discussing editorial decisions.

“I want to do a piece about drug laws,” Joe said. He and I had been buddies since elementary school. As much as I hate to admit it, this was a friendship that, perhaps, I occasionally worked overtime to sustain because the Stanhope name carried broad shoulders in our town. I liked stopping at his big empty house on the way home, padding unheard over a sea of Persian carpets to the den and crashing into its generous leather furniture. His parents were both physicians and seldom there. But with an older brother who was some kind of future Einstein, Joe suffered from superfluous child syndrome. Philip had been class salutatorian in '73 and was completing a dual major in math and physics at M.I.T. Joe, thinking that he could never measure up and aside from that, it would be utterly exhausting to try, did the next best thing—he rebelled.

“It’s okay by me. What about you, Bruce?”

“Che Guevara.” It was then we heard Fuller clearing his throat.

“Sorry to interrupt, recess is over, children,” he sniffed, waving the papers over our heads. A peal of laughter rang through the room. It was warm for March, and the windows were open. We could smell the manure a farmer was spreading on his fields mixing with the sweet chemical aroma of the mimeographed sheets.

The quiz, which consisted of multiple choice, true and false, and an essay question on the Russian Revolution, had not been unannounced. And since about half of the time I fancied myself a leftist and the other an anarchist, I’d actually studied for this one. When Fuller collected the copies, I was confident that I’d done quite well. At the top of the page, I’d doodled a hammer and sickle.

The tests were returned mid-week, and we reviewed the answers during class. Out of thirty-two questions I’d missed only a true and false and a multiple choice. With the essay (How did the evolution of Russian culture in the years prior to 1917 parallel the social and political conditions?), I’d hit on all the major points. Yet next to my name was a boldly drawn C. Joe, who’d answered a hundred percent of the multiple choice and true and false correctly, got a B-. And Bruce, who’d stumbled on a few more than I, received a D. We decided to confront Fuller following class as he loaded his books into a handsome cordovan colored briefcase.

“I’m well within my rights to impose a disciplinary penalty. You’re discourteous and disruptive, and you don’t pay attention.” Glaring at us from behind gold wire-framed glasses like John Lennon

wore, he had an olive complexion that had never known acne cream and a quarter moon of sideburn jutting onto each cheek.

“You can’t do this,” I shot back.

“Take it up with Principal Wolger.”

“Oh, we will,” Joe shouted. “You bet we will.” The three of us marched down to the administrative offices, comparing ourselves to Dreyfus and every other wronged historical figure we could think of, but were turned back by his secretary who informed us, “The principal will see you on Friday. At three.”

By the time our appointment rolled around, we were confident that Fuller would be raked over the coals for his brash decision. After all, Joe’s father, Dr. Stanhope, had removed the superintendent’s gall bladder, and he’d called to complain about this kid, Fuller’s unorthodox grading policies.

Principal Wolger sat across from us at a massive but organized oak desk. On the wall behind him was a photograph of President Carter and one of himself in a western outfit on a palomino horse. He was new to our school district having come east from Oklahoma City only two years before.

“Now tell me your side of the story, son,” he said to each of us in turn, while squinting through slits in a face so jowly and lined you could have inserted coins into it. He nodded to everything we told him while running his fingers over a glass paperweight with a baby coral snake inside. At the conclusion he rubbed the bridge of his nose for a moment then rose abruptly and announced, “I know you fellows think you’re getting a raw deal, but Mr. Fuller’s your teacher and I’m not going to interfere with the way he runs his classes. You give him respect; he’ll give you the same.”

We left, chins pinned to our chests, hands driven deep into our pockets, vitriol leashed until we got outside. But even there, under the deaf ears of a balmy spring afternoon, our response (except for a few overused expletives) was muted because it was Friday, and the weekend, and an Irish blues band was playing Harrisburg, and Bruce and I had tickets.

At the concert Saturday night, we met a couple of girls, sisters, from Juniata County. The sticks. They had teased hair and false eyelashes, and one of them was wearing a pink Naugahyde mini-skirt. They sputtered along behind us, catching up occasionally, batting what looked like centipedes and saying annoying things like, “The guitar player isn’t as cute as David Cassidy.”

Bruce and I gave them fake names and told them we were students from Frostburg State in western Maryland because that’s where his sister was going. Later that evening, somewhere between

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Harrisburg and home, we pitched their phone numbers into the darkness along Route 944.

Sunday morning, I got a call from Joe Stanhope. “So, where’d you guys go after the concert?”

“The Grill for a burger. Why?”

“Did you do it? You sly dog, you did it, didn’t you?”

“Do what?”

“You know what?”

“No, tell me. What?”

“Jeff, stop screwing around, you can level with me.”

“I’m not screwing around, and if you don’t cool it with this cryptic shit, I’m hanging the hell up.”

“Somebody painted the water tower. You better go take a look.”

Someone had painted it all right—**FUCK FULLER**—in brilliant blue letters at least three feet high on the white background. My first thought was that Fuller, the jerk, had it coming, my second, that Bruce had to be the culprit. He must have climbed up and slapped it on after dropping me off. Unless Joe was feigning ignorance to throw off suspicion. Bruce would later vehemently deny a role. What was inevitable, though, was that the three of us would end up taking the rap.

Monday, my homeroom teacher sent me packing straight to Wolger’s office. Bruce and I waited on a bench in the hall until Joe emerged, winking. “The Gestapo will see you now,” he said to Bruce.

I was the last to be interviewed, which wasn’t a good sign. It meant they thought I was the mastermind, the ringleader. Wolger motioned for me to sit down. “Well, son, it’s been called to my attention that the paint in question is a dead ringer for the blue your father put on the concession stand last fall, so if you have anything to say, you better come clean now.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Unless of course I was sleepwalking.”

“Now you listen up, do you want to jeopardize your father’s position with the school district? If you stole that paint, be a man, own up to what you did.”

I shrugged. “Bring on the bamboo splints or the electrodes, whatever you’ve got because I didn’t paint the tower.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, young man.”

“I’m not, but I won’t confess to something I didn’t do either.”

“Well, we’re going to get to the bottom of this. You can count

on that.”

My father was standing outside when I was excused.

“Come on in, Jim,” Wolger said.

“Yes, sir.” It annoyed me that he’d called my dad by his first name and yet he had been so deferential in return.

Dad fixed his eyes on me for a moment as he brushed by. He was dirty with tiny pieces of bark clinging to his sweater. He’d begun the spring mulching of the flowerbeds and trees surrounding the buildings and walks.

That evening my mother was buzzing through the house arranging and rearranging her knickknacks, carping, “This is about that awful woman.” Then my father sat me down to reluctantly and clumsily explain that he had once been married to Aaron Fuller’s mother. Yet at no point did my father ask if I was involved and that irked me. I knew that Wolger would have told him I’d denied it, but it still wasn’t right that he couldn’t or wouldn’t inquire for himself. And if that wasn’t bad enough, I had to deal with the image of my middle-aged father having sex with another woman.

Within several weeks the whole ugly mess receded like rain water from a leaky basement but left a lot of sludge in its wake. Someone scrawled FIRE LUTZ on a wall in one of the men’s rooms. It was no secret that Fuller had called for my father’s resignation and for the expulsion of my friends and me. But in the end there just wasn’t enough evidence. It fell to my father to paint out the offending message. Twice in fact. The first time he used a white paint, covering only the letters, which he thought would match well enough; however being a slightly grayer shade, you could still read it. I can imagine Fuller was probably livid until the entire top of that tower had been rendered virginally blank. During this period, we became a family of mutes, and Dad’s refusal to question my involvement left me convinced that he considered me as guilty as Wolger and Fuller did.

After graduation Bruce and I moved to Philly. We lost touch with Joe who went off to the University of Oregon as a political science major with the objective of going to law school someday. I waited tables in a Mexican joint and studied journalism at Temple. For the next fifteen years I rarely saw my parents though they were just a tank of gas away. I got married and divorced, wrote part-time and sold advertisements for a free city paper. When it folded, I needed a change. Thinking it would be a short stint, I took a job in production at the spice plant. Samantha’s uncle fast-tracked me into marketing and then management. I liked it, and I suppose it was this sense of fulfillment that enabled me to restore a relationship with my parents. Getting to know them as adults was akin to learning a new language—the

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breakthroughs, the revelations. We were finally making sense of each other. Oh, they weren't fond of Samantha, but, thankfully, she rarely left Philadelphia. The only thing we never really talked about was the water tower.

As the field hockey players jog into the middle of the field, I realize I'm tense, brimming with anticipation. I'm waiting for my father to ask me, once and for all, and before it's too late, if I had anything to do with painting the water tower. But instead, he stares off in the other direction to a lawn spotted with bright blue uniforms.

"Dad," I say. "All those years ago when Principal Wolger asked you about me and the water tower. What did you tell him?"

"I said I didn't think you did it. But if you had, I would have held the ladder."

The sun is intense and bouncing prisms of light off the girls' hair. Their movements shimmer in the smoky quartz-colored windows they've installed at the middle school. The roof is new too—standing seam tin, its low sheen like worn flatware. And the glass walkway connecting the classrooms to the cafeteria, the one that used to get as sticky hot as a green house, they've enclosed it with siding. I wonder what else has changed around here. Maybe tomorrow I'll go for a walk and find out.

"Do they still have the banana custard at Tommy's?" I ask my father.

"They did the last time I was there."

