

We Didn't Know

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The only time I spoke to Lanny Ficke was in 1993 when she called to tell me that Daddy was dead. She'd found my phone number in his wallet, along with a worn clipping that Mother must have sent him when I got the Breen scholarship.

As the news poured in my ear, a quiet space opened around me. Daddy. Gone. A stone thrown dead center into the pond of me. Rings spreading out from the point of impact, stilling my blood.

Then nausea rolled over me and I knew my brothers and I had been waiting for this call our whole lives. Hearing about his death and the clipping at the same time made it doubly affecting. In recent years it was almost impossible to get Daddy's attention about anything that wasn't ninety proof, so the fact that he kept the clipping took me by surprise. Evidently he'd cared after all.

"You have two brothers, right?" Lanny said in a wispy little country voice. "Could you tell them? The funeral's Thursday at two, at Poplar Grove Chapel."

"How did he die?"

"Pneumonia. He come down with it last winter and just couldn't shake it." She coughed, a defeated sound.

I was eleven when we left Kentucky for the upper Midwest. Mother and Daddy had been divorced five years. When Mother got the job with social services in Wisconsin, Granny Bea lamented, "Oh, honey, don't take my little grandchildren up there amongst those tall Norwegians." We're all wiry and dark like Daddy, so she was afraid we wouldn't fit in. But we learned to ski and ice skate and say, "You bet," instead of "Damn straight." Pretty soon Craig had a Wisconsin accent with R's hard enough to cut sheet metal.

We only saw Daddy for two weeks in the summers, when Mother would send us to stay with his folks in Mount Prosper. He lived in a trailer behind Papaw and Granny Ollie's house so they could see that he got regular meals. After the divorce he was all right for a while. He and Mother had met at Blue Valley College, so he had a degree and employable skills. He taught school, planted flowers around the base of his trailer and worked on his collection of Indian artifacts. I remember playing softball and kick-the-can with him and having swimming races at the community pool and spitting contests in the yard. He was more like our big brother than our father. He meant well, remembering our birthdays and Christmas but often sending clothes in the wrong sizes or toys we were too old for.

As Cousin Dreama says, "The trouble with whiskey is, it gets in your stomach so

bad.” After Daddy drank himself out of teaching, Papaw staked him to a little grocery store. We liked to go down there, get candy and pop, and tell the cashiers, “Charge it to the Bossman.” That was his high school nickname, back when he was elected Most Popular Boy. In a way you could see why Mother married him. She’s cautious around people she doesn’t know, but the Bossman never met a stranger. He could get you laughing with a wink and a joke quicker than anybody. A skeleton comes in a bar and says, “Give me a beer and a mop.” Or, a grasshopper’s sitting in a bar with his friend the ant and says, “Did you know they have a drink named after me?” “Really?” says the ant. “I didn’t know they had a drink named Howard.”

The day of the funeral was hotter than Dutch love. I came in from Madison, Craig from Nicholasville, Tommy and his wife Marni from South Bend, and Mother from Milwaukee. The crowd nearly split the sides of the little church. I’d like to think people came out of regard, but most likely they came because everybody loves a car wreck and Daddy certainly was one. I mean, isn’t that what NASCAR is all about? The town had been watching him drink himself to death for thirty years.

At the service, Lanny Ficke and her two little tow-headed girls had pride of place in the front pew. We’d heard he had more children and that he’d married Lanny after the first one came, but we hadn’t known how many. Granny Ollie let the younger girl, Charmian, sit on her lap. Lanny had come along after we were too old to be sent to Mount Prosper, so none of us knew her. We sat on the other side of the aisle, Mother in bright purple. She’d pretty much gone on with her life and was just there to support us. I asked her one time how long she and Daddy had been happy together.

“Oh, about a week,” she said, “give or take a few days.”

Lanny didn’t look over twenty, a thin dishwater blond with fingernails bitten to the quick and nervous blue eyes accentuated by rings of blue eyeliner. Probably underage when she had the older girl, Kaylee, whom I judged to be about six. Both kids were pale as garden slugs. I was surprised that Lanny’d kept her maiden name; she didn’t look the type. Somebody said she’d been one of his cashiers.

“Whose idea was the closed casket?” Craig asked.

From the pew behind, Cousin Betty whispered, “Lanny said he made her promise to keep it closed. I went to see him in the nursing home two weeks ago and he looked awful bad. Thin as a rail and big sores all over his face.”

“He was in a nursing home?” Mother said.

“Pneumonia doesn’t give you sores,” said Tommy.

“Two months,” said Betty. “I think they said he had a skin infection on top of the pneumonia. Just plumb run down.”

It turned out that Daddy had a favorite hymn, “Farther Along,” and a favorite poem, “Crossing the Bar.” Betty said it aggravated Granny Ollie that he’d told Lanny his wishes, but nobody else in the family. It made me wonder what else we didn’t know.

After the cemetery, we went on back to Papaw and Granny’s, which I noticed Lanny and her kids didn’t do. The window fans blew around smells of fried chicken, coffee, and cheese-topped casseroles. The grocery, which Daddy lost about a year before he died, had sent a fruit basket, a platter of cold cuts, and a case of Ale 81.

I was on my way outside to get some air when the telephone rang. Raymond Hogge, owner of Spanky’s Tap, answered it. Many’s the time Daddy left the three of us in his ’67 Mustang convertible on hot summer nights while he went in Spanky’s for “just a minute.” We soon learned to take a pack of cards with us to pass the time and played gin rummy by the one light pole in the parking lot. Sometimes on the way home Tommy would have to sit in Daddy’s lap to steer the car. Often Daddy would

leave again after he got us in bed.

"Diane," Raymond called to me. "They want to talk to next of kin."

"Who is it?"

"The *Enquirer*."

The room went quiet. We were all thinking the same thing: Why would the *Cincinnati Enquirer* care about Daddy?

"Oh, Lord God," moaned Granny. "Oh, Lord have mercy. What now?"

Raymond held the receiver toward me. "Come on, it won't bite ye."

"This is Bob Granville," said the caller. "I'm a reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Sorry about your loss. Sorry to disturb you at such a difficult time, ma'am. Would I be speaking to Mr. Morgan's wife?"

From the irrepressible good nature in his voice, I pictured Bob as early thirties, with a beer belly and a rosy, friendly face; a weekend golfer.

"I'm his daughter."

He took down my name, as well as the names of the other survivors.

"We were wanting to do a little article on your father for the Sunday edition. I wonder if I could ask you a few questions."

"Why would you want to write about him?" I asked, with Craig, Tommy, Mother, Granny, Papaw, Cousin Betty, Uncle Don, Uncle Dennis and Aunt Niota, Great Aunt Lil, and Raymond Hogge all staring at me.

"I understand he was a prominent citizen of Mount Prosper."

I didn't like his nosy tone so I said, "In the third grade he held some kind of record for shoving beans up his nose."

Granny's cold hand gripped my forearm. "Don't let them say anything about his drinking," she begged in a whisper. "Oh, please, Honey. It were pneumonia killed him, not drinking. He never had but that one wreck two years ago, and that one assault charge that was dismissed, and he never went to work drunk."

Don chuckled. "'cause he hardly ever went to work."

Bob Granville said, "Well, I expect you can figure out our interest. It would be the first death from it in Wagner County."

"From pneumonia?"

"You're saying he died of pneumonia? That's what's listed as the cause of death?"

I looked to Papaw and Granny, then to Uncle Dennis, Daddy's brother. "What's listed as cause of death?"

"Pneumonia," they chorused, with Uncle Dennis adding, "Doc McSorley filled it out himself. Signed, sealed, and delivered."

"He died of pneumonia," I told Bob Granville.

"AIDS-related pneumonia, you mean."

I hung up on him. A tic started up under my left eye.

Uncle Dennis caught up with me out on the road, where I was pacing and tearing the petals off a roadside daisy.

He said, "The nursing home's sewed up. They don't want no trouble."

"So it's true?" I asked.

"Hell, no, it's not true. And don't you be saying nothing to Papaw and Granny. They've not heard nothing about it and they don't need to."

"Then how did this reporter get the idea?"

"How the hell should I know?" Uncle Dennis turned away to light a cigarette. The blue dragon tattooed on his left forearm leered at me.

"Who else knows?" I asked.

He widened his eyes and let his mouth drop open, like I was so stupid he couldn't believe I was walking upright. "There ain't nothing to know! Some damn rumor. Probably started by one of them trashy women he went with."

"What about Lanny?"

"Lanny knows what he told her."

"No, I mean, does she have it, too?"

"Don't worry about Lanny. You live by the sword, you die by the sword."

He pulled a half pint out of his back pocket and offered it to me.

"No, thanks."

"Well, ain't you the high and mighty one." He knocked back a swig. Dennis didn't like Yankees, and I was one now.

"Was Daddy—?"

Dennis cut me off, "We don't have that kind of thing around here. Listen, in prisons, they spread the mountain men out amongst the general population, because they keep down that kind of activity. It's a known fact."

I thought about how the Bossman looked the last time I'd seen him, maybe two years before at Aunt Ida's wake: a slight man, given to blackouts. Vulnerable as a kitten. Though it was a cool day, he was sweating; I'd thought it was the DT's.

"You're an idiot," I said.

"Don't you be taking nothing out on me," Dennis said, "Miss Wisconsin. Where was you when decisions had to be made? You and your mother that walks like she has a cob up her butt."

"And a hypocrite."

I went back inside. When Daddy was drying out in Lexington, Dennis had twice snuck a pint of Four Roses to him. Whenever I thought of that, I would conclude that family loyalty is highly overrated.

On Sunday I was still in town, helping Granny go through some of Daddy's things. Mother and my brothers had left. We'd heard that Lanny and her children had gone to be with her sister in Prestonsburg. We were just finishing up breakfast when Uncle Dennis blew in, a copy of the *Enquirer* under his arm.

He bent over and gave me a one-armed hug that smelled powerfully of Aqua Velva and Dentyne. "Hey, sweet'nin'."

Granny brought him a cup of coffee and refilled Papaw's cup.

"Look here." Uncle Dennis put a section of the newspaper between my plate and Papaw's, folded to the obituary page.

The headline of the short article read, Civic Leader Will Be Missed. The focus of the piece was Daddy's memberships in the Ambucs, Shriners, Antique Car Club, and Sportsmen's Club; and his service on the Mount Prosper School Board. He had helped to organize a non-alcoholic Post-Prom party at the high school. The place of death was given as Heritage Nursing Home, where he'd died "after a long illness."

Uncle Dennis lit a cigarette. "Whyn't you tell me it was Bob Granville that called?"

"Why should I?"

Papaw scraped back his chair and limped out on the side porch to sit a while. Granny was still picking around on her plate, listening to whatever was going on in her head. Daddy was her baby, the youngest of four.

Uncle Dennis said, "That old boy's one of the Vanceburg Granvilles. He knows how things are. He wouldn't write nothing that wasn't so."

"Even if it was so," I murmured.

Dennis smacked the newspaper on the table. "Hey, it's a slap-out, good obit. Bob

had second thoughts and listened to them. Want to see it, Mama?"

Granny shook her head like she had a pebble rattling in her ear.

I'll admit I was relieved. All I could think was how bad it would be for Papaw and Granny if the news got out about Daddy having AIDS. Of course, we didn't know much about the disease back then, or I didn't. Maybe he got it from Lanny. Maybe they were into injecting drugs. And what does it matter now? Leave it to Daddy to knock us out of our comfort zone one last time.

The family gathered at my house this past Thanksgiving. When you get older, these things become more important, so everybody made the effort. As we reminisced over pie and coffee cut with Bailey's Irish Cream, I said, "I wonder what ever happened to Lanny Ficke and her children." Not wanting or expecting to get an answer, to tell the truth. I'd just had three cups of coffee, with progressively more Bailey's in each one, plus two Maker's on the rocks while I cooked.

My nephew Randy, Craig's boy, piped up. "Lanny died two years after Grandpa. Kaylee lives in Lexington. She's married and studying to be a physical therapist. Charmian graduated from high school last spring. She's HIV-positive but doing okay so far. She's in a string band. I guess Lanny played the mandolin and Charmian took it up."

We all looked at him like he'd spoken in tongues. All except Hannah, Tommy's daughter.

"Facebook," said Hannah. "Duh."

Randy said, "Charmian's so cool. She's on Youtube—I can show you."

My brother Tommy said, "You mean, you're friends with them?"

Hannah said, "Come on, Dad. They're family."

"We didn't know," said Tommy's wife Marni.

"Didn't know what, Mom?" said Hannah.

Marni blinked a while. "Well. Well, you know."

Mother said, "Who wants more pie?"

So here's what I've done. I've gone on Facebook and sent a friend request to both girls. Young women, actually. With lives. And hopes. And feelings. Hi, you may not remember me. So far, and it's been a month, they haven't friended me. On the other hand, they haven't refused the request, either. I haven't told Tommy or Craig, but I've made a promise to Daddy to keep checking. Not that I deserve to be their friend.



photograph by Shawn Rubenfeld