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My Father's Unholy Local Union

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Everyone in the world is Christ and they are all crucified.

— Sherwood Anderson

I knew my mother would find out before fall, when I'd leave home to find a real job. I'd watch her at the sink, her roan hair falling down, her round face red from the steaming dishwater, and I'd think about telling her, but it was impossible to open my mouth. I was sure something just under her pale skin would break if I revealed the truth: that my father was having an affair with a woman who looked like a man.

I'd found out during that summer of 1990 while I worked to pay off my college tuition at the ceiling-tile factory where my dad had worked for thirty years. It was a terrible secret to keep from my mother, but keep it I did — partly out of respect, mostly out of cowardice. It turned out to be a long, hot summer; temperatures rose to over a hundred degrees on the plant floor, where we made acoustic tile for \$10.23 an hour. We drank lots of yellow Gatorade, whose color only served to remind me of my spinelessness. Every time I filled a paper cone with the powdery drink and put it to my lips, I heard in my head the Kenny Rogers song "Coward of the County." The bitter fluid trickled down my throat as my dad and his man-woman talked near the production line.

All that summer I had dreams of killing him: of shoving him from behind, off the loading docks and onto the railroad tracks, the clacking train tossing his body parts down the slope to the smelly irrigation lagoon. To make matters worse, we rode to and from work together and cashed our paychecks together at Smitty's Bar in Lagro, Indiana, where we drank the coldest beers I've ever tasted. I hated him for what he was doing to my mother, but something made me hesitate to take action: I thought he might be the next to die.

One by one, longtime employees at the factory were dying. They let their illness go without treatment, distrusting doctors until it was too late. There were funerals all the time. The men succumbed to cancer mostly, with a few cases of cirrhosis and diabetes thrown in for good measure. At first everyone said the cancers were from cigarettes, but a few men who'd moved up from Appalachia to get the well-paying union jobs — men whose strict religion didn't allow smoking — also died. Then, that summer, management revealed the cause, which had lain hidden above us. Expert crews started the removal process, pulling down old sheaths of asbestos that had been tucked inside overhead ventilation pipes, pockets of it like gray cotton candy gone to mold. I dreamed of my dad throwing up awful hunks of the killer. I imagined waking him before our

four-to-midnight shift and finding his pillow covered with hairy balls of it, like something a cat might spit up, his open mouth desiccated, his lascivious tongue as dried up as autumn ditch grass. But it wasn't like that. Most of the time, I'd simply show up at his bedside with a tall glass of iced tea, my seething anger hidden, and tell him it was time to get dressed and head to work.

That spring I'd been commuting between Muncie and Lagro, simultaneously working at the factory and taking my last two classes at Ball State. When graduation day came, I attended the noon ceremonies by myself: my mother had to work at Kroger, and my dad logged an extra eight hours overtime on a swing shift. The first in my family to have gone to college, I donned the cap and gown and went through the motions. When it was over, I hurried to get back in time to pick up my mother.

I was free then not to return to the factory; in fact, by coming back, I risked ridicule. The union men loved to tease the few college graduates who remained at the factory until something better came along. I told myself I was just putting away money while I prepared a résumé and shopped for interview clothes, but there was something else, too: something I believed I could do.

It was mid-August when my father and I drove to the Meeks Funeral Home for the viewing of our co-worker Phil. Though I'd worked side by side with Phil for four summers, I hadn't even known his real name until we were handed small interment cards at the front door. Everyone had called him "M.F.," short for "motherfucker." He'd done serious time at Pendleton Prison and liked to take his teeth out during meal breaks; he said they hurt him to chew with. He'd swipe the dentures from his mouth, drop them into his shirt pocket, pop open his silver lunchbox, and gum down his sandwich.

The sweltering parking lot of the funeral home was across the road from an egg-processing plant, where workers held eggs up to bright lights to check for embryos. The acrid sulfur stench drifted over the highway and hung above the steaming pavement where my dad parked the car. The egg plant and the ceiling-tile factory were the only two significant employers in town.

My dad wore a short-sleeved shirt tucked into a pair of gray pleated pants, a shiny black belt strapped around his ample waist. I had on a suit I'd bought on sale at JC Penney, a meager addition to my interview wardrobe. I'd worn the same suit at the graduation ceremony. I'd also purchased a cheap

briefcase, a perfect-bound dictionary, and a pen-and-pencil set that gleamed with silver, all in hopes that I'd actually find a job thanks to my Bachelor of Science in psychology. I hadn't yet realized that I'd have to take a considerable wage cut when I left the factory.

Our car didn't have air conditioning, and by the time we were walking toward the doors of the funeral home, I could see a large dark spot on my father's back and could feel the sweat dripping off my nose. I imagined we were leaving a trail of sweat that we could follow back to the car.

Phil had been diagnosed three weeks earlier with advanced cancer. Within a few days he'd become bedridden, then been brought to a run-down hospice, where he'd died with his kids around him.

I loved Phil. He never lied about anything. Once, when a college kid teased him about having been someone's "wife" in prison, Phil said, "What would you do if someone held a knife to your neck and said, 'Spit on my dick, or blood on my blade?'" While the college kid walked away ashamed, Phil pulled out a harmonica, plucked his teeth from his mouth, and began to play. "I learned how to do this in there, though," he said to the rest of us, a proud, toothless grin, as pure as a baby's, stretched across his face.

As my dad signed us in at the little podium, writing our names in a spiral notebook with a ballpoint pen tied to it, I spotted a circle of guys from the factory, members of Union Local 563, shirts damp, hands shoved in pants pockets, somber but fiery-eyed from shots of schnapps in the parking lot. They nodded at us, and one man, Bob, giggled and made a comment under his breath to the others. Bob's mouth always got him into fights.

I'd tried to ignore the rumors about my father's affair, but it wasn't easy; in fact, it was the talk of the factory, and I didn't know how to handle it. That summer I drank more than I ever had at college, and now, as my dad marched us toward the front of the funeral home to stare down at Phil in his affordable casket, I longed for a bottle.

Cold air from a large vent hit my damp back and gave me the chills. I felt utterly out of place in my interview suit. Phil's family had dressed him in a blue work shirt buttoned to his chin, no tie. His thick hair, brushed back, shone under the lights. He didn't look "eaten up" with the cancer, as the guys had all said at the factory during lunch breaks. Phil looked as if he were napping during downtime, when the line would jam and we'd all grab a few winks before it roared back to life.

Ever since I was a kid, I've cried freely and without much provocation: when baby pigs died on the farm, when a kid at school would sock me in the shoulder, when my first girlfriend dumped me. I liked crying; it made me feel better, released some grim, throttling tension in my stomach. But my dad hated it. I'd never seen him cry, not once, not even a misty tearing-up. That summer, we attended no fewer than ten funerals together, and he always acted the stable foreman, capable of fixing any problem, coolheaded and unemotional. Meanwhile I did everything I could to stifle my tears, including a lip-puckering technique that made me appear more crotchety than sad. Right

then, next to Phil's simple wooden casket, I wanted more than anything else for my dad to break down and lose it, to fill his shirt pockets with tears. But of course he didn't. He only bowed in the direction of Phil's widow, handed Phil's son a check in an envelope, then turned to walk back up the aisle toward the exit. I walked behind him, wiping my tears on my suit-jacket sleeves like a dumbass.

In the parking lot the stifling heat hit us like a wall of space heaters in our faces. The sun made everything silver and painfully bright. I intentionally lagged behind my father to keep him from seeing me try to swallow the king-sized lump in my throat. As I stopped and pretended to tie my shoe, Bob, with the big mouth, emerged from the funeral parlor alone. He came up next to me sporting a broad, saturnine expression, towering over my stooping figure such that he blocked the sun. Then he broke into a laugh, his breath reeking of peppermint liquor, and said, "You like your new stepmommy, Crandell?" (Older men at the factory interacted with us college kids in one of two modes: either cruelly taunting us about everything from girlfriends to the length of our hair, or heartily encouraging us to finish our degree and not end up becoming a "lifer" — a word they spit out as if it were a hunk of asbestos.) I looked up at the large shadow, which wheezed out another round of laughter. "Or should I say 'stepdyke'?"

I stood from my crouch but said nothing. Bob was not a bad person — frustrated and tired, to be sure, but not cruel by nature. For him, things like my dad's affair were swigs of life to be savored at length, lest he go for months without another drink to relieve the boredom of work at the factory. My dad was standing by the car, beckoning me with his hairy forearm to get a move on; from that distance, he was a blurry figure, a heat-wave mirage. As I walked away, I heard Bob spit a ball of phlegm onto the sizzling ground, and then his dress shoes tapping the pavement.

When I was a child, my mother would let me ride with her to deliver my father's dinner to the factory. They were in love then, or so it seemed. She'd pack his chicken and dumplings in a warm crockpot, slip on a pair of heels, and spray her neck with hyacinth perfume. At the factory, I'd marvel at how big the men seemed, their shirt sleeves twitching with every bend of their strong arms. While my mother and father talked about the farm, I'd breathe in the smell of Salem Lights and sit on the knee of an enormous mute named Doadie. His hands were heavy and sandpapery, as hot as the factory air, and he'd cradle my tiny hand in his, fiddling with the small nails, his massive thigh like a tree trunk under my butt. At the factory, to hold another man's son imparted a godfather-like quality, whereas to put your own son on your lap would betray weakness, a desire to soften the boy, make him unfit for the calloused world he would soon inhabit. Daddies didn't hold their boys, but Doadie held me, and I relished every moment: his gentle, wordless examination of my cuticles; his approving smile in my father's direction; and his velvet pat on my rear as I crawled down.

(end of excerpt)