

# Who Was This Guy

*by* John Olson

Luke and Diane sat at a round white table looking around the room. There were clusters of people forming an archipelago of cordial exchange and small talk. All but a few were strangers, friends and family of his sister-in-law Mary, now a widow, though the word sounded oddly Victorian and did not quite suit her. Maybe it was because his brother's death had been so sudden and unexpected. He'd complained of a sore back after changing a tire, and — a few days later - began to have difficulty walking, to the extent that he required a walker. Eventually, he got a diagnosis: multiple myeloma - a blood cancer - and a tumor in his spine.

At each table were pictures of his brother windsurfing, having fun in Mexico, tapping out a drum rhythm with a fork and a knife at a table in Cabo San Lucas. Each picture included an anecdote describing the circumstances and mood of the occasion and celebrating a certain brio that had been characteristic of his brother on happier occasions. His brother had grown darker in his later years, assumed a cynical view of society and people and neglected his health. He didn't drink any longer, but he still smoked, and was seriously overweight. The last time Luke had seen Scott alive he appeared defeated. Scott had revealed, rather fatalistically, that he'd be happy if he made it to 70. Scott was 68 at the time. Luke was 72. Older, but not wiser. It seemed in some way that Scott was the older of the two. Scott had been more compliant, more pragmatic and stoical, and had held down a career in design at a major corporation for many years before early retirement.

Luke often felt that he irritated his brother with his defiance and loquacity. When Scott was still in high school, Luke had ridden the crest of the psychedelic 60s all the way to the stars and back. Luke's life had been impelled by the chimeric pursuit of art and literature. Scott arrived at late adolescence just as the whole scene began ebbing into coke and Disco and crass narcissism. Scott had been more prudent, more willing to reconcile his values and talents with

the rigors of life in the modern era of corporate technocracy. Luke felt like a joke around Scott, an aging boomer, a self-preoccupied anachronistic bookworm whose less than adequate income was his own damned fault. Luke wrote books, but Scott — so far as he knew - did not read them.

That last trip to Scott's house — several months before Covid broke out - hadn't been a social visit. Luke was just there to pick up a box of odds and ends that had been stored in Scott's garage. His wife Diane accompanied him. Scott didn't invite them in. They had exchanged a few words outside, ending with what proved to be Scott's prophetic declaration of making it to 70.

Scott's remark hadn't been intended as a glib titbit of black humor, nor was it bravado, full of easy surrender and a jaded disenchantment breezily dismissive of life. There was real sadness in his voice. It had been strange and concerning that he would reveal such a thing. He had a good life. A loving wife and son and a spacious, well-lit house, that he'd designed and built himself. He knew Scott suffered depression. They both did. Scott — always suspicious of pedantry, people he termed “brainiacs” — resisted any discussion that probed too deeply into the mysteries of human consciousness. He eschewed the use of psychedelics that were then being newly introduced to therapy, which had been superbly documented in a book called *How To Change Your Mind*, by Michael Pollan. Luke sent a Scott copy, but doubted that Scott had read it.

Scott's wife Mary was inconsolable. She asked Luke if he could provide an anecdote for a memorial handout. He was surprised at how difficult it was to provide the right memory. Since this was a memorial, he wanted to provide something upbeat, something that celebrated his brother's sometime affable nature and joviality. He was finding it oddly difficult to think of something. He'd spent a lot of time partying with Scott when they were in their 20s but nothing uniquely memorable about those drunken occasions stood out. His clearest memory was an incident that had occurred when he was 12 and Scott was 8 and they were living by the Mississippi river in a suburb of Minneapolis. The house had been newly constructed and

didn't have a lawn. The yard surrounding the house was still dirt, big beige clods of it. Scott had been playing by the shaded north side of the house one summer. He'd dug a number of trenches and embankments and populated it with little rubber soldiers. He was using one of their dad's wood chisels, its bright blade flashing in the shade. Luke remembered gazing at Scott's military campaign and could see there was a narrative of some kind connected to the way everything was arranged. He had said something mocking, he couldn't remember what, he wasn't even sure it had been mocking, or mean, or sarcastic. But whatever he'd said triggered Scott. He went into a rage and threw the chisel with all his might at him. The chisel buried in his knee. Luke pulled it out and the bleeding was intense. He felt ashamed that he'd said something to put Scott into such a towering rage. He told their mother he'd fallen on a nail buried in the dirt.

Another memory had to do with a trip to North Dakota he and Scott and their two wives made by train in May, 1997, to visit their ailing father who had chosen to spend part of his retirement in a cottage in the Turtle Mountains, nestled among a stand of birch by a small lake. While walking out on the prairie, they happened upon a slab of limestone imprinted with the marine life of an ancient sea. Scott had picked up a rock and began hacking at it, ostensibly to bring a souvenir home with him. Seized with anger, Luke shouted "what the hell are you doing?" Scott looked stunned. Luke felt bad immediately for the outburst. Here he was humiliating his brother in front of his father and wife. He should've just let Scott hack a piece off. Hurting his feelings like that wasn't worth a damaged slab of limestone imprinted with brachiopods and trilobites.

These were clearly not memories he could offer for the memorial handout. He cast another line into the waters of his consciousness. Nothing stirred. Everything about his brother was peculiarly vague in his memory. He could remember general things — laughter, music, a fundamental kindness — but nothing emblematic. Nothing, that is, that didn't support the overall narrative of a man's being and imprint on the world in an upbeat, nicely commemorative nutshell.

Luke's childhood had been enriched by Scott's existence. They'd supported one another during their parents' lengthy and highly contentious divorce, and adjusting to life with a new set of siblings, people with whom they were constantly told were equal in love to their father. Scott had been the most constant thing in his life while he experienced all the turbulence and tribulation that denote the odyssey of adolescence. They began to grow apart in their 30s, a time when friends and siblings begin to distance themselves geographically and circumstantially. He saw Scott evolve into a man of steadfast maturity while he remained spellbound in a lush, sybaritic realm of exotica, caprice, and French symbolism. There's not much market in poetry these days. He didn't romanticize poverty, or elevate it to the status of a sacrament as some did, but he did find a certain magnificence in the lunacy of it all, pursuing what he felt was a high and noble calling rather than the spirit-deadening exigencies required for financial security. And he was lucky beyond his wildest dreams to find a loving companion who shared and understood these things. And together they let their eyes wander, trying to look at ease when they were so clearly not at ease. He and Diane felt doubly awkward. The people in the room were mostly Mary's friends and relatives, total strangers, but there was also the deafening absence of his brother.

His nephew Hugh was there, but he barely knew him. Hugh was 24. He seemed like a nice kid. Intelligent, affable, a bit rebellious. There'd been little opportunity to get to know him better. In 24 years, they hadn't been invited to a single birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas or graduation. Luke joked to his wife Diane on the way to the memorial, "we finally got invited to a family event."

He remembered Scott's last gruesome phone call. Scott must have rolled over onto his smartphone in his hospital bed and butt-called him. He could hear the sound of his brother's pained breathing, labored, heavy, unnatural. "Hello? Hello?" Luke kept shouting into the phone, hoping to awaken him. It was futile, like shouting at a granite wall. Death had already claimed him. What

would follow was the ceremony of departure, struggle yielding to release.

Several men in their late 60s introduced themselves as Scott's old drinking pals. They remembered Luke, and he remembered them. He was reminded of far happier times. The 70s. Steely Dan. Cheap Trick. Blue Öyster Cult. The glossy world of advertising and marketing that had become Scott's professional life, a world Luke loathed, though he liked Scott's friends.

He managed to write an 80-word anecdote about how he and Scott had a blast as kids turning the sound down on TV and filling in the dialogue themselves for the memorial handout. Mary didn't use it. Maybe it was too many words. Too silly. Too insipid. There truly are things that can't be said. This becomes especially apparent when death is around. It has a vibe. It's a discovery. In the literal sense: un-cover. Pull the curtain back. Lift the rag. Open the door. See what's there. And what was there? A smile, the sound of a voice beginning to fade. Who was this guy he'd known for 70 of his 74 years? Why couldn't they have remained closer? Why had his brother walled him out so completely? He thought of Scott's cremated remains. Luke's first job out of school had been as a factotum in a funeral home. Washing the limousines, hauling flowers by the truckload to the dump. He remembered opening the big steel door of the crematorium furnace and seeing the ash, grit, bits of bone. He used to take his breaks there, because it was warm. Hard to think of Scott now in that way. Something to put in a jar. And that prosthetic titanium rib used to replace the one Scott broke during a coughing fit. What would become of that?

It was unbelievable that the being still in his head, this energy that was too fresh even to become a memory, was essentially an emotional residue now, an aura, like the nostalgia that comes over him when he hears the Beach Boys sing "Don't Worry, Baby," and he can see Scott tugging at a sail on a surfboard on the windy Columbia gorge. This enduring image was so different than the person he saw that one last time, that perplexing, sadly resigned man, his body silhouetted against a pale grey late afternoon sky in the Pacific

Northwest. It would be a strange memory, when it finally and ultimately became memory. But for the time being, Luke could still feel his brother within him. He still felt the impulse to joke with him. That deep connection of flesh and blood was still there, the reflex to call and ask something, share something, tell him something.

