

The Prince of Arthur Avenue

by Gary Percesepe

They're in Arlington National Cemetery, father and son, not far from Kennedy's grave. The older one. Then the younger brother, where there is only a simple white cross, low to the ground.

It's a warm day in April and they've shed their jackets. The son wants to know what it was like in those days. He's a tall boy, taller than his father. Around his neck are purple beads and a guitar pick with a hole in it, the bead string snaked through so that it looks homemade.

Tell me a story, he asks. Anything you want. Just so it's about me. You can do that, can't you?

The father drags his sleeve across his brow, checks his watch.

We have time, the son says. Later, we'll go find something to eat, see the town. But first, tell me this story like I want.

I'll tell you a story, the father says. I'm not sure if it's what you want, but it's one I know. It concerns you, in a way.

Shoot. Whenever you're ready. We've got all day.

I worked for Tuck Tape in those days, on the loading dock, down in the Bronx. There was a bakery not far from there on Arthur Avenue, where they made Italian bread. I liked to smell the bread baking as I pulled into the lot. It was the smell of home, made by hard working men in the dead of night. It was an honest product, that bread. Sometimes after work I'd stop at the bakery and pick up an armful

of bread just to smell it on the drive home. Your mother would slice it up and serve it that night with salad and pasta and maybe a bottle of chianti. We had the life.

I worked graveyard five nights a week and caddied on the weekends at North Redoubt because we needed the extra money. North Redoubt is still one of the better clubs, though I haven't been there in years. Caddying was good pay if you got the right member or some happy-assed relative from out of town, but it was lousy hours, ate up the whole damn day, and I didn't get to see your mother much.

She was pregnant at the time. We hadn't planned on it. We had barely enough for our own selves. In those days it seemed like every time I turned around someone needed money. Her two older brothers had managed to run a perfectly good tire business into the ground and got sent to Riker's when the feds got into their books. So there was that, their families to look after, and we were supporting my sister, who had MS and needed pretty much around the clock care. So what I'm saying is, things were tight. But hell, we welcomed it, the news about this baby. We thought maybe this would turn things around for us. I told her I'd just caddy on Sundays, or if I needed to I'd get a third job. I knew a guy who fished the river for crabs. It could be managed, I told her. We'll be fine. Let's have this baby.

We rented a small house in Yonkers back then. We had a back room that I used for storing my tools and fishing gear. I cleaned it out and she set to work, cleaning, spackling, painting, wallpapering, you name it. She put a blue border running along the top of the wall. She was sure it was going to be a boy. In those days you had to wait to find out what you had.

She asked me one day, Joseph, do you think we can afford a crib? This baby is going to need a crib. I said sure, let's go get us a crib.

We poked around antique stores on Broadway until we found a crib that suited her. It was mahogany, stout as you'd please, with fine woodworking, all hand tooled. That crib could have held the young Paul Bunyan. And a set of drawers, she said. This baby will need a place for his things. So we bought a set of drawers to match the crib. We put it all in the baby's room, the room that was my old tool and fishing room. She said to me one night, Do you like the baby's room? I said it was the finest baby room I had ever seen. There wasn't a finer baby's room in town. And I meant it. It was a fine room. We had everything just so. At night sometimes, before I went in to Tuck Tape, we'd sit on the floor in that room with what was left of the bread and wine and we'd talk about baby names, about who it'd look like, what side of the family it would favor. She wanted to know what his voice would sound like, and how it would feel to hold him that first time.

This one night in particular we were sitting there in what was to be the baby's room, past ten o'clock, talking, like we would do, and she looked so pretty sitting up against the wall like that, like a child herself, except for her belly, where she had begun to show. She had her hands propped up on her belly, just holding them there steady, when she started sobbing. Not loud, you understand, but so I could hear her. I asked her what was wrong.

Nothing, she said. I'm just so happy, I guess. I'm happy that you want this baby.

Sure I'm happy. You're going to be the best mother any baby ever had, I said. It was true.

She was quiet a long time. Then she said, this baby is going to be loved, Joseph. Not like me.

What do you mean, not like you?

I never told you this. I didn't think it mattered. But now I see that it

does.

What do you mean, I asked her.

You never met my father.

I know that. He's dead. Drowned in the Hudson, you told me.
Fishing accident.

He's not dead, Joseph. I told you that because I was ashamed. Or because he's dead to me. He's drowning all right, in booze. He left when my mother died, cut out just like that. That's why I was raised by my grandfather, not like I told you, because my father never died. He's still here in this shitbum town, a drunk, Joseph.

Well, I knew that her mother died of cancer when she was seven. But this news about her father made me wonder about her, about what else she hadn't told me.

The boy looks at his father, then looks away.

You want to hear more? the father asks. The breeze presses against his face.

Sure, the boy said.

I saw him one day, her old man. I asked around at the union hall. Some men who had worked with him, all good men, told me where I should look. He wasn't hard to find. I went to one of his watering holes. I staked a position at the far end of the bar, and waited. Along about midnight this one Friday night he shows up, still in his work clothes. I remember how he leaned into the bar, standing the whole time, one foot on the dented brass rail to steady him. His bartender lined up three shots and he downed them one after the other, then chased it with beer and ordered up another set. I ordered another one myself, careful not to catch his eye. He was a mean drunk, loud and loose-limbed, and he had a wicked laugh that ended with this

high little trill. It sounded funny coming from such a big man, but no one laughed with him. No one tried to talk with him, just his bartender, who kept feeding him the drinks, washing his glasses in the sink and drying them with a towel he kept slung on his shoulder.

The crowd is still six deep at the dead President's grave. The boy plays with the guitar pick around his neck. He puts his jacket back on. The sun has ducked behind a cloud, lower now in the western sky.

His father studies the boy a long time. Then starts again.

I knew it was him. He looked like your mother. His jaw had the same set to it, and besides that there was that laugh, the way he broke it off with that high lonesome sound, which to me that night sounded like a small animal in pain. It was a laugh designed to mock women. I had heard it from his brothers, the Riker's crooks, and I hated him for it, hated all of them, and looking at him that night in the bar I knew, I could feel, how much she hated him, hated the very sight of him. Hated him so much she had snuffed him out in her memory, even though he was all she had in the world after her mother had gone and things went to the bad for her family. But to hate your father and bury your mother as a little girl--where does that leave you? I felt awful, watching him that night, to see what I meant to your mother. It was a burden to have to mean so much to someone who had so little. I began to feel like it was a weight I couldn't handle.

I followed him home that night. After last call he staggered out the door, and I went out after him. I had it in my mind to hurt him, to hurt him like he'd hurt her, and everyone else he'd ever known. And no one would've blamed me if I did. Hell, they'd thank me. I walked ten paces behind him and he didn't even notice me. I don't know how he knew his way, he was blind drunk, and reeking of booze. His smell stuck to the air.

Did you tell my mother you found him? the boy asks.

No. Not right away, at least. I followed him for a few nights, debating it, whether I should tell him what a certified asshole he was, that he had a beautiful daughter no thanks to him, and a grandchild about to enter the world. But then I thought no, this would make him a grandfather, put us in connection in a way I didn't want to be connected. Right then was when I understood how your mother had felt. I understood the way she had refused to let him exist even though he clearly did. For a minute or two I might have thought that news about his girl and her new baby might change something in him, knowing that he had someone to care for--but I shook that off when I remembered how he'd left his own blood years ago, and how would any news change him, anyway? It would all be the same to him. I saw I was just being a fool. But I trailed him for days, looking for signs or clues or something, what I should do, or shouldn't do. It bothered me that your mother was from such trash, I'm not ashamed to tell you. I wish I could tell you different. And it changed something in me. I can see that now. Though we managed for another few years.

The boy looks at his hands, puts them in his hair, then cradles his head in his clasped hands as he leans back and tries to find the sun. He straightens up then and looks at the rows of white crosses, marking the lives of the famous, the unknown, and the dead.

Is he gone? the boy asks his father.

Yes. But I didn't do it, I'm pleased to say. Much as I would have liked to. He fell down drunk on the job one day is the way I heard it. Never got up.

What was his name? the boy asks.

Not yours, says his father. Not yours.

They walk around the twisting road, past the tall gates, aiming for the car. The cemetery is quiet, it's secret knowledge safe beneath their hurried feet.

When they are in the car, before his father can get his keys in the ignition, the boy tries again.

What was his name?

What's it matter? his father says. And reaches to start the car.

The boy grabs his fathers right arm and holds it. Tell me, he says.

William. His name was William, same as yours. Your mother wanted to change things. She believed in the redemptive powers. Absolution, you might say. I think she just wanted to be able to say that name with love again, to love a person with that name, William. There was never a woman with a bigger heart than your mother, I can tell you. What's happened is all on me, I've told you that. There's things you can change in this world and things you can't. We have to figure out which is which. Though I never was much good at it, I guess.

I never liked my name, the boy says. I'll change it.

Don't change it. And don't tell your mother I told you, either. This isn't a contest, see? She never told you about him, right? That's the way she wanted it.

The father cranks the car, eases out into the traffic headed back into the nation's capitol.

And I bet she never told you we called you William, Prince of Arthur

Avenue?

The boy shakes his head no.

Then don't tell her, don't talk about it. Just leave it be, son. You wanted a story and now you have it. It doesn't mean anything's changed, or that you have to fuck anything up because you know something new. It's just a story.

Yeah, says the boy, rolling with it now. William, Prince of Arthur Avenue.

Just a story, his father says.

