

Two Lives

by Mike Croley

You don't know what it's like to be in the bed as a child and feel the air of fall enter your room and hear the dishes in the cabinets of your home rattle, their doors slammed by some drunk looking for a fresh bottle of liquor. The cool air sweeps over you like frost, hardens the skin of your nose and shrinks the vertebrae in your spine until there is a pulsating tingle of fear at the base of your skull. Your stomach goes hollow, and if not for the worry of having the drunk come in your room, you would call out in the middle of night when he utters those first words down the hallway, toward your parents'.

"Goddamn it, Speed," he yells. "Speedwell Fleming get your ass out here, I need some goddamn drink."

But even worse than that is the voice of your father. It's calm and slow. Practiced and repeated. Somehow he's grown accustomed, unmoved by these nighttime interruptions, and he tends to these men—all low and scruffy, their hair unclean, their clothes unwashed—as if he were a store clerk fetching a fresh bag of meal or two bottles of pop for a customer's son or daughter.

"It'll be okay, Bev," he says to your mother. "Just one of the boys."

Boys. Boys, he calls them, as if they do not know better. As if these are just kids walking on the very floor where you just took your supper seven hours ago and listened to your father tell about how cool the mines are even in the summertime. "Like climbing in a damp and hollowed-out tree," he said and winked. "You'll know what that's like one day when you're old enough."

"The children, Speed," your mother says. "They scare the children, you know this," she says.

But his footsteps are already padding down the hallway. "Drummond," he calls. "Please, keep it down. My wife and children, they're sleeping."

"I don't give a good goddamn what they're doing," he comes back. "I'm thirsty. Fetch me some drink."

Years ago, I tried to write this. In college, when I was majoring in finance but had become something of an English Department rat, spending nearly all my elective credits on American Literature and creative writing courses (except for the six hours I took of both football and baseball coaching).

My fiction teacher, God bless her soul, encouraged my writing. She was a pleasant woman, with a sharp eye, full of wit and charm. After class one day she pulled me aside and asked what my plans were when I graduated.

"Attend law school, I suppose. If not that, then maybe get a job in sales." Though, I must admit, at the time (and even now) I had no idea what a "job in sales" meant or even implied.

"Have you considered other graduate degrees? In English, perhaps?"

"No," I said flatly as if I were distracted by her question.

"There are some fine schools that would let you study writing while working on a degree in English. I know of some," she said. "I could make some calls, write some letters."

She was a writer of some merit. She had written two books, published by a big New York house with moderate sales, before she came to our college as the writer-in-residence. She was a handsome woman, the only woman I've ever described in such terms, with a long neckline and a face sunken at the cheeks and driven to a point at her chin. She kept her hair pulled back in a child's ponytail that made her seem younger than she was, and she walked stoically, leading with her shoulders. Her fingers were long and bare, she never wore rings, and only once do I remember her wearing anything other than a watch on her wrist.

That semester, the semester in which I first told the story about my childhood and my family—a fictional one laced with truths—I would go home at night after class and sit down with my pen and pad to write a new story for the next class, but every time I began, my mind drifted to the image of her working by a window in all seasons, those long fingers rapping away at a typewriter as she

polished and pored her next manuscript. I saw her holding the perfect posture of a Southern debutante, that slim back of hers fully erect, curved only slightly, her thin gray sweater hugging her breasts with support and warmth.

"Drummond, just calm down. I'll get your liquor. I always do. Let's just go outside," he says.

"What the hell for?"

"My family," your father says.

You are only twelve, but you know your father is a chickenshit bastard. The fear in you turns and looks upon him, and you want to run out and help him because you are so afraid for what can happen to everyone if something happens to him first.

"If you love your damn family so much, seems to me, you wouldn't be making this corn mash still. You'd get out of the game and let others sell it," Drummond says to him.

"The barn," your father says. "It's out in the barn."

Rain has started to fall and it thumps against the gutters of the house. The drops are so big they sound like acorns falling into the hollow aluminum, and from your window you try to follow the two shadows moving across the yard to where you'll be in three hours milking the cows, just as day breaks over the mountain and the sun's weak rays will be caught in the clouds, the smell of stale hay and manure stagnant like pond water.

And then, minutes later, your father is coming back down the hallway, stopping for a second outside your door. He doesn't come in, but you feel him there, thinking whether or not he should come in and check on his only son. But he doesn't, he never has, and you don't expect him to tonight. He goes to his room where he hushes your mother, and in another set of minutes all falls quiet inside the house again. The winds cause the rain to come down in alternate heavy beats on the roof, a two-second rage followed by a two-second reprieve. It'll be muddy in the barn tomorrow and the water will run under your feet, and the tops of your boots will suck into the earth with each of your steps.

I sent this story off once before. I worked and reworked the sentences. I sifted through the pages; I gutted the story just like my cousins used to gut their kills after a day of hunting. I took it as far as I could go, knowing there was nothing left for me to do with it. I tried to do as I later heard Miller Williams say, "use the usual word in an unusual way." My teacher looked it over. I watched as she bit down on her bottom lip and nodded in approval. Minutes passed while I sat in her office looking from her face to the collection of books on her wall. I scanned the titles—O'Connor (Frank and Flannery), Faulkner, Roth, Updike, Welty were the ones I had read—and listened for a sound to come from her, one of approval or confusion. She said nothing. The only sound was the turning of a page and the creaking of her chair when she sat up straighter in the light from her window.

I packaged the story in a clean, white envelope. In my best print, I wrote the name of the journal, addressed it to the fiction editor and took it to the post office. I checked over my submission letter three times, made sure I had spelled my teacher's name correctly, made sure to include it was at *her* suggestion I was sending this story to be reviewed.

It was a tight-looking package. Simplistic with smooth lines, the dark black ink of my print hopping off the white. I expected the clerk to look over the address, see the neatly printed journal name, then catch the attention line of "Fiction Submission" and look up to me. More than paying for the postage, I wanted this man, whom I'd never seen till now, to look at me from atop his gold-framed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose and ask, "Are you a writer?"

And then it would be out there. Was I a writer? What was I other than a senior at a state university in a town of average size far from where I had grown up? For that was the only thing I was sure of in my life at the time, and the only thing I could speak to with any sort of coherence or truth. Back then if you had asked me where I'm from, what I'm studying, or what I plan to do, those would have been easy, rapid-fire answers. Kentucky. Finance. Law school or sales. But

had you asked me, "Are you a writer?" even I am curious as to what the answer would have been.

The clerk snatched up the envelope from my hand and laid it on the meter, bent down and read the numbers, and then with the matter-of-fact tone I receive from my doctor when he checks my blood pressure, said, "Thirty cents for first class."

I pulled the dollar from my wallet, a wrinkled one that had seen better days, and handed it to him. I watched as he stamped my envelope and slid it in the bin beside him among all the other letters, bill payments, and small, flat packages.

Your old man has been out of work for a few years, and that's why he's selling that moonshine. He didn't hurt himself in the mines like most that are laid up around the countryside. No, his pain was brought on by something tamer: a pickup basketball game between him and his brothers just down the road from your house.

Every Sunday they played on the dirt court you watched him pace off to a thirty by thirty square. Then he and your uncles burned the grass off the patch of land and set into leveling and packing the dirt down. Their old high school had just gotten new goals, and they gave them one of the old ones, the orange paint long gone so that the metal was a dull greenish-silver. They fastened the hoop to a plywood backboard and hung the goal from an oak tree not more than a few steps from a creek a couple of feet deep.

When they played, there was always a danger one of the men would go flying off into the water chasing a ball down or just from getting bumped under the basket in the rough way they banged their bodies into one another. "Assholes and elbows," your father always said about the games with your uncles. And you, at age twelve still too small to compete, were forced to watch the games from the back of a pickup truck.

Your father was the best player of them all. The dusty dirt would kick up on his bare chest when he dribbled past your uncles for a layup while his jeans slid down his waist. He was not especially quick, but he was always in the clear, causing your uncles to

constantly switch and take turns guarding him. But none of them could stop him, and from the truck you drank your bottle of Pepsi and cheered.

The day your father hurts himself is no different from most others. Your mother has gotten up early, fixed breakfast for everyone before she and your sister go to church. You sit with the men of the family at the table, mimicking their motions and leaning on your left elbow against the tablecloth while you use the other hand to feed yourself. You trade looks with them as they talk about sports, work, and their wives to one another. Between the six of them, you notice only your father has the blue eyes of your grandmother. Just a shade lighter than the Blue Labels he drinks from when working in the garden. They have the texture of glass, catching the light in a certain way that glazes his pupils. His eyes, you want to believe, are the only things of his you ever envy.

It is not surprising when he falls. The games are rough. Though they are all family, they are men first, and they have taken a day's worth of embarrassment at the hands of this one man, your father. Angry at each other, they all play harder, this one final game before it is time to get cleaned up for supper. The ball goes over your father's head, and he runs for it and, unable to stop, goes flying off into the creek.

The force he lands with makes you wince. A hard rain a few weeks earlier has loosened the rocks along the bank so that they have floated downstream and now rest behind the basketball court. Your father's body flails through the air, and almost instantly everyone sees his blood mixing with the clear water of the creek, rushing away from him and into his hair, as he lies flat.

Your oldest uncle, Calhoun, jumps into the creek and kneels beside your father and then rolls him over to look at the gash on his back. The white tee shirt Cal is wearing becomes pink with his brother's blood and creek water, his tan flesh starts to show through the fabric.

"Let's get him out of here, boys," Cal says and they lift him up while the youngest uncle, Farris, backs his truck up to the bank in a

hurry and you hold onto the sides of the bed. The truck leaps for a second, and you hear the basketball pop, loud as a shotgun blast, underneath the tires.

By the time I had five or six rejection slips for the story, I was already out of Kentucky, attending law school at William and Mary. Rejection is never easy. We learn this lesson early and often in life. There is nothing new in that. But rejection, when stretched out over a period of months, is quite a different thing. It took two months for the first one to come. A small, typewritten slip with the words, "Thank you but we are unable to accommodate your piece at this time." And, of course, I never sent the story back to see if it could be accommodated at another time.

I kept the slips stapled together and let them sit on my desk. When bored with my studying, when the intricacies of tort law and judicial process overwhelmed me, I would pick the slips up and thumb through them like cards. I'd watch the flicks of the paper and listen for the soft tapping of them against each other and feel the air this movement created against my lips. I imagined these slips to be like the old time animation sketches and that if I moved them fast enough, skipping through the printed words with a high enough rate of speed, what they said would change.

But even further from home and the events in my childhood that led me to write the story in the first place, and busy with the demands of school, I would have to put the slips down; and the story which they all spoke to stayed in my notebooks, hidden from sight and collecting dust.

I rated out in the top ten percent of my class and made the law review after the first year. I got a job up in Richmond as a clerk for the summer, and during lunch breaks I would walk down to the James River, Thomas Jefferson's capitol building at my back, and read my old teacher's newest book that had come out the previous fall.

The breeze off the James that summer was light, but the humidity was down, and I was able to sit under the shade for forty minutes

every day until I had finished her book. Of the three at the time, and the four that followed, it was her best work. She had captured a place, distilled it in time, as writers like to say, and brought a story into the world.

I thought of our classes together. The way she sat with us in the circle, legs stretched in front of her, ankles crossed. Her hands were always moving, tapping a pen into her palm or strumming her fingers across the table. I wondered where this fidgetiness came from compared to when she and I were just alone. I remember trying to think what she was like when she had been my age and was looking her own future in the eye.

That whole first year of law school and into that summer, it never occurred to me that this would be the only story I ever wrote. Even then, busy and pushing ahead, I always believed I would come back to writing, that there were more stories inside of me, stories I wanted to tell.

And so when summer came to a close and I readied for my return to Williamsburg, I sent her a note, telling her how much I had enjoyed the book, how much it reminded me of our classes together, and that I hoped to start writing again sometime soon when I had the time.

Her reply came before the first day of classes, and it said, "There will never be enough time to write, Max. Remember that."

The first worry is that he might be paralyzed, but when Cal asks him to wiggle his toes and then his fingers, he can. In the back of the pickup truck with him, you take off your shirt to put under his head as all of you drive down the bumpy road and make your way into town. He is still bleeding a lot, and his eyes look heavy, but Cal says it is starting to clot. Cal keeps slapping his face, telling him to stay awake, pushing back the bangs of his hair. "Come on now, Speed. Don't fade, brother," he says and pats your father's stubbled cheeks.

You keep squeezing his hand over and over, feeling the rough calluses on his fingers and in his palm. He is looking up at the sky,

toward the overhanging oak, maple, and pine trees. In between their leaves and branches, the sun glints on all of you and casts dancing shadows over your father's body. Your empty bottle of Pepsi rolls at his feet, bouncing over the grooves of the truck bed and landing with its ringing sound against the sides.

By the time the truck pulls into the hospital, his eyes are closed and his breathing faint, no harder than a feather. You sit in the truck, unsure if you can move as his brothers help the nurses lift him onto a gurney and rush him inside the big tinted-glass doors.

Farris comes back out once your father is inside and hands you a yellow tee shirt that reads "Get Well Soon!" he picked up from the gift shop and a Snickers bar.

"Your mother will be here soon," he says. "Brant stopped on his way to get her, so I suspect they'll show up any minute."

The tee shirt's newness grabs and itches at your skin, the screen-printing on the front smelling of fresh paint.

"Let's go get you cleaned up a little bit," he says and you jump down from the truck and follow him into the hospital.

There is a security guard with a bright red beard standing in the doorway. He carries a nightstick on his belt and nods when you pass.

After I received her letter, classes started again and then somehow, in the way we let life move us to a finish line we've already set, my connection to her, like with my home, became slight, and I followed the steps that were easy to see and define of what success was as a lawyer. And the writing I promised her I would do when I had the time never resurfaced.

Three years passed, time spent on the law review and in moot court sessions, along with my clerking in Richmond, impressed the recruiters from firms in D.C., and after I had passed the bar, I took my position as an associate at a private firm that worked corporate insurance cases mostly and worked eighty-hour weeks and billed out for one hundred twenty dollars an hour.

I never had a love affair with the law. Even when I started law school, I had no idealistic notions that law was a means to change

society, a mechanism for good. I enjoyed the research, I liked looking up the precedents and sifting through old court documents. Truth be told, I should have gone into academics, I should have taught the law because what I was best at as a student and then as an attorney was seeing what others couldn't. The subtle nuances in past decisions, the rule of *stare decisis*.

I made my fair share of money, but the price (and there's always a price) I paid was that my twenties and most of my thirties consisted of paperwork, free time devoted to writing briefs and researching cases. When I was thirty-eight I was named a partner. The youngest in the firm.

That's how it seemed to happen. I woke up one day and I didn't know what had happened to ten years of my life. It was as if they were snuffed out like a match flame, the smoke trailing upward and vanishing. I came into work one day and looked around, saw my plaques, my degrees in the same frames I had purchased thirty years ago, the deep color of my mahogany desk, and for the first time I felt lost in my surroundings. I turned in the room, and each time I did, I saw something else that was mine but no longer looked familiar. The baseball from the 1976 Series a client had given me signed by Johnny Bench, the picture of Julia and me with Claudia, our only daughter, before the divorce six years ago, everything seemed to be from someone else's life.

You can call it a mid-life crisis if that makes it easier to understand or to explain. I don't know what it was, but I knew I didn't want to be in D.C. any longer. I wasn't tired from practicing the law—it had never been tiring work to me—but something was off, though when I thought about it, when I considered what my life had been, I couldn't place what it was exactly. At the football banquet my senior year of high school we'd actually gotten Paul "Bear" Bryant to be our guest speaker. Our coach had played with Bryant at Alabama and they were old friends, and Bryant was also interested in our starting tailback, Dickie Jenkins. At the banquet I remembered how Bryant walked up there, his face worn like a saddle from August summers, his thick hands on both sides of the

podium, and told us that there would be obstacles in all our lives. "Hurdles," he said. "Life will throw down hurdles in front of you, and you will, when the time is right, need to take those hurdles and jump over them. You will need to clear them. That doesn't mean you won't bump your knee against them from time to time, but you cannot go around your hurdles. You must jump over them or risk being disqualified from the game of life."

I'd seen my hurdles, I'd always been aware of them, out in the distance, my life closing in on each of them, and I'd crossed each, never nicking or tilting their tops. Even the divorce had been smooth, Claudia had taken it better than most of our own friends, and seemed contented with us both now that she was away at Bucknell. But I knew it was time for me to leave that day I walked into my office and the colors of everything seemed to have changed.

Your mother comes, already white as a sheet—the streak of fear now in her—though she's not seen your father. Cal tells her what the doctors have said while Farris and Brant play a game of gin rummy on the floor with you. Your father can't work in the mines anymore. His back has been cut up too bad and there is some nerve damage. Once he rehabs, he will be too weak to ever crawl down in the belly of a mountain again and shortly after that he will take to making moonshine to put some food—the garden not nearly enough—on the table for the family.

He is different after the accident. He doesn't get excited about things the way it seems he used to. His bad back forces him to hunch with leaden shoulders, and he takes to drinking nearly as much of his liquor as he sells.

In the winter, the whole family used to listen to Kentucky basketball games in the front room of your house. Cawood Ledford's voice, crisp as the wind pushing against the little house, would relay the movement and spectacle that was Kentucky basketball then, but your father stays in the kitchen now. He fills his mason jars and lines them up on your supper table, counts the big roll of money he keeps

wrapped in a rubber band in his back left pocket and sits, smoking cigarettes, his ears pointed or tilted toward the window.

After big wins, there are more nighttime visitors than normal, and you know after the game you will lie in your room and listen to the sounds, familiar now, of your father pacifying them with one quart of liquor at a time.

Cawood's voice rises above the crowd at Memorial Coliseum, and the picture of a basketball pounding up and down the court, the boys in blue scrapping for every basket, enters your mind. And you think about what is to come that night, how when the door opens, you will pull the covers up to your chin and keep your body still, waiting for a ruckus or shouting or both.

The wind pushes against your house, lifts the eaves and runs under the front door, and the warmth of your coal stove, sitting in the center of the kitchen, next to your father, close to him, is only a few steps away, but Cawood's voice keeps you on the floor.

I opened up a small office in Portland, Maine, in a house overlooking the Casco Bay. It felt good to be out of the clogged drain of D.C. traffic and in a place where I could, within a few minutes' drive, walk into the woods the way I did as a boy.

Unpacking my things, I found the rejection slip in an old box from my law school days. I don't know how it got there, but I pulled it out from the spine of a book where it rested and saw the handwritten note. "Your story is not without promise, but I think it may be a little cliché, and I can't accept it at this time. Please feel free to submit again."

I flipped the paper and looked at it again. Cliché. The story is not about my life, but there are enough ties to it that I felt hurt by these words that came back through the tunnel of time to find their way in front of my eyes. I wondered, how can a life be cliché, how the things that happen and that we do to ensure some measure of happiness, or to cope, become tired and trite in the eyes of others?

Speed, like my own father, was a good man caught in a bad situation. And I know that just because that happens in real life

doesn't make a story more acceptable or worthy of publication, but what was easy about his choices? What did that editor know of hardship and long, grinding hours?

In the tenth grade my father's hands were crushed in car accident. He was coming home late from a house he had spent all day framing and fell asleep at the wheel. His truck crossed the yellow line, ran up the side of the mountain, flipping the truck onto its side, his hands caught underneath the door.

To this day, I can go back and see the homes he built all over the countryside. The dormers he lined up and centered, the nails he drove, the concrete he helped pour for footers. But his hands were no good to him after the accident. He told me a carpenter without feeling in his hands was like a saw without teeth. His fingers stayed in curled positions like warped and knotted tree limbs. Arthritis set in, and he would sit all day on our porch, rubbing them back and forth as if the faster he rubbed them, he could get the pain to leave, the function of his fingers to return.

All my father ever had was his work, and when his work was taken from him, it wasn't just the money that went missing. It was the part of himself that he used to define what kind of man he was. His hands weren't the only thing that were broken in that accident.

Boxes were piled in the corners of my office, no pictures hung on the wall. It would have been easy to leave my belongings, my life, packed in brown cardboard. I thought of my old teacher, the encouragement and care of a different time. It was so quiet I could hear the clock tick, each second an echo off the walls, a chisel into the soft pine of the choices I made. I could afford to walk away now. I had means, and means are supposed to provide opportunity and allow for chance.

You go to college after high school like a lot of kids. Your father's liver will fail him before you finish college, and you will go back home for the funeral and look to the forest, its mystery and wonder no longer seeming so large. But after that, you stay gone, away from the place you were raised. And of all the things you could cling to,

especially the family you left behind and hope to make proud, it's your accent, the twang that always finds its way into your speech—no matter how hard you've tried to leave it behind—you end up holding onto the hardest, letting it be the only reminder of your old life and where you came from.

In my office, I look out into the bay. A mist is coming down, and snow will be falling by the end of the month. There are still a few weeks of running outside before I will be forced indoors. I'm staring at my computer screen and trying to think if I've worked these sentences over carefully enough. If I still knew my teacher and could borrow her ear, would she sit back in her chair with the fading light of afternoon up on the hill where our class was and nod with approval at the changes I've made? And would she, when she was finished, tell me that I've done all I can?

