

A Full Boat

I'll never forget the day that tree fell on my father, crushing him like a fly beneath its massive trunk. We were sitting on a park bench together, on a beautiful – albeit windy – afternoon. My father: dried and withered. Hopeless in a pleasant way. But bitter: very, very bitter.

“I have nothing,” he said, “nothing but unbridled *contempt* for the two-legged bastards who promenade about as if walking were something everybody could do.”

He spit the thin, dry spit of an old man. A pigeon examined it, balked, and flew away.

“Yes, the wooden leg suits me,” he went on, nodding, agreeing with this assessment of himself. “In some ways it's proven to be a great asset. If nothing else, it can certainly start a conversation!” And he gave me the raised-eyebrow look, his facial exclamation mark. “But I just can't walk around all la-de-da like these god damn fuckers.” He nodded toward the innocent people who had chosen this bright, clear, cool day for an outing to the park. “I suppose it would accurate to say that I perambulate, and in that way they are no different from me. But I don't so much walk as *limp*,” he said. “Limp and drag, limp and drag.”

“That's true,” I said. And I might have added that the sound was quite horrific to me, waking up in the middle of a dark night and hearing it, in the hallway, coming closer and closer to my very own room. *Limp, draaaaaag. Limp,*

draaaaaag. Over and over I had to keep repeating to myself, *It's my father out there. It's only my father.*

He leaned in toward me a bit. "I appreciate it, of course," he said, "how you accommodate me in that way. Limping the way you do. I really appreciate it."

"It's not a problem."

"*Can* you walk? I mean, in a way that's regarded as normal?"

"Yes, I can."

He nodded. "Good, good. You're versatile. You can limp, you can not limp – it's up to you. Me, I have no choice, but it would seem my handicap is either completely ignored or I am made a figure of fun."

"People – they don't know what it's like."

This seemed to make him feel good for a moment. But the moment passed. "Too true," he said. "The fuckers don't know a god damn thing. Were they to open their eyes for but a second, and look this way, they would see A MAN WITH A WOODEN LEG!"

That last part he spoke quite loudly. People opened their eyes and looked. I felt sorry for the small, elderly African-American lady who had the misfortune of being the closest fucker to us at that time.

"What are *you* looking at?" he said. She turned away. "No, please! Gawk! Your eyes do not deceive you, madam. I am a man with a wooden leg. I hope the sight of me enlivens your otherwise predictable, boring life."

She moved on. He watched her derisively until she disappeared around a bend in the pebbled path.

“What a sad person,” he said. “She has no idea how lucky she is! She must have had those legs her entire life, and yet, no doubt, given the opportunity she would regale us with stories of hardship and discrimination. But I’ll tell you something, and it’s the truth: I would rather be black than have just one leg. I’m dead serious. I would give up my natural skin color if it would mean I had my leg back. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“It does,” I said.

“What? What does that tell you?”

“That you’re a racist?”

“No!”

“Well, then I would say what it tells me is that you would do almost anything to get your leg back.”

“Oh no!” he cried. “You’re not going to get me with that one!”

“*Which* one, Dad?”

“The one where you give me a wish and I get my leg back but it’s fifty years old and rotted through and smells bad? I’ve been around the block, son, don’t try that with me. But. If I could get a brand new, healthy, strong, nicely proportioned leg, well-fitted on my body – the whole nine yards – then, yes, I would happily become an African-American.”

I tried to imagine my father as a black man. I looked at him and he looked at me.

“I’ve always liked you,” he said. “I hope you know that.”

“I’m your son, Dad.”

“Even so,” he said.

We sat there for a while longer, watching the people, the pigeons, thinking our own private thoughts. Inevitably, this was where we found ourselves, exploring the dark and confidential corners of our lives, in silence. He was a man of few words when I was growing up; we ate our meals in a solemn quietude, and an entire evening might pass before he said anything at all – usually *Good night*. Sometimes there was music – he liked to hum. But no conversation. “What are words,” he told me once, after I curiously questioned his affinity for absolute silence, “but a random combination of letters, resulting in a recognizable sound? And what are letters but a meaningless scrawl of circles and lines?” When I was six I had no idea what this meant. But now I think this meant he thought language was an invention, a product like any other, and just because it was a common and accepted thing to speak to other people it didn’t mean he had to do it himself. He was a kind man, a good man. He just didn’t have much to say. This changed of course when he became old. All the words he had denied in his young life began pouring out of him like water from a broken pipe. Once he was old there was really nothing he wouldn’t say, to anybody, and I looked back fondly on the silent years.

“You know how I lost it, don’t you?” he said.

“Lost what?”

“The leg,” he said. “The leg, god damn it!”

I thought about it. “I remember something about a whale,” I said.

He shook his head. “That was just a story. The truth is, I lost it in a card game.”

“A card game?”

“A very high stakes card game,” he said. “I feel like an utter fool now, of course, as I have everyday since. But at the time, I thought there was no way I could lose.”

“You bet your leg in a card game?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said. “It was a different time, a time when men were men and cards were cards and men played card games. For *keeps*. Most of my friends had lost some body part or other. An eye, an ear. A couple of fingers more often than not. One of the people we played with, he was a doctor. Performed the surgery then and there.”

He rubbed the joint, the place where his flesh and blood leg ended, and his wooden one began. It was a bit like a pool cue: he could unscrew it when he wanted. He usually unscrewed it right before bed. But if there was some household chore that needed doing, and he didn’t want to do it, he’d unscrew it then as well.

“It was a painful procedure. But you knew that going in. ‘Don’t bet your leg if you’re not prepared to lose it.’ That’s something I’ve tried to teach you.” He looked at my legs. “And in that respect at least it looks like I’ve been successful.”

“I don’t think it ever would have occurred to me, under any circumstances, to bet a part of my body in a card game.”

He looked at me, misty-eyed. “That’s something a father longs to hear,” he said. “Thank you, son.”

“You’re welcome.”

“My father – hell, he didn’t care whether I had my legs or not. Sad as that is. He never thought to tell me one way or another what I should or shouldn’t bet. When the moment came, I wasn’t prepared. And I bet the leg.”

He reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet. He opened it up, and showed me an old, dog-eared black-and-white picture of himself dressed as a sailor, smiling, his arm around a girl whose laughter it seemed I could almost hear. Women were happier back then.

“I didn’t know you were in the Navy,” I said.

“I wasn’t,” he said. “But it was a good look for me and the women, they loved it. That’s not why I’m showing you this, however. I’m showing this to you because it’s the last picture taken with me in it. All of me, I mean. Look at that smile: so hopeful. Full of life. That young man didn’t know that in less than two days he’d lose his right leg to a guy with three jacks and two tens.”

“A full boat.”

He settled into the bench, as his mind seemed to be taking a stroll back in time; his eyes had that VACANCY sign. Even when he talked it wasn’t like him talking; it was the voice of the ghost of the man he used to be, reporting the past to the present.

“It was Saturday night, of course. Two a.m. Everyone was smoking cigars, and the room was so smoky it was like playing cards in the clouds. We’d been at it for the last four hours or so, and let me tell you son I was on a roll! I couldn’t lose! It didn’t matter what I played – I won a hundred dollar pot with a pair of threes! People couldn’t read me. I bluffed like hell. By midnight I was up seven hundred and

fifty dollars. I thought about leaving and taking my winnings and buying something special for myself – a new wallet, a nice bottle of scotch, a warm pair of socks. But with things going so well I thought they could only get better. I decided to quit when I hit a thousand.

“I won the next hand – Montana Low-Hole, roll your own. That brought me up to eight seventy-five. I lost the next, but won the next two. Grand total: nine hundred and sixty-two American dollars. One more hand, and that was it: I was out of there.

“The dealer, winking, choose my favorite game: seven card stud. This is the game I was born to play, son, it was like magic with me and everybody knew it. I figured I didn’t even have to look at my cards to win this one. But I looked. I was confident. I thought it was my lucky day. And everybody folded – except for one man. DeSoto Moriarty, we called him.”

“Why’d you call him that?”

“Because that was his name. DeSoto knew how to play a hand of cards. We kept at it, raising each other until we’d gone through all our money. I tried to call, but he would have none of it. *Chicken*, he said. *If you really had something there, you’d be willing to bet more than money. Me for instance, I know I got you beat. That’s why I’m betting my thumbs. Both of them.*

“I didn’t blink. I could tell he was just trying to scare me. *Name the leg*, I said. *Right or left*. He smiled. *Right*. And we showed our cards. And that’s all she wrote, I lost my leg.” He paused. “A full boat beats two pair any day of the week.”

I looked at him. “You bet your leg on two pair?”

“I was young,” he said. “Reckless.”

“But I still don’t understand,” I said. “What did he want with your leg? What did he do with it once he had it?”

My father shook his head. “That was his business. After the doctor cauterized the wound, I said good bye to the leg and I never spoke to it again. It was DeSoto’s now. He took it with him everywhere. That’s why I eventually stopped playing cards with those guys. I couldn’t stand the smug smile on his face, and the way he rested his hand on my knee cap.”

His eyes began to glow with an old man’s sadness. He sighed. “A salamander can regenerate his legs,” he said. “A newt. Sometimes – ”

“Sometimes you wish you were a newt.”

“That’s right,” he said. “Sometimes I do.”

We sat there a moment. I was thirty-three years old on that day; my father was eighty-seven. I had known him all of my life and I had never heard this story, or imagined that he had ever lived through such a macabre experience. It just goes to show you, I guess. Something.

“What a story,” I said. “On the one hand, you were stupid to even be there, but on the other hand you were kind of brave. I would never play in a game like that. The stakes are too high.”

He looked at me. “It works both ways, though, doesn’t it? You can either lose big, or you can win big. Losing is the worst, but winning – there’s nothing like it.”

And he stared at me then, for as long a time as I ever remember him staring at me in all our lives, taking in the details, the parts that made me real, as though he had never seen me before.

“Winning?” I said. “Winning what?”

He smiled, his eyes shining in wonder. “How do you think – you and me – you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Ever wonder why you never met your mother?”

“Of course I’ve wondered. Why didn’t I?”

“Because neither did I. Son,” he said. “Four Aces, King high . . . the best hand I ever had . . . are you telling me I never told you that story – *your* story?”

And that’s when the tree fell. A big, towering, ancient oak, rotting from the inside, hanging on by its tenacious roots, teetering there for who knows how long – a cross-wind hit it just so, and before either of us could move, limp, or drag, the man I called my father – tiny already, shrunken by age – disappeared beneath it in a bloodless moment of finality. Crushed. But, save for a jagged branch scrape across the cheek, I was left unharmed, completely.

I guess it was my lucky day. §§