O-Dark-Thirty

A Literary Journal

Winter 2020
Volume 8 Number 1

One Outta Four Ain't Bad

By Stuart Phillips

I am driving my father halfway across Mississippi so I can watch him die a little more. He's doing his part, sitting next to me with cancer eating his insides. We pass the new cemetery hard by the pecan orchard on the outskirts of town. My mother and her people lie in Belzoni, deep in the Delta, but my father's family is buried here; he'll join them soon.

Every doctor with options had already left Clarksdale, so each week we make the one-hour drive to the clinic in Oxford. For six months we've looked at the cemetery; we never say a word, but we both know that regardless of how many drips they push through the IV, this is the real end of the trip.

After three generations of dirt farmers, my father had scrabbled his way through law school. Out of his four boys, I was the only one who didn't escape Clarksdale. One brother is a doctor in Tupelo, one a professor at Starkville, and one is gay, which was apparently enough to justify shaking the dust of the Delta off his feet. I headed off to Ole Miss for a degree and stuck around for law school. That's what my father expected, and I didn't have a good reason not to go. After I graduated,

finding a job seemed like too much work, so I headed home to his practice.

He's pulled his old Coahoma Electric jacket up around his neck. He represented them in the eighties; now he wears the ratty blue windbreaker all the time, even in the house.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine." I turn the heat up a notch.

He started getting dizzy in late spring. Basic panels were akilter. The specialist confirmed pancreatic cancer, and our journey began. The fields were so heavy with cotton we drove through clouds until we hit the bluff at Batesville. Then, thirty miles of rolling hills unfolded until we reached the clinic in Oxford, where he lay back in an oversized armchair with his IV. We'd spend an hour watching Fox News, checking in on cases, and avoiding talking about why we were there. Each drop was like ordering soldiers to fight for territory already ceded by a secret treaty; they kept sending them over the top, and we kept coming back.

We reach Marks in about ten minutes, slowing down for a four-way stop the town doesn't deserve. He turns in his seat.

"You ready for that deposition Monday?" Our conversation revolves around the practice because it's easier that way.

"Yes, sir. Got my outline done, exhibits copied. Ready to go." His gaunt cheeks turn up with a half-smile and he looks back out the window.

After two months, his home health care insurance ran out, so I moved in, bringing my dog, Martha. I spent nights on the couch in his living room listening to Hannity bleed through the half-open door in case he needed me. Despite his professed aversion to dogs, Martha knew better; she curled up on his bed, only leaving to eat or go outside. He slept with one arm draped across her flank.

We quickly reached the point where the old man grunted in pain

when he sat down on the toilet. I would take his hand and help him sit up, feeling the fragile bones and thinking of how he arced me over the bank of the Sunflower River, pretending to toss me into the muddy water.

A steadying hand on the shoulder for balance soon turned into a fireman's carry to get the old man to the bathroom. Done, I'd back up to the mattress until his knees hit, then give a slight stoop so he could lie down. A quick check on his socks, covers up, and Martha moved back to spoon him.

I had brief hopes that my brothers would step up. It'd also be nice to say they came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but that would be a different family.

I got irregular phone calls from Eli, the doctor. "Missy hit me with temporary alimony, but I'll see if I can send you something. We really appreciate you taking care of Dad." After a minute pretending to listen, he'd promise money that never came and hang up before I could ask him to take our dad to his next treatment.

I hated to even let Bryant talk to the old man when he made his monthly call of vague promises. "Amy and I might come over this weekend, take you out to lunch at the Ponderosa." He never came, but I still shaved my father every Saturday before we sit down to watch football, just in case.

James, the third one, never called back.

As I drive, I listen to his breathing to make sure he's not in pain. It catches when he needs a pill; he gasps when he needs a new patch.

We've been coming over so many months that the fields are dotted with bare stalks that jut from muddy shallows, remnants of a sodden fall. On the far side of Batesville, a semi cuts me off just as my phone rings. I let it go to voicemail and stifle a curse at the trucker, who rumbles on toward I-55.

By the time we pass the Water Valley exit, I've settled down enough to listen to the message.

"Will, this is Bryant. Amy and I were wondering if y'all still have those barrister bookcases in the front office? We'd like to come get them sometime. Give me a call."

I want to feel angry. Instead, I feel like pulling over and retching.

"Who was that?"

"Bryant. He was just asking after you. They might come over this weekend."

He looks out at the waves of brown grass streaming by at sixty-five miles per hour. "I'm sure he's busy." He absently smooths his jacket under the seatbelt. "You're all good boys. I'm proud of y'all."

He knows. But he fights the truth as much as the cancer. I feel my seatbelt tug as my chest tightens with understanding.

We pull into the new medical factory that's sprung up in south Oxford, twenty acres built of craggy concrete blocks that sparkle in the sun. I've learned which one is the cancer clinic by now—two rights and a left.

He swings his feet out of the car and sits a moment, hand on the door jamb.

"Do you need a pill?" I reach into my pocket, where I always keep a couple wrapped in aluminum foil.

"No, just catching my breath." He pushes himself up and puts one hand on my shoulder as I close the door. "Thanks."

Inside the office, the staff checks him in and guides him to his orange armchair. They love him here. "He's so brave," they say, not knowing that the stream of jokes is how he's always deflected all emotions, not just fear. The CNA is putting a line into a vein on the back of his hand when a nurse in blue stops her.

"Dr. Jackson wants to see them first."

Dr. Jackson's exam room doesn't have a clock; time doesn't matter when you're this close to the bone. I stare at his diploma from Vanderbilt while he gives us the uncomfortable, expected news.

I hold the door open for my dad as we leave with two boxes of Fentanyl patches. He walks with a stoop and his chambray shirt hangs a little bit. I help him into the car.

"Do you want me to call the boys?" There's not a lot to say, but we still have to fill our days somehow.

He stares out the passenger window, eyes seeming to reach the pecan trees, husks split and heavy. Shells dot the row next to the fence line, mixing with the Yazoo clay to stain the headstones ochre. His eyes glisten for a moment.

"No. Let's go get us some lunch."

"Do you want to stop at Cracker Barrel?"

"I do like their fried okra." He uses his thumb to rub the IV site on the back of his left hand. "And this'll be the last time I have it."

"You'd better get two servings, then." We smile at each other for a second.

"I may do that." He clicks his seatbelt, leans back, and closes his eyes. "Wake me up when we get there."

Stuart Phillips is a former Army officer, expatriate Mississippian, and recovering lawyer, now pursuing an MFA at Fairfield University. He strives to bring a sense of place to his short stories while he works on the Great Southern Novel and tries to master the semicolon.