

The Things I Choose to Remember

by Corbett Harrison (a work in progress)

One

They divorce when I am two.

They live three miles apart (each with new spouse) until I am twelve. When we move away from Him, it turns out to be the only time I ever see Him cry. In His backyard, He is squeezing me tighter than I have ever known anyone to. Without a word, He turns me around and pushes me hard towards the house. I move away from Him slowly, not realizing until this moment how rarely I will see Him after we have moved. I need to say something but then—like now—I haven't prepared a speech and so remain silent in the spontaneity. I have already turned to face Him though. He doesn't know I have done this. He is staring at the sky, holding himself. I can only see His back, but I know what He is doing. He doesn't know I've seen. This is how it should be.

I'm nineteen, and They both have used words I had spoken to each in secret in an argument against each other. Even worse, They have written what I have said down and argued through the U.S. mail. Somewhere out there, evidence may still exist that I spoke badly of Him to Her and Her to Him. My insides twist. I find myself screaming long distance to Kentucky at Her. I wrongly assume She began this. When I hang up, I sob quietly and hold my pillow. I don't like myself enough right now to hold on to myself...like He did.

I'm thirty-six. She cries hard during breakfast in a Holiday Inn. It is the day before Grandmother Harrison's ninetieth birthday party. We have come from everywhere to surprise a ninety year old woman. Talking about my recent divorce lures thirty-four-year-old memories from Her. She is consoling me with her usual poise when suddenly Her cheeks flush, the emotions of long ago grabbing Her hard. When I look out the window instead of reaching to hold Her (I am so like my father sometimes), my older brother moves in to provide the embrace She needs.

On the day of Grandma's well-orchestrated ninetieth birthday party, my eyes catch Him standing alone in the room full of Harrison cousins and sisters and nephews and aunts. His voice box has recently been removed to stop the cancer. He believes in His heart that His government-provided doctors—perhaps even god—will grant Him another chance. He is thin but stands proudly. He has made this happen for His mother, and Grandma Harrison is having one of her best days ever. When I spot Him alone, He is staring at my Mother, who chats across the room. He loves Her still.

His smile verifies it.

Two

We Harrisons are bluffers, and that's why we love playing cards.

My favorite game to bluff is pinochle. My father loved poker.

When we play Harrison pinochle, the rules remain fairly orthodox. But when Harrison poker becomes our game, then Sneaky Pete rules go automatically into effect.

I don't think we invented the Sneaky Pete, but I'm going to pretend we did for the rest of my life. If we didn't, then we should have.

Now, to understand the beauty of Sneaky Pete you can't play just five card draw, where the cards are all totally hidden. Sneaky Pete works best in a game of seven card stud, when you can see four of your opponent's cards. It's a complete bluffer's tool.

Sneaky Pete allows there to be a hand that's even better than a royal flush. If a player ends up with a deuce, a four, a six, an eight and a ten—not even of the same suit—in his hand, then he wins it all. No wild cards are allowed; your Sneaky Pete must be natural.

I've only seen maybe two dozen Sneaky Petes in my lifetime. It's not nearly as hard to get as a royal flush, but it isn't all that common. What's surprisingly common is how often one player has three—often even four—legs of the damn thing staring at the other players in his up cards. You find yourself sitting there with a genuine full house or a wild-carded four-of-a-kind, and your opponent's either sneakily bluffing you, or he is sneakily hiding the fifth card of a rare but possible Pete in one of his three down cards.

My father loved the Sneaky Pete. He won a lot of pots he probably didn't deserve thanks to it.

He has less than two weeks to live, and we all know it, so we play a final game of poker. My two brothers must return to their jobs in California soon, but I have arranged to stay in Colorado until the end. My father is very aware that he is about to lose mental control. He becomes tired too easily now. His written notes are not making complete sense. During this day, the business of his death was slowly and stoically discussed. But now, the aunt and the step-mom and our ninety-one year old grandmother have been sent to bed, and the three Harrison sons are playing poker against their father. The final game.

Between some hands, my father is sharking away for his pleasure several of his possessions. I win his pocket knife by guessing best when he writes down the question: "How much money do you think [my poker basket] holds when it's

completely full of change?" I guess highest, knowing my father mostly stores quarters for playing poker, not the dimes and nickels. I win the knife, even though I am forty dollars low of the right answer.

Between other hands, I tell my father I don't believe he has planned enough for what comes after he is gone. He has requested a modest stone. He purchased a modest plot ten years earlier. He refuses to have an opinion about his memorial service. My two brothers will have to leave before this ordeal will be over. "When should we plan to come back, Dad?" He doesn't care. He grows more and more irritated with my interruptions to his final poker game, but I fear he won't be able to talk about this later.

Finally and fiercely, he points at his gaping larynx hole, covered in painful radiation sores. He breathes heavily out his nose as he writes, "Look at me. How's this for closure?"

I refuse to argue. A terminal man should always get his way. This is slowly sinking in as my new motto.

Joyce, my step-mother, stands behind us. She tells us it's getting late. Like boys, we plead for a few more hands. Our father has won too much of our pocket change to quit now.

On our third to last hand, the third card up gives my father three visible legs of a Sneaky Pete. I scowl and consider folding with my whole lot of nothing. But I don't. With only a few hands left, I realize I have no business folding. My brothers both bet on their potential hands, and I call, still optimistic. My father raises the pot considerably. "You don't have it," one brother says, and we all agree and settle with the pot.

A fourth leg of Pete is added to his up cards. "Sonovagun," I say with genuine awe of Dad's luck as a bluffer. My father doesn't lift his eyes from his two down cards. He slides a dollar in quarters into the pot.

In nickel-ante poker, this is a huge bet. I have to open my wallet to stay in now.

"He **doesn't** have it," my brother stresses when the old man, without even peeking at his final down card, bets huge on the next go-around. Another wallet is opened to stay in this game. I don't have a chance in hell of winning this, but I do not fold.

How could you fold when your father might be holding his final Sneaky Pete?

Now...I'd like to say something monumental happened when, leaning forward, we called him on his hand, and he was forced to show us his three down cards. It didn't. There was no clap of thunder outside. No sudden movement of the earth's plates. No cure for cancer.

Dad had his final Sneaky Pete that hand. We laughed and groaned simultaneously, and the most monumental gesture he could muster was a toothless but very genuine smile.

Two hands later he went to bed.

Three

My father lived for things that tasted extraordinary. He liked his food five-alarm spicy, and he prided himself on eating what the rest of us might find extreme.

He only said the words "I am proud of you, son" out loud to me once. He said this because I cooked him something that impressed his sense of gustatory. I had mastered a Mexican soup recipe over the winter, and I knew Mexican soups were one of his favorites. So I made him a perfect batch while visiting Colorado one February when he still could talk. It simmered all day beneath a layer fat, and the pork fell apart when prodded by my wooden cooking spoon.

Everyone else at his house ate at a normal dinner hour, but Dad always ate very late. At 6:00, the rest of the family found my soup a little too spicy, but I could have told you that would happen ahead of time. This pot soup was made specifically for my Dad's taste, not anyone else's.

Several hours later, the rest of us had just enjoyed our desert and were now arguing playfully over a round of Skip-Bo when my father, in the other room, rose from his chair to serve himself his dinner. I watched him silently carry it back to the living room to eat it alone. He had primed himself with a couple of vodka cocktails. He was wearing the wireless headphones I had helped him buy and set up when his hearing started to go a few years back. This was how my father ate his dinner. I believe I inherited my lack of chit-chat from Dad.

I watched him from the dining room table, where we still argued and laughed over cards. I tried to make my watching of him not too obvious. I didn't need him to know I was seeking his approval. I didn't need anyone at the table with me to know that either.

On his second spoonful, he emitted the sound I had been hoping for. It was a heartfelt, too-loud-because-of-his-headphones kind of grunt that meant complete pleasure had found his tongue. I had heard it before...many

times...usually as he sampled from his own simmering pot. He quickly side-glanced towards me, but I pretended to study my Skip-Bo cards.

He came back for seconds.

Before going to bed that night, he said, "That was good soup. I'm proud of you, son."

Although he said many other things to me before losing his voice box, this was the last thing he said to me that I will distinctly remember. I can actually hear his voice in my head as he says it. If I could open my head and share it publicly, I would. Him saying it made up for decades of not hearing it.

The night before his laryngectomy, we sons spoke to him separately on the phone. He talked of his operation with a no-big-deal tone that didn't surprise me. I can't remember much that was said that night.

I found out later my oldest brother had recorded him through the phone that last night he could speak. My brother ordered him to perform some of his best Chuck-isms into a tape recorder held up to the receiver: "Hey dough-head" and "I wouldn't pay ten cents to watch pigs screw" were among the expressions supposedly recorded. Like a puppet, my father performed. I don't know if he knew my brother's intention was to use the recordings as sound bytes to be used on his computer. Double click on this icon, and hear my Dad speak. Advance this slide in a PowerPoint and you can hear a Chuck Harrison colloquialism. Someday, I might ask to hear that tape, but for now I am savoring the "I'm proud of you, son."

A few months after he died, I found the 5-minute video tape I'd made of him speaking. On the tape, we are in Wrigley Field, one of his favorite watering holes. He is drinking wine at 10:30 in the morning and arguing playfully with my step-mother while telling short snippets of stories. At one point, he realizes the camera I've set on the table between us is on. He shakes his head, staring right at the lens. "You're a dough head, Corb," he tells my tape quietly.

I can vividly see that morning with him in Wrigley Field. It was one year after the fiery crash that killed Dale Earnhardt. I was visiting him in Colorado when that happened too. On the day of my videotape, Earnhardt's son is doing the racing, and the Coloradoans have gathered early in Wrigley Field near my father's table, placing their bets. Earnhardt Jr's car malfunctions badly early in the race, and he pulls off the track for the day. Most everyone in the bar has included the younger Earnhardt in their trifecta bets, and many go home in disgust. On the tape, I can hear my father's stories very clearly. If Earnhardt Jr. had been winning that day, would I have heard less?

After my father's final poker game and my brothers' exodus, my father grows noticeably weaker and less able to think clearly. I suspect he was forcing himself to stay alert for the final visit of his three sons. He has succeeded, but it has taken its effect on him.

The cancer is blocking his throat more each day. For weeks, he has been unable to swallow much, if anything. Each day, it seems to be getting worse. He is surviving off the sugars and fluids that he mostly absorbs through his mucous membranes. He holds things in his mouth for as long as he can, then spits them out into the sink or into his plastic spit cup. On one of the last days he is able to hold the pen and concentrate enough to write us notes, I notice him spitting in his drinking cup and drinking from his spitting cup. He has no idea he has done this.

He needs morphine for his pain and haloperidol for his anxiety, but both medicines must be taken orally. Hospice has told us that if he holds the medicines in his mouth for enough time, he should be able to absorb it. I squirt it in from the dropper and loudly tell him to hold it in his mouth for as long as he can, but he grows impatient with standing there by the sink or forgets what we are doing and spits it out too soon.

He hurts. And he is anxious. And I don't know how to medicate him.

Menudo was my father's favorite Mexican soup—one that I had no interest in eating or learning to make. It contained a few too many unusual animal parts for me to consume comfortably. My father took great pride in his Menudo recipe. But his Menudo experience was never complete unless he drank a dark Mexican beer while he eating it. This was how I was introduced to Negra Modela, his favorite beer.

There are a few Modelas left in his fridge from our last poker game four days ago. He is trying to write something down for me to read, but he is only repeating the same word over and over again. I can feel his frustration from across the room. Dusk is coming.

I suggest to him that we go have a curb party outside, and he suddenly seems to be aware again. I suspect the term "curb party" has sparked him back to us momentarily. My father enjoyed dusk most of all, and he used to sit on the curb outside his house with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other to watch the evening sky darken. He'd nod to neighbors and watch the birds flit from tree to tree.

He picks up the writing yellow pad on his way to the door, but I shake my head at him. We won't be needing that. I waggle a Negra Modela bottle at him, and he understands there will be no talking at this curb party. We are going to enjoy the taste of beer.

I pour some into a glass for him. He sighs as he holds it in his mouth and smiles to the darkening sky. A minute later he spits it into his spit cup.

I have secretly laced my father's Modela with morphine. I doubt it has been in his mouth long enough to be completely absorbed. I smile at the sky tonight too. And I realize I have never once told him that I am proud of him too.

Four

When I left for Colorado several weeks back, two very dear colleagues told me two very important things.

Jodie said, "You're about to find out what's really important."

Mary said, "You give your father anything he wants."

Today he wants an orange Popsicle. We have every flavor in the freezer except orange. He seemed to have been favoring the root beer ones, so we overstocked on those. He's thrown us a curve ball with this request for orange. The grocery store is a thirty minute round trip. Will he even remember that he wanted an orange Popsicle thirty minutes from now? My aunt, my uncle, my step-mother and I stare at one another with sleepy eyes.

Aunt Betty offers to take the errand. She misses his return to the freezer four or five times to look for orange popsicles while she is gone.

He smiles like a baby with a stick of candy when he finally has it. His lips are dry. His gums seem too red. He falls asleep with the orange Popsicle only half gone.

Five

I listened to *The Old Man and the Sea* on audio tape while driving to Colorado in September of 2004.

I told my Dad I had done this as soon as I arrived. He nodded, knowing I had heard things in Hemingway this time around that I had missed on previous reads. My father loved that story, and he loved the Spencer Tracey film. He probably watched it once a month. My cousin, Robin, and I once made fun of the film while my Dad—unaware—watched it with his headphones on. I never cared much for Spencer Tracey or movies with narrators.

Another film he watched regularly was *Shane*. I read the book before I ever saw the movie, but I watched it at my Dad's house when I finally saw it. My father knew every scene of that movie by heart. Over the years, I can remember calling him in the evening from Nevada, and he'd say he wasn't doing much. "Just watching *Shane*," he'd report.

My father was like that with a select group of media. He'd find something he could love, and he'd love it, and then he'd hit play over and over again. "Come back, Shane. Come back, Shane. Come back, Shane."

There was a jazz Christmas album he loved so much he'd play it year round. I tried to find it during my final visit to see him in Colorado, but it was no where. I suspect he wore the CD out. Or one of us brothers hid it so well that he never found it again. We didn't like that album as much as he did.

Hospice delivers a hospital bed two days before he dies. We can sit him up or recline him, and the rails keep him in bed, which is where we want him. If he could have his way, he would bring in the newspaper on the day he passes away. If he had a choice, I suspect he would rather die on his driveway than in this bed.

He looks terribly uncomfortable. He hasn't the energy left to kick and fight us, but he can sure make himself look uncomfortable. I respond, I think, in a pretty good way.

I fetch his wireless headphones.

I put his *Old Man and the Sea* tape into the VCR.

I plug him in. When the movie's overture begins, his eyes grow wide with recognition.

He looks at me. I am smiling.

His shaky hand lifts from the bed and he pretends—for a moment—that he is conducting that orchestra. He doesn't yield much of a smile, but he does give one more away to me. He relaxes and eventually falls asleep.

It is the last time I see my father smile. It is forever burned into my memory.