

THE BOYS OF BRADLEYTOWN

Just when I'd begun to wonder if my uncles knew where they were going, they pulled off the road in front of me. A state route, it was only a lane and a half through the heart of the West Virginia coalfields where my father, their brother, Benjamin James Bradford, was to be buried in the cemetery of Redeeming Blood Baptist on Wolford Mountain, my mother's church.

After parking the Jetta off the road, I walked up beside Elm's pickup. Three o'clock on a grim November afternoon, the day was already fading, and I saw he and Frank had on the dome light, illuminating their friarish balding grey-fringed heads. The window was down, allowing their cigar smoke to curl around me as I leaned inside to peer over Elm's shoulder. Pointing with the gnarly hand that held the stogie, Frank said, "There it is, Route 23, as plain as day going south."

"Too far south," Elm said. "We shoulda been there already. It's getting late."

I retracted my head, turned around and leaned against the cab. My eyes bored into the bare-limbed forest across the road. Not only was Frank wearing Elm's bifocals—always a bad sign—but the map was clearly upside down.

I thought I detected motion among the trees, as if someone were waving from the top of one of the old white oaks. But when I stared harder: nothing. Then I heard Dad,

clear as Digital Dolby inside my head, tell Mom one more time, *That's the way them boys are.*

I walked back to my car. Mom and I'd traded shifts until the final forty-eight-hour round-the-clock vigil. Then the arrangements, then the wake. I hadn't eaten much, nor wanted to. Thank God for hospital coffee. We drank gallons of it. I glanced across the road one last time before getting behind the wheel. We'd get there when we got there. If they didn't hold the service for us, then I wouldn't have to deliver the eulogy.

The day was headed for bed when we finally pulled into the parking lot an hour late. I couldn't tell if the aura around the sun was real or the product of my own road-induced double-vision. Sure enough, they'd waited for us, everyone's worried looks turning to big grins when both Frank and Elm accused the other of getting us lost. Mom, bless her heart, had ridden with her cousin Ella. Now she just gripped my arm, kissed my cheek and whispered, "Thank you for getting the boys here." I didn't tell her that my father had waved from the upper limbs of an oak, in death still treating his brothers like headstrong kids.

The sanctuary overflowed. Everyone within a twenty-five-mile radius had turned out for the local hero, who'd never left the place of his birth. Though there were black and white action shots and yellowed newspaper clippings borrowed from Bradleytown High's trophy case, it was the shoes that nearly did me in.

Atop the bronze casket sat a pair of high-topped black and white Converse, probably the very shoes he'd worn in the last tournament he'd taken the Blackhawks to. Hard shoes to fill. Elm and Frank had discovered that, when they'd tried to play triple-A

ball at the same school where their big brother had broken all the records. Forget that Ben Bradford had always been able to resurrect any gasoline-powered engine, had been school board president and mayor twice and had almost made it to the statehouse; Benny “The Bullet” was forever frozen in mid-jump-shot above the warped boards of Bradleytown High, circa 1961. Head bowed in the pew beside my mother, I turned my face toward the stained-glass shepherd and wiped the stray tear. He’d want me dry-eyed for this job.

The service seemed fine, but all I heard was the constant clamor from the front of the church where Frank and Elm were moaning like holy-rollers and attracting attention, as usual. *Grow up*, I wanted to stand and holler—me, the boy who’d fled West Virginia, unlike the man in the box, unlike my uncles, unlike everyone else in the room. I’d gotten away as soon as I could, gone to college out of state, married a girl from Cleveland, divorced three years later, and now saw my twin girls two weeks in the summer. I wouldn’t be here but for what Mom said night before last when Dad lost consciousness for good..

“Billy, your daddy knew a month ago that the cancer had gone to his brain—was inoperable—and he told me then he wanted you to give his eulogy.” She paused to wipe her eyes with one of her embroidered handkerchiefs. “‘Bill’s the best of us Bradleytown boys,’ he said.”

A glance left showed me the shoes were still there on top of the coffin, awash in a puddle of bloody stained-glass glow. Eyes front.

I'd hurt Mom when I moved north for good, but I'd ground her heart beneath my heel when I'd lost the grand-children that she now never got to see. Doing this thing for her was the least I could do. My hands were sweating. I'd rehearsed a few brief sentences—what's a five-minute eulogy in a country church to a big-city public defender?—but now I couldn't recall a single word. And the tingling in my belly didn't feel like the on-my-toes burst of energy before I rose to cross-examine; it felt like the descending rush of blood when Mom sighed on the phone and said, "I wish you'd fought harder for your babies." Brother Jarrett was winding down. I was up next.

"Friends and family," the reverend said, smiling through his wrinkles, hands clasped before him, "Benjamin's son William from Columbus, Ohio, will remember our dearly departed with a few words."

Looking neither left nor right, I lurched up front to the plywood and velvet lectern, keeping my eyes averted from the box and those shoes.

When I turned, the light in the room shimmered, dimmed, then went out altogether. The sound of a buzzer startled me and I saw, as if through smoke, stands full of hunkered-forward people, their mouths open, some hugging themselves, a few standing, arms raised. The old gym smelled like armpits, hairspray and mold. I followed their eyes to the floor, saw the long pass inside to the tall, dark-haired boy breaking for the basket. He faked left, spun through traffic and made the lay-up as the buzzer sounded. Through the stifling haze of memory and mist, I realized that once again The Bradleytown Bullet had beaten the clock to take the team from the coalfields upstate once more.

The mist dissipated and I was left staring at the grief-ravaged faces of my father's people. *Your people*, a voice echoed, as in a high-ceilinged gym.

No, not really, Dad.

"I've come here today to say . . . "

Not another word came. In my four decades, this had never happened. Words always came. I was raised on books, the ones in my grandparents' attic; then those Dad brought home from the library in Welch; eventually the considerably better stock Mr. Holly, my speech teacher, ordered for me on inter-library loan from WVU and Marshall. My teacher drove me to debates all over the state, was something like a father. At such times, I always felt like I was betraying Dad, whose first diagnosis came during my sophomore year. I attended as few athletic events as I could during my three years at Bradleytown and spent many hours I could've been sleeping or studying wishing my name weren't Bradford or that my mother had been able to have other sons.

Despite the chemo and radiation, Dad never missed a game, and never quit asking me to go with him. My refusals always brought the same response: "Wherever you go, Billy, you'll always be a Bradleytown boy."

Dad, I was never a Bradleytown boy.

Their frozen faces stared up at me, saying *Who are you*. I couldn't say. At the moment, my throat was soldered shut.

Elm stood up from the front pew and walked forward, careful not to stagger ("the boys want you to join 'em for a little 'shine outside," Ted Sowers had whispered to me almost as soon as we'd arrived. The last thing I thought I needed to be while eulogizing my dad was drunk; now I wasn't so sure).

Elm slowly strode up front, his old washed-out blue eyes fierce as he faced me before turning.

“This here is a good boy,” he slurred. “He’s honored us by coming back.”

Their faces relaxed. I wanted to slug him. Was I so far removed from my father’s people I needed an interpreter?

“And if he’s too overcome by his feelings to talk, it don’t matter. Somebody’ll have something to say.” He flung out his arm as if sowing seed.

Everyone in the church had a story about Benny Bradford, but in their shocked confusion, they just sat there. Uncle Elm must’ve thought they’d cast a secret ballot and elected him spokesman for the dead and dumbstruck. Or the ‘shine told him it was time to divulge secrets.

“When he first got sick, Benny asked us to take Billy here and raise ‘im . . . if he, y’know, didn’t make it. He told us to make his son a man.”

I longed to be anywhere but in my mother’s church on this mountain; I wished I were facing the toughest prosecuting attorney in the world; to be inside that box beneath those accusing shoes.

Frank shot out of his seat, as if hurled off the bench by a coach who’s seen his team blow a double-digit lead. Glaring at Elm as he had while trying to read the upside-down map, he stood on my other side. Convicted as I was, I still had to grin. How could you find anyone’s final resting place with a reversed map? Yet here we stood.

“It’s true that Benny said that,” Frank began, “but he wasn’t thinking right—this was a man with poison coursing through his brain and blood. Besides, we wasn’t about to do it. His mama did the job just fine, giving this boy—our brother’s son—exactly

what he needed to become the man he is today, the man who came back to stand with us for Brother Ben.”

Awkwardly he put his arm around my waist at the same time Elm laid a huge paw on my shoulder, squeezing their bodies so close I smelled Old Spice, alcohol, sweat and cigar. At last I looked at Mom, her white-gloved hands laced atop her black purse, the way she always placed them in church when I was a boy beside her. Those hands had said, *be still and listen*. I’d listened to some powerful sermons in pews like these, full of fire and fury, grace and love. Out “in the real world,” as Mr. Holly called it, I’d learned to speak—to talk fast and fancy, to dazzle, crush, if I could. It took Mom’s hands on a black purse to remind me to pay attention. In this place, words neither convicted nor acquitted; only the grace given by blood did that.

Disengaging, I stepped away, approached the box and snatched the shoes, aware that not even an infant had uttered a sigh. Clutching those size thirteens to my chest, I detected a faint trace of rubber and sweat. Back before the gathered mourners, I offered a shoe to each uncle. Elm took a half-step backward and wagged his head. Frank, as always, stood his ground.

“No, Billy. Them’s yours.”

At last my throat opened. “Thank you,” I whispered. Turning, I held my trophies aloft. “Thank you, all.”

Letting my gaze wander to the casket, I saw, as if through a rain-glazed window, the polished wood above my father’s body, the shrinking crimson sunset stain.