

ASHES TO ASHES

The whole misunderstanding was set up by Peter's poor wording in the condolence letter: "We have to figure out what to do with dad's ashes." Dad's wishes were of course clear on this matter- an ostentatious tomb at the churchyard. That sentence, truth be told, was Peter insisting that Mark ought to help defray the exorbitant costs that bloodsucking church of his dad's demanded. Peter might admit he was well off- not wealthy, mind you, but comfortable – but he was sensitive. Mark thought of him as a tightwad and so, in his grief, lacked his usual clarity of expression in this instance. Who knows what he put in the damned letter!

Mark took it differently. All the while he was awake during the thirteen hour flight back from China where he taught, he jotted a list of places where they could scatter dad's ashes- places where precious moments passed between a father and his two sons.

THE HUG

Peter picked Mark up at the airport. Mark, who had been awaiting this moment – consciously or not- this first opportunity leaned into his big brother's shoulders crying. But just as he began to sob, Peter cut the hug short, not prepared to let go his tears at this juncture. Passengers around them were reuniting with loved ones joyously. Those on business hurried past with mere glances at the begrieved men holding each other there.

Mark had rehearsed things to say on the dread ride from the airport. He also had questions for Peter. But he remembered Peter said that he always talked too much. As Peter concentrated on freeway traffic, Mark decided to keep silence also. It was weird to be back in America.

Mark had gifts for Peter's wife and kids. The kids fled the adults, uncomfortable with the prolonged sadness. Mark longed to join them in the yard. He rarely saw them. Peter too wished to at least watch them. "You two have catching up to do," Peter's wife withdrew. Mark began complimenting the house and trying to segue to some detail of his new lodgings off campus in Shanghai, but Peter quickly moved talk to logistics about dad's "arrangements." It was then Mark mentioned the list. Peter seemed confused, then shocked.

THE LIST

Peter's heart fell when his wife had informed him Mark had gone out. "You were sleeping at last. We didn't dare wake you." It was an odd dream that woke Peter and sent him to cradle dad's urn. Dad was an old man in the dream as he'd appeared his last month in bed in Peter's guest room. But in the dream Peter was a babe in dad's arms, unable to speak yet crying for comfort. Now Peter, awake, a man, admitted he did want comfort but the urn was gone.

Peter and Mark had argued. It was agreed in principle to respect dad's wishes of course – the church yard. So why had they argued over the inclusions and omissions in a now irrelevant list??

“The Hole,” Peter objected, “was an awful place I hope they've filled in. You know I hated it there!” Peter had always found fishing not cruel or boring per se, just, well, irrelevant. As often as not he wandered off. Mark and Dad could sit there for hours pondering life's eternal questions, catching anything or not. Peter preferred to explore the woods, see what was THERE.

“Pete,” Mark soothed unctuously (nobody called Peter by his diminutive since Dad died). “I threw it in the park, just for you.”

There was a fundamental mistake. True, Peter had forced Mark to practice sports for hours with him in the park days no other boys were around. Dad, an ascetic, had not known what to make of a “jock” son, while Mark, more musically inclined, just played along – often ineptly, at ball of base or basket. But Peter had turned his back on sports years ago, when kids began arguing calls more than playing, and it was a bitter renunciation. Mark's inclusion of the park was a gall and a ruse just to get the Hole in. The Hole! It was there Peter must begin looking.

THE SEARCH

As he drove out there Peter realized he'd neglected to ask his wife which car Mark had taken. Peter had uncharacteristically also neglected to charge his cell. Surely his wife could have backed him up in “something.” He was also not sure of the way to the Hole anymore, having never been back since boyhood despite dad's belated request. It had been difficult and dangerous to move the old man then.

How could Mark remember the way after all these years, he who had moved away never to look back? Peter made the right turn on the dirt road though. He parked at the end where a little path still led down to the Hole left. To the right not path led up into the woods. Peter went down to the Hole.

The sun was high in the sky. Peter must have really slept! He got hot walking around and found a shady spot to sit. It would no doubt have been a bad place to cast in by dad's standards then! Peter tried to scan all around the Hole, some banks of which were obscured by trees. He'd recognized no cars at the trailhead. Perhaps Mark hadn't found his way here. Peter closed his eyes. Oddly he could have slept more. He scanned once more. The sun glared on the water surface. A fish – small – broke the surface just a bit. Or had it been a frog jumping in? He'd go try the Park.

THE BOYS

Although it was hot, the park was full of kids. Was it a weekend? Peter wondered. He'd really lost track. Man, what day was Mark's flight again? The funeral- Mark as ever had missed – seemed years ago now.

Some boys were playing soccer and a scuffle broke out. Two in the middle seemed to be going at it most vigorously. Peter wondered if he should intervene. Although he

considered himself a good father, he felt strongly inadequate to this instance. Anyway other boys broke it up. There was a pause, negotiations, the two shaking hands, play resumed, all rancor forgotten soon as the next goal. Peter thought he ought to bring his kids to the Park more to play ball after all. He'd hate for them to be unprepared for the type of negotiations he'd just witnessed.

No sign of Mark though. Peter was going to his car when the fog finally lifted. Had Mark done this so Peter would be forced to relive those plagues? In spite of himself he now began to remember Dad at the park. For Peter's birthday one year Dad has set up a slip 'n slide for them. There were also games and prizes. Peter had fought with his best friend Todd over a break dance routine Peter had choreographed for the occasion. Todd missed too many practices! Peter scolded. Now Todd wasn't coming. He did though. Mark had negotiated it. The three of them performed the routine to wild applause. (Mark, of course, messed up once, but Peter forgave him without mentioning it.) Dad had hooted and tried to do some moves himself, sending the boys into beat boxes of laughter.

THE DINER

That sneak! Peter was torn up, trying not to think of the Hole as he drove to Moser's Diner. He was hungry. Dad had kept very irregular hours his whole life until at the end his stomach tube feedings forced him to follow day nurse routines. Moser's Diner was open all night. He often took the boys.

Peter loves to dinner rolls there, of all things. Mark loved the mashed potatoes. For Dad it was all about the crab cakes – ooh, and soup. In the last years his friends there called him Soupman. He knew the waitresses and flirted shamelessly, harmlessly. (Mom was long gone.)

Peter came in to an almost empty Moser's. It was the quiet time after lunch, before dinner, no doubt. The air con felt nice. It had a weird, familiar smell. Peter read the specials board until the waitress came to seat him. It was an old fashioned diner – when they were still unpretentious of course but fancier. Peter did not recognize the waitress. He hadn't been back since Dad stopped eating.

Peter decided to sit although it was obvious Mark was not there and he'd lose time of pursuit. He also feared the flood of memories if he stopped moving, especially the Hole. It was in this diner Dad had often told the boys about the mysteries of life.

“Buddha and Christ were Center Beings,” Dad explained. He had joined a weird church, the Akashic Church. They took all his money for trans-medium sessions. “They dwell in the core of the earth. Of course there are ascension points for them to come up to meet space craft,” Dad continued, “like the pyramids. The Pope can't explain away their age and reconcile it to Biblical time!”

It wasn't the money siphoning Peter minded most about Dad's church, but its inching him towards paranoia. Of course some was canny (Dad was very smart if un-degreed) – like his astrological calendar coinciding the Old Testament in Ares – viz the Ram idols, and the New Testament in Pisces – the fish. A day spent with Dad often went this way. He'd keep you waiting hours while he just finished a bit of

research, then take you to mini golf if they had a night course and he'd missed the last movie, or the 24 hour bowling alley after that. In the middle of the night it was to Moser's to eat and listen to the mysteries.

THE HOLE

Why had he ordered pie? Peter was full on meatloaf, yams, greens, dinner rolls, sweet tea – why was he lingering? He thought he should order a crab cake for Dad's sake. Its smell like the bait bucket.

He wondered what more Dad told Mark down at the Hole the time Peter ran off into the woods and left them after Dad's confession.

“There's something I need to be man enough to tell you to your faces before you read it,” Dad had said. He'd written a book of bad confessional poems that would never appear. He told how he'd cheated on their mom just before she left. They already knew. Dad went on about the other woman, trying to justify but sounding like one of his other times charming befuddled conquest stories. At least he did not try to explain the problems with mom. (Later we'd learn she'd had her own dalliances.)

This did not visibly upset the Boys the way Dad seemed to have expected – at least not Peter. Dad went on to cover his attempted suicide. That was news to Peter. He ran. Peter ran up into the woods to think. Of course it explained the hospital, why they couldn't visit. Mark stayed at the Hole with Dad. He was younger. Peter needed his whole own woods to come to terms with his Dad as a man apart, more than Peter's father. That meant Peter was a man apart too, he supposed, destined to die perhaps alone. It was a lot to take in. He'd need more times in the woods. Many things changed then.

After finishing his pie, paying, tipping more than usual, Peter found himself driving back to the Hole. As the sun descended the water appeared dappled and cast webbed shadows on his leg. He had thought Dad took them to that spot to trap them with the news. Now he realized it was where Dad felt safe.

Perhaps Mark had had the better idea with his list after all. His selections seemed spot on. The hell with Dad's damned blood sucking church.

THE CHURCH

He tried to check the time on his cell. It was dead. Peter had forgotten his meeting at the church! He sped over there. His wife's car was still in the lot, but she was not there.

“Pete,” Mark hugged him as he came in. This time Peter too leaned into the huge and let the tears flow. They held each other a long time. Mark was unsurprised. He received it like a gift. They wiped their eyes, laughing.

“I've been here since noon waiting,” Mark explained. Cindy said not to wake you so I came to the meeting. You've done enough, I figured. I've negotiated a monument I can afford with the Elder here, just waiting for your approval...”

