

## **Digging Up Mother**

# **Digging Up Mother**

A LOVE STORY

***Doug Stanhope***

**Foreword by Johnny Depp**



Da Capo Press  
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

Copyright © 2016 by Doug Stanhope

Foreword copyright © 2016 by Johnny Depp

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Da Capo Press, 44 Farnsworth Street, 3rd Floor, Boston, MA 02210

Set in 10.5-point Goudy Oldstyle Std

Cataloging-in-Publication data for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

First Da Capo Press edition 2016  
ISBN: 978-0-306-82440-1 (ebook)

Published by Da Capo Press  
A Member of the Perseus Books Group  
[www.dacapopress.com](http://www.dacapopress.com)

Da Capo Press books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the U.S. by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 2300 Chestnut Street, Suite 200, Philadelphia, PA, 19103, or call (800) 810-4145, ext. 5000, or e-mail [special.markets@perseusbooks.com](mailto:special.markets@perseusbooks.com).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Bingo,  
You're a potatohead and I know you'll never read this book.  
That's okay, I read you all the good parts  
out loud while I was writing it.  
Thanks for being there.  
I love you.  
You'd think I'd dedicate this book to Mother.  
Mother is dead and doesn't give a shit.  
I am not a man of faith but I have faith in that.  
Of all the things you can't take with you,  
Hopefully ego is the first to be left behind.*

# Contents

*Foreword by Johnny Depp*

*Preface*

- 1 Mother's Last Gasp
- 2 Not Your Average Mother
- 3 Paxton: Square Peg in a Sphincter-Shaped Hole
- 4 Actually, You Can Go Home Again
- 5 Hollywood: Scams, Queers, Scamming Queers, and Queering Scams
- 6 Deathbed City, Florida
- 7 Tail Between My Legs
- 8 Las Vegas: Money. Women. Danger!
- 9 Worcester: You Can't Go Home Again and Again and Again
- 10 Boise Fucking Idaho
- 11 Vegas Redux
- 12 Stand-Up Comedy
- 13 Going Pro in Phoenix
- 14 Movin' On Up
- 15 The Big Time
- 16 Breakdown Dead Ahead
- 17 Mother's Big Move
- 18 Off the Wagon, Out to Sea
- 19 Bisbee, AZ: What The Fuck Just Happened?
- 20 My Best Friend, Again

*Acknowledgments*

## Foreword

*“The greatest tragedy in mankind’s entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion.”*

- - -Sir Arthur C. Clarke (Writer).

*“The superior man understands what is right, the inferior man understands what will sell.”*

- - -Confucius (Philosopher).

*“Life has become immeasurably better since I have been forced to stop taking it seriously.”*

- - -Hunter S. Thompson (Writer).

*“Don’t worry, don’t be afraid, ever, because this is just a ride.”*

- - -Bill Hicks (Comedian).

*“I’m not going to censor myself to comfort your ignorance.”*

- - -Jon Stewart (Comedian).

*“Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.”*

- - -Christopher Hitchens (Writer).

*“Spare no man the fire should he make his ignorance yours.”*

- - -Richard “Tude” Wells (Moonshiner).

*“Life is like animal porn. It’s not for everyone.”*

- - -Doug Stanhope (Drunk).

Dear Reader,

He's a depraved reluctant visionary and debauched accidental guru who wears old suits that were likely once some dead fucker's Saturday night prowling outfit - he's a man of the people who says what must be said for no one else will - total honesty - consequence be damned - no fluffy outside no creamy inside - you get what you get and deal with it - he is our savior - for here in this life where the only guarantee is the ceasing of breath and a healthy death tax for our loved ones he is the one man who dares to plunge the cold dagger of truth deep into the collective brain-dead psyche of our species for the ultimate benefit of all humankind and certainly not since my dearest friend and mentor Hunter have I known an individual with such a profoundly strong sense of moral justice - it makes me sick so I suppose I must ultimately admit that I do not like this man I speak of I fucking love him.

Him being Doug Stanhope.

Johnny Depp  
Los Angeles, CA.  
19th February, 2016

## Preface

AFTER THIRTY-SOME YEARS OF RUTHLESS DRINKING, IT'S MORE THAN probable that I've fucked up a few details. Perhaps it was a year before or after, the wrong town, a different hole. But I've made every attempt to fact-check every story, and I thank all of you who took my relentless calls and emails to make this book as accurate as possible. I'm sure some of you never expected to hear from me again, some probably didn't want to at all. Regardless, I couldn't have done it without you.

A lot of the people involved have grown into responsible adults with families and respectable professions. For that reason, I may have had to tone down a story or two on your behalf. Even if I wanted to smear you publicly, the lawyers wouldn't have it. For that same reason, almost every goddamned name in this book has been changed. If you are reading about yourself and that's not your name, it's not because I got it wrong. They made me change it. I actually tried interchanging names: Molly Brown becomes Sally Jones and vice versa. You'd still be mentioned, just as the wrong person. They didn't buy it.

If the story is graphic and true and wrong and I could STILL use your real name, that is because you are fucking blessed to have nothing to hide, are proud of your scars, and have nothing to lose. There's still a few of us out here and I'm wealthy for still having you in my life.

# 1

## Mother's Last Gasp

ON THURSDAY, I GOT A CALL FROM ONE OF MOTHER'S CAREGIVERS. "I'm here with your Mother. I think you should come over so you two can talk." She spoke like a mortician from a 1950s horror movie. Since I can't remember her name, I'll call her Morticia.

I knew this meant Mother was going to kill herself. There was no need to be mawkishly sentimental. I'd been here waiting for the call. I'm not the "Sit down. There's something I have to tell you" type of guy. I freak out at traffic or figuring out gadgets. I punch dashboards and smash laptops. When serious shit happens, I'm generally rational and grounded.

"Is it time?" I asked.

"Yes, she's ready to go."

"Now . . . as in today?"

"Yes."

In the background, Mother wheezed out "I've had enough" with no less theater.

We'd had enough false flags of a Mother suicide over the years that there wasn't any immediate panic. In fact, there was no panic at all. At this point, she was in terminal care. So much had happened over the last short period—midnight ambulance rides and helicopter medevacs—that we were happy to have her go, for her own sake. She had no reason to be alive.

Of course, at the forefront of my mind was the suspicion that this was another Mother ruse. There was enough history to consider she might be doing this just for attention.

Emphysema is not a disease you can see. It's a horrific, suffocating way to die, drowning in your own fluids like being endlessly waterboarded. But you can't tell how bad just by looking at a person. Mother wasn't a waifish cancer patient with her eyes bulging out. Not cirrhosis-yellow or covered in the sores of an AIDS patient. So although diagnosed terminal, and no doubt withered, there was no way of knowing how much she's embellishing for effect. Mother wasn't above using her own impending death as currency for patronage. I had lost all tolerance for her scheming years ago and now it wasn't necessary. She was dying and I would be there for her in whatever way she allowed me. I left my girlfriend Bingo at the house to make a short recon drive to Mother's place.

You could almost hear gothic church bells toll as you opened the door to her tiny apartment and into the rubble. Morticia had a way of making things overly dramatic

and hokey, probably in her own self-interest. Mother was in bed. Inside her 300 square feet of filth, cat shit, and clutter she was now piled with an ER unit's worth of medical equipment. Morticia was playing her role of Sister Helen Prejean, head tilted in earnest sincerity. Mother was sat up, leaning forward as if to vomit up an alien, eyes closed but very alert.

"I can't fucking take this anymore." Even with the raspy smoker's death voice, she could affect the tone of a crying child. "I'm sorry."

There's nothing to be sorry about, Ma. You've taken this for more years than I ever would. And it's all your fault.

Morticia left and Mother and I fell into a calm calculated discussion of what happens next. Even though we were alone, for legal reasons we still spoke in silly, roundabout hypotheticals like one of us might be wearing a wire. "Well, if someone were going to end their own life in a situation like this, they would probably want . . ." She knew that I couldn't "know," much less "assist."

She'd spoken to a doctor that she trusted. Establishing that mother was under hospice care, the doctor intimated that hospice was essentially a suicide machine and that if she were in that much pain, hospice wouldn't assist but she would have adequate medication to make the decision herself. It was offered up that thirty morphine tablets of her dosage would be more than sufficient. She had nearly ninety. Should she decide to do this, she wouldn't have to go out like Kurt Cobain, not that you'd notice the mess.

I called her caregivers to make arrangements for transporting Mother and her machines over to my house. Hospice had agreed to deliver a hospital bed that we could put in my living room. Mother was a hoarder, and since she'd become unable to clean up after herself, her apartment was vulgar. I'd long since given up on trying to convince her not to live like that, but I certainly wasn't going to see her die in that.

I went home and told Bingo that Mother was on her way and that, indeed, this seemed to be the end of the line. We looked at each other comically and shrugged in the way Butch and Sundance did before they jumped off the cliff. How it goes from here, who fucking knows? If you ask me to plan a wedding, I would at least know the basics of hiring caterers and renting a hall. Regardless of how okay we are with the concepts of death and suicide, I didn't know even the first steps of how to prepare. So we talked about hiring a birthday clown just for the pure satisfaction of watching him flounder. They don't have any birthday clowns in Bisbee, AZ. Too bad. That was my only idea on short notice.

Mother's clunky white linen hospital apparatus looked completely out of context with the carnival colors of the interior of our house. We dolled it up with multicolored, polka dot throw blankets. Festive. She was wheeled as far as she could be and the few steps to her bed took an eternity. There she began to build her nest. A tray next to her bed was quickly filled with different pill bottles, a travel mug, kleenex, and, of course, her cigarettes and ashtray for when she'd occasionally turn off her oxygen and smoke. I mentioned—not as a joke—that at least she may as well go ahead and start drinking again. You can't take those AA chips with you.

"Two and a half years of sobriety down the drain? Fuck it!" It was the first time she smiled since she'd made her decision. I went to the liquor store and bought mini-bottles of Ketel One and Kahlua—she was always a Black Russian drinker—to leave

on her stand with her pills. I had plenty of large bottles. This was just symbolic and it brightened up her nightstand.

I'd called my friend Betty—once lovingly and accurately described as the Edith Bunker of Bisbee—to hire her as a nurse for Mother. I can co-host your launch into eternity without a blink, but no way I can deal with piss bags and shitting in bedpans. Mother's run-on sentences and complaining are hard enough but the idea of holding up her deflated ass-cheek while she forces out a mushy yogurt turd . . . no.

Betty was more than willing, almost like she was happy we thought of her for the opportunity. She lived just two blocks away so she could be on call. She didn't even want to get paid. We helped her with her long-shot, failed run for Mayor of Bisbee, but that held no candle to dealing with Mother, and there was no way I wasn't going to pay someone for a job that miserable.

Mother didn't take to Betty, sniping and snapping at her both behind her back and straight to her face. Fucking ruthless. This sweet lady who kindly agreed to wipe Mother's ass and change her Foley bag as a favor for a friend was now getting berated at every gentle turn. It was embarrassing and entirely consistent with the woman that I'd now realized her to have been for the last several years of her life. No point in reprimanding her now.

I don't know if I apologized to Betty verbally at the time but I know I must have done it with my eyes. To her immense credit, Betty never missed a beat, was never flustered or frustrated by the verbal abuse, like a veterinarian with a snarling puppy, taking no offense where I would have wanted to say, "Go fuck yourself," and hosed her down in the driveway like a messy baby.

Mother, of course, arrived with cats. There were only two left at this point, down from many. Georgia was a decrepit seventeen-year-old, half-blind, matted with nicotine and her own filth, stinky dreadlocks hanging from her belly like stalactites. The other cat was a new arrival, a stray that wasn't so much rescued as ensnared, dragnet-style, and incarcerated. There's no such thing as a free lunch, kitty. My house was more minimum security compared to the SuperMax of Mother's apartment. The new cat lasted one night at my house before beating feet at the first opportunity of an open door and heading for the Mexican border. Mother was in no place to be accounting for cats much less petting them. Thinking they were there was good enough for her.

What Mother was more concerned with was all of her shit back in her apartment. And it was all shit. She was a hoarder before there was a word for it. Once, it had been at least somewhat clean and organized, if only by her own sense of organization, but as her health deteriorated, it had become squalid. It crawled with spiders and houseflies, the floor littered with plates of cat food, her own food rotting in the refrigerator. Now she was at my place and she was terrified that I was going to go back there and raze the joint.

She'd implore Bingo not to allow me to touch her things. "He's just gonna want to throw stuff away and you can't let him," and then she'd identify different items that had to be kept.

"A lot of that shit is worth a lot of money."

No, Ma. Just because you spent a lot of money on it doesn't mean it's worth anything. And you can't hoard from the grave.

As soon as she was settled in, I set down terms. If you are indeed going to kill yourself, you can't do it on Sunday or Monday because that's football. I was not kidding. If you have the freedom to decide when you are going to die, it would be downright rude to knowingly do it while your host has other events planned. And no loud parties.

I turned on whatever shitty television she wanted to watch and tried to go about my day like nothing was different. I'm not much of a collector but the one I do have is a full wall of stolen clocks. One from the Man Show production office, one from the Girls Gone Wild tour bus, the Hammersmith Apollo backstage clock, and so on. And they were all on the wall behind the television facing Mother. It never occurred to me what subtle implications that could have had until years later.

All day Friday Mother drifted in and out of sleep, waking up to have me refill her 32-ounce travel mug with diet soda, eating very little if at all. Soft things like cottage cheese or yogurt. She was down to 79 pounds. She'd lived with back pain for years and complained about it in every lucid moment. She complained about her now-hardened breast implants, which on someone of that weight were like bowling balls on a skeleton. She'd had at least three sets in her life and now hugging her was like hugging your grandpa with a boner in his sweatpants. It was obvious from her short, gurgling breaths that her body was struggling to continue. She was sixty-three years old and she was a fucking mess.

That being said, when Saturday morning came around and there'd been no more intimation of suicide, we started to think we'd just wait the whole thing out. Obviously I couldn't send her back to that toxic studio apartment, and in the unlikely event that she did last more than two weeks, that would be great to fuck with my manager, Brian Hennigan. He'd be coming to stay in two weeks, and he doesn't have the spine for this kinda shit.

Saturday afternoon, Tamar Halpern showed up at the house. Tamar had directed Mother in a few independent films back in Los Angeles and happened to be in Tucson. (You'll know more about all these people and places later. For now, shush up. Mother's dying.) Tamar had called Mother to say she'd planned to drive down to visit. She had no idea the condition Mother was in and I felt bad for her. Hey, I'm going to pop in for coffee and next thing you know you're visiting someone on their deathbed. Still, Mother was thrilled to see her. Tamar was one of the only guests Mother ever had in the three years she'd been in Bisbee, and their reminiscing definitely perked Mother up. It wasn't long before Mother launched into her customary, over-the-top aggressive bids of hospitality, pushing Tamar to stay the night.

"C'mon, it'll be like a sleepover. It'll be fun." Yes, Ma. It'd be a fucking blast. Bingo and I wing-manned it so Tamar didn't get cornered and detained like Mother's cats. We had some cocktails during Mother's unconscious periods and later all four of us watched *Bad Santa*, a favorite movie of Mother's and mine, together. Movies were a great way of avoiding talking, or more often, of listening to Mother. When it was over, Mother was out cold and Tamar snuck out. When Mother woke up, she asked where Tamar had gone as though she'd expected her to be there in her footie-pajamas for the big sleepover. I told her she'd left but sent her love. Mother shrugged it off and went back to sleep.

By now Bingo and I were mentally exhausted from three days of spinning plates

with caretakers, Betty, hospice, Tamar, and, of course, Mother. Bingo and I split a bar of Xanax, twice what we'd normally take to sleep. Bingo laid down on the couch in the living room with Mother while I went into my office to catch up on whatever emails or Myspace or whatever the fuck was taking care of business back then.

Somewhere around 10:30 that night, Mother yelled for me with a weak scream: "Doug!" with the same demanding tone she'd had since moving from LA. I gave an abrupt "What?" She doesn't hear me and calls again, "DOUG!"

I went to the living room, irritated: "WHAT?!"

She was lying on her side, facing away from me.

"It's time for my pills and my drink!"

Hey, how about you don't say it like an asshole? I grabbed the diet soda and her travel mug.

"No," she said, still turned away from me. "My OTHER drink and pills."

It took a few seconds to sink in what she meant and I felt like a dick for being short with her.

Not knowing exactly what to say, I simply asked her if she was sure.

"Yes," she said, scrambling for breath.

I shook Bingo awake. "It's time."

"Time for what?"

"It's TIME."

"Oh, shit."

I started to move in three different directions, like a fireman looking for a pole that isn't there. Next I did the first thing anyone should do in this situation.

Cocktails!

Mother was always a Black Russian drinker in her early days before AA, but tonight she asked me to make them White Russians—her thinking being that the milk would coat her stomach for the pills. Amazing she didn't want to take them with chicken soup. I poured cocktails for the three of us while she took her arranged medication. We talked for a while to make sure she knew what she was doing. I didn't want this to be an impulse-buy panic decision. She was keen on pulling the "I don't want to be a burden" card—which, indeed, she'd proven to be in her later life but not because she was dying. She was just a general pain in the ass. I knew that wasn't what she was referring to. I also had to make a conscious effort to not talk to her in coddling tones, as one tends to do when talking to someone this frail. You're an adult, Ma. In fact, you are still my mother, making you the authority figure here. So if you say you're ready, I'm not gonna argue. I'm just gonna look the other way. Hypothetically.

With all the theoretical qualifiers and caveats out of the way, it was indeed "time."

Mother took what for her would constitute a deep breath and began swallowing morphine. I want to say she took them with her cocktails, but seeing as she ended up taking all of it, I think that much booze would have killed her before the morphine had a chance. Regardless, it was a long process taking that many pills, and we were cocktailing the entire time. She became more relaxed as it went on and eventually we were having what someone might call "fun." Betty stopped by to check on things, decided it looked like it was a time for family, and left, saying she'd come back later.

I called my brother Jeff and told him what was up. He was aware that this day was coming. Many years prior my brother and I had made a gentlemen's agreement that

when the time came when our parents were in their last days, that he'd be responsible for Dad and I'd take Mother. Jeff lived near Dad and I got along better with Mother, far better than he did. I always had. And even though Dad was eighteen years older, factoring in their lifestyles, it was pretty even odds on who would go first.

Shortly after we'd made that arrangement, Dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. It went through him pretty quick—he wasn't a fighter and was pretty content in that he'd lived a full life. But while he was going through surgeries my brother would torture me with phone calls.

(Whispering from the hospital room) “Guess what I'm doing? I just had to wipe off Dad's ass after he shit himself!”

“Stop calling this number!” Click!

Ring!

“I just had to pick up Dad's dick and put it in a bedpan.”

“Okay! You get the house! Leave me alone!”

Now I was calling him to let him chat with Mother while she was dozing off into the dirt. Enjoy that for awkward. As with me, she kept looking for validation that she hadn't been a bad mother. He lied and assured her she'd been a fine mother. I went the other way. A bad mother, you ask? Hell yes, you were a bad mother! How else would you raise a child to one day tend bar while you were about to croak! Another round? Me too!

No doubt she'd groomed me with this sense of humor from the beginning. Her Friars Club send-off was just the culmination.

Once she'd finished the unpleasant project of getting all of her pills down her tentative throat, there was nothing left to do but wait and make jokes. She remained lucid for quite a while, ordering more White Russians like it was a Christmas party. I'd bring her drink back, lean in, and fuck with her.

“Hey, Ma! Wait! They found a cure!” and she'd laugh like someone coming out of a nitrous oxide haze, lifting her middle finger towards me.

“Ma, when you go through that white light—see if there's any way you can make the Saints cover 8 points at Oakland tomorrow. That'll be our sign of the afterlife.”

She'd occasionally have us crank down her oxygen so she could have a cigarette. Bingo and I had quit for ten months at that point but had schemed since Mother got here to share one last cigarette with her. Considering the prevailing circumstances, it couldn't really count against us. We'd even bummed non-menthols from someone in anticipation. There is no better cigarette than the one you break down and smoke after a long period of abstinence, and this situation removed any guilt from it.

Now that we were all in our pints and in this situation together, we were doing whatever we could to make this fun and funny and comfortable for her. When I was a little kid, she'd always make me rub her feet. I bet she could remember the exact day when I decided it was gross and stopped doing it. But these were extenuating circumstances so Bingo and I each took a foot and massaged it. We went through the litany of old fun stories, the same ones that she'd been repeating since they happened to us as kids, only now I had to act like they were brand new and still hilarious. It was like pretending to be on ecstasy without the wanting-to-fuck-her part.

Mother was always funny on some level. Her Achilles heel was that any time she got a big laugh, she'd always repeat the punch line ad nauseam until it wasn't funny

anymore. As she drank what was sure to be her last one, I said, “Wow, Ma, you’re really hammering down those cocktails!”

And Mother, barely alert but perfectly intoned in a campy British accent, said, “There’s times to be dainty and there’s time to be a pig!”

Bingo and I fell out laughing. I could see Mother trying her best to follow it up and ruin it. I stopped her before she could.

“No! Don’t say anything else! Those are perfect last words!”

And they were.

Mother lay there in a smiling half coma while Bingo and I put on music. We cried a bit and sang louder than Mother probably would have liked but she was in no state to complain.

I have no idea how long this went on. When my father was dying at my brother’s house, I remember putting a mirror under his nose to see if he was in fact still breathing, and I’m pretty sure we did that with Mother as well. At some point, thankfully, Betty came back over, joining what seemed to be a party in progress and confirmed that she was still breathing. Betty was unaware of what was happening exactly, but she knew me well enough that seeing us in full swing with my dying mother wasn’t curious at all.

I guess I’d expected that this whole thing would take thirty minutes—this based on absolutely no factual information whatsoever. Now it’s been hours and Bingo and I are fighting lots of cocktails and a double-dose of Xanax to keep our eyes open. Finally, after Mother has been unresponsive for far too long, we collapsed on the couch next to her. She drank me under the table to the end.

I woke up and there were people in the house. As a drunk, I’m used to the first several moments of waking up being a cavalcade of confused memories trying to shape themselves like a game of Tetris. It was 6:30 or so and Betty was there, engaged in some sort of activity. There were two men there who at first I thought were paramedics but turned out to be from the mortuary. Waking up in a Xanax-and-vodka haze after just a few hours sleep, my mind was racing to work out the details of exactly what was going on.

I got up to see Mother laying on her back with her mouth gaping open, just like Dad’s had been. When I touched her face, cold saliva that had puddled in her mouth spilled over my fingers.

Betty had shown up after we’d fallen down, stayed while we slept, and made the appropriate phone calls when Mother no longer showed vital signs. She told us later that when the mortuary people showed up, they came through the back door and first spotted Bingo, sprawled out across the sofa, and assumed she was the corpse. As they went to move her, Betty stepped in and pointed them the six feet away to the obvious hospital bed with the old dead lady in it. She said they were mortified at their own gaffe. We still think it’s hilarious.

I don’t remember anything after this. I know the Saints not only covered the 8 points, they won the game, 34–3, confirming that Mother was in a better place now. And by that I mean that she wasn’t all dead and drooling in a hospital bed in my living room while I was trying to watch football.

This is a love story.

## 2

### Not Your Average Mother

THE MAJORITY OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES ARE BLURRED OR DELETED but there's no forgetting the image of your mother jerking off the family dog. It wasn't even really the family dog. It was a step-dog, and we didn't like it. I was around twelve years old, standing at the top of the stairs at our new house in Paxton, Massachusetts, watching Mother lean down and go from a friendly belly-scratch to a two-fingered tug job that neither me or the dog was expecting. She justified it by simply saying, "Well, they like it."

I'm sure I found it awkwardly amusing because I was twelve and dog dicks are funny. Touching a dog's dick is gross, and your mother touching a dog's dick is far grosser and gross equals hilarious. I don't remember the dog needing any counseling afterwards. I assume that's why you never see PETA protesting a Tijuana donkey show. So long as the donkey is pitching and not catching, it's hard to cry abuse. The dog belonged to my stepfather du jour, John Kirk, from whom my mother Bonnie took her name. My brother Jeff and I called her Ma but would eventually refer to her as Mother, usually in the same grim tone that Seinfeld called Newman. Or sometimes as "MOTHER!!!" when the situation warranted, like when she's jerking off the cat in front of your friends and you're no longer twelve, you're a full-blown adult and your friend is comedian Ralphie May. Or when she's telling your girlfriend's parent's—unsolicited—about jerking off her cats. You know. Situations like that.

"What??? They like it!" she'd still say.

It's tough to pinpoint exactly when Mother started going weird. We grew up in a house on 20 Rich St in Worcester, Mass in a middle-class neighborhood with a side yard big enough to play kickball in. Over the blueberry bushes is an automatic home run. That's how I've glossed up the memory. Mother was evidently quite the drunk until she divorced my father when I was six or seven, but I have no memory of her being sloppy or out of hand. I heard the story early on that after my birth, a neighbor up the street, Rita Herbst, congratulated my mother and asked about me, the new baby. My mother told her that I was the ugliest baby she'd ever seen. The neighbor tried to laugh it off. Mother insisted that she was serious. "No, Rita, he's really fucking ugly! He's got this blotchy skin and weird shocks of hair that go in every direction!" Having a lifetime with her to judge by, I can fairly accurately chalk this up to Mother's insuppressible honesty, not any kind of drunkenness. I laughed when I heard it and I laugh about it now, remembering her telling it. To this day, I've never heard a mother

saying—demanding even—that her newborn was frighteningly ugly.

I do remember Jeff and I making lots of plans and preparations to run away from home, including tents, survival gear, and a collapsible fire ladder to escape from our second-story bedroom, so it couldn't have all been summer days and lemonade. But that may have been just as much about us being shitty kids as from any lack of parenting. I had the proclivity to be an unruly little prick from the beginning. Strange early memories of taking a turd out of the toilet and putting it under my dad's pillow and then blaming it on Jeff, two years older and not nearly as adorable a liar. Another memory of putting one of my mother's sewing needles upright in the fabric right where she sat on the couch, and pleading my innocence when she impaled herself upon it. I swore I had no idea how that happened. I couldn't have been older than four or five. That's not a product of an alcoholic household. That's just straight-up fucking evil.

I was clever as well. I remember crawling into their bed on a Saturday morning during cartoons to ask for money to go to the store to get cereal. Junk cereal is what I wanted, of course, and to upend me they said that I had to read the ingredients, and that sugar could not be one of the first two. I came back with whatever Count Chocula or Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch I'd wanted, and then feigned ignorance to the fact that not only was corn syrup actually sugar, but that it was not two separate ingredients, corn and syrup. Plausible deniability. I should have been a fucking lawyer.

More remarkable here is the fact that, in 1972, there was absolutely nothing odd about a five-year-old child hoofing it down to the supermarket all by himself to buy his own groceries. The idea of that, with the added image of the kid reading the side of the box for nutritional information, slays me. It's weird that I picture the five-year-old me wearing reading glasses at the end of my nose in that image.

Mother divorced my father right around the time she quit drinking and joined AA. He always said that the only reason she wanted a divorce was because it had become a fashionable thing to do, and she would later confirm this. My dad, Russell Stanhope, was Mother's high school biology teacher and married her when he was thirty-six and she was eighteen, or so went the story. Digging through old letters for this book, I now know that they were already a couple when he was thirty-five and she was seventeen, and still his student. Today, this would make him a sex offender and a felon. That may have clouded my perception that, in reality, he was the kindest, most gentle person I have ever known. If you look through your own family tree, you won't have to go far back to find what we call pedophiles now. Your great-grandfather that came home from the war at twenty-two and married your fourteen-year-old great-grandmother. Today that war hero would have his head stoved in on the prison yard. Be careful of how you react to buzzwords. If I were now to be informed that a sex offender were moving into my neighborhood, part of me would think of my father and consider that he or she would be a fantastic role model. My father was anything but a predator. He was like a more lighthearted, less involved version of Richie Cunningham's dad in "Happy Days." I wouldn't be surprised if my brother and I represented the only two times he'd gotten laid in his life.

INITIALLY WE STAYED WITH DAD AFTER THE DIVORCE, A TASK HE WASN'T very well-suited to handle. As much of a rotten kid as I was, at least Mother had some sense of discipline. She could be scary as fuck. One winter she took our two huge toy chests and threw them out of our second-story bedroom window because we didn't clean our room. Jeff and I were always drawn to pyromania and I remember my brother nearly burning down the garage (with me stuck in back of it) while setting dead leaves on fire. Mother took him inside, lit a match, blew it out, and pressed it to his fingertip while it was still hot. She wanted him to know what fire felt like. It sounds cruel but you could argue her point. It certainly didn't kill our love of setting shit on fire, but it did instill the fact that we should never get caught by Mother.

Dad was a complete soft touch. He was too aloof to catch you doing anything even right under his nose, and if he did catch you, he was all Mr. Rogers. "C'mon now, guy," was his disciplinary catchphrase.

"C'mon now guy. You know better than to stand on the roof hitting Whiffle balls full of lighter fluid and burning toilet paper into the street with a bat."

"Sorry, Dad."

And that would be it.

Jeff and I ran amok. Dad had moved into the parsonage of the church—a house set aside for the minister—that had been unoccupied and, for the most part, we stayed with him. Now, not only were we unsupervised most of the time, we also had free run of an entire usually-empty church to use as a playground. While I know they had joint custody, I don't remember much custody at all. The parsonage and 20 Rich were walking distance, and it seemed like we drifted at will between the two. We were monsters. I wasn't big enough to be a bully but I did what a lot of weak kids did. I found someone weaker and paid it downward. On our tiny street that kid was John Schafer. John was two years younger than me and dumb as an onion. We'd send him to people's doors in the neighborhood, saying that if he rang the doorbell and sang a song, they'd give him a bag of candy. Time and again, he'd belt out "Twinkle Twinkle" and then stand there in painful silence, only to have the door eventually closed in his face. We'd get him to blow us behind the garage. We didn't even know what it meant exactly. He'd just blow on our dicks and then we'd make fun of him for doing it. Mother came home to us once with John Schafer on a stool in a noose with the rope swung over a branch. She had to have known that there were discipline issues.

---

MAURA WAS MY FIRST LITTLE GIRLFRIEND AND LIVED JUST UP THE STREET from Dad's new digs at the church. There was a small field—giant in my eyes back then—behind the parsonage that we were cutting through when Maura stopped and told me to kiss her. I did so but no differently than you would your grandpa. "No. Kiss me like Captain Kirk." And then she taught me how to French kiss. So I kissed her like I would my grandpa, only now with my tongue sticking out.

I don't know why I was hyper-sexual so young. No, I wasn't molested, and I'm pretty sure Maura wasn't either. But we knew what fucking was and we knew we

weren't supposed to do it but we tried to all the time in that church. It didn't feel like anything. Nine years old is way before load-blowing years. It just felt like great mischief, like whipping snowballs at cars. It was a fun summer. I don't know how nine-year-olds break up, but I know that Maura wasn't my girlfriend anymore after we moved to Paxton. She would still call me occasionally and I remember her telling me that she had a new boyfriend named Bart and his dick was "waaay bigger" than mine. I remembered Bart because the teachers all called him by his full name, Bartholomew. I was jealous that nobody teased him about that stupid name since he was athletic and good-looking. And now I knew he had a bigger dick and that's not something you should be depressed about as a ten-year-old.

Years later, when I finally played in my hometown of Worcester at the sadly legendary Aku Aku Chinese Restaurant and Comedy Club, a girl named Susan Joy approached me at the bar and asked if I remembered her. She was someone we knew from Dad's church and I had a vague recollection of her.

"Guess who I'm here with? Do you remember Maura?"

No fucking way! I couldn't believe it and would have bet that all those memories had been white-washed from her brain, but I'd have been wrong.

Within the first three sentences of talking to Maura, she said, "Do you remember we fucked when we were little kids???"

"Yes! Yes I do! I can't believe you remember! I got you to put your mouth on my dick and then peed! You started screaming at me and chasing me, so I ran out to where my Dad was so you couldn't say anything!"

Oh, happy days!

We laughed and talked for a little while, short recaps of what we had done with our lives. When she mentioned she was married now, I immediately assumed her husband was somewhere at the venue and told her to grab him and I'd buy us drinks.

"Oh, he's not at this show. Are you kidding? He's mad that I'm even here. He's afraid we have 'unfinished business.'"

Seriously? Your husband is jealous? We were nine god-damned years old! And now we're pushing forty and he's at home, pissed off? "Mr Big Shot comedian coming back home to take what's his!" I've been the insecure boyfriend before, pacing, staring at the clock, and every time my girl doesn't answer the phone I'm picturing her fucking some other guy. But that was as an adult. With an adult girlfriend. If you picture two nine-year-olds fucking, and the first emotion that springs up is jealousy, something is very wrong with you.

God help him if he ever finds out about Bart and his huge ten-year-old dick.

---

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I WOULD SAY AS A PARENT IF I FOUND OUT my kid was trying to have sex at nine years old. I know I would probably laugh. At least he's not trying to burn down the house. That's pretty much how Mother handled things. She could be vicious if it was warranted, but if it was funny, right or wrong, she'd fucking laugh. That was always paramount with Mother, no matter how fucked up other things might be. Humor was right there with it. Comedy albums—Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart—