Natural-Born Proud

Martin Jr., S.R.

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"Carter, are you all right? You’re driving over eighty," Claudia says, her tone of voice and her using my given name shocking me to attention. Jesus. I hadn’t noticed. Guess I wandered off. The kids are riding well and I don’t need to get Claudia all ticked off. She already claims I drive like my dad used to—too fast too often. Better ease off a little.

More relaxed after getting my attention, she asks, “Do you want to stop by the church first, Hon? You mentioned last night that you might want to do that. I can handle the kids for a little while.”

We’re passing Fort Ord, and I can see blue glimpses of Monterey Bay whenever we top one of the sand hills of the Peninsula. The white houses of Monterey are like doll houses spotted around in the oak and pine groves, and Highway One looks like a gash cut over the crest of Carmel Hill. I can smell the ocean air. I discover I’m strangling the steering wheel, and I have to consciously relax my stomach muscles to breathe and answer her. I take a couple deep puffs of salty air. I stare straight ahead.

“Honey? Carter?” I’ve forgotten to answer her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Aww...I don’t know, Babe, I don’t know. Doesn’t seem to be much use, but I could check up on how they have him set up. I’ll drive by, and if there aren’t a lot of people there yet, maybe I’ll stop in for a minute. But I can’t take long. I need to get on up to the house for Mom and Bub.”

“Take your time, Hon. You have a right.”

Goddamn, I love that woman. What she knows, how she feels. I just sigh, “Guess so.”
Fremont Street looks like always, just as it was when I left here yesterday. Bright, hazy sunshine. Stores and cafés open. People on the streets. There’s a garbage truck. Gas stations are busy. No one seems to know why I’m here, what I’m doing. A line from a Stephen Crane poem crosses my mind: “A man said to the universe, Sir, I exist. No shit? answered the universe.” Something like that. Life goes on, right?

The funeral’s still three hours away, so the only car at the church is the hearse. Parked right in front. Its back doors are wide open, and out from them a maroon carpet runner goes up the stairs into the building. Looks like a shiny black whale, its great mouth gaping, its long purple tongue sticking out and disappearing into the church. Later, the limousines will file in behind it. And my father.

I pull off Fremont to the side of the church and park in the space under the sign reading “Reserved for Pastor.” As I get out, Claudia stands the baby up behind the wheel where he goes into his driving game. “Ooootnnh. Ooootnnh,” he growls, his version of how a car engine sounds, and turns the wheel back and forth with his chubby little hands. The other kids scramble out to move around.

The sun is bright outside, but the inside of the church feels cool and is dark. Funereal. A recorded organ hymn carries the heavy fragrance of flowers all over the auditorium. Flowers of all kinds—roses, carnations, gardenias—are everywhere. On the pews, in upright stands, covering the pulpit, draped all over the casket and trailing out to the sides and down the aisles. I know every inch of this room.

I used to sit right over there in the second pew after Sunday School. I played that very piano for the bishop when I was eighteen. Claudia and I stood right where I’m standing to recite our wedding vows. Here’s where the Old Man proudly christened Baby Booker, his namesake. Now it feels like some place I’ve never been in before. It’s so quiet. No clapping hands. No joyous songs. No shouted amens.

The coffin’s bronze surface mottles through the flower trellises in places, even darker shadows in the already dark room. The white satins and silks caressing him seem like clouds. His black, turned-
around collar contrasts with his billowy resting place. His skin is ashy, but his face looks natural, at peace. No hint of the awful, wrenching moment that brought him to this final repose. God! What must that have been like? Did he suffer? Was he afraid? My dad, all right. Guess I do look some like him. Mom and Claudia think so.

I wish I could sit down with him for a few minutes, but there’s no place to sit close. Doesn’t seem like twenty-five years have passed since we made that first Modoc trip together. College, graduate school, the symphony, marriage, kids. A lot of things in some ways, not many in others. Years and events rolled by fast, like river waves curling downstream from one shore toward the opposite one.

“Well, Old Man, I thought we’d come to such a place as this someday, but not so soon. I sure wasn’t ready for it. Were you? Somehow, I thought it would all be different. You used to call our house and say to Claudia, ‘Hi, baby. This is your reverend father-in-law. Is the doctor home? I thought he might want to go to Los Banos duck hunting.’ Or, ‘Think you guys can steal a few days to run up to Lake Almanor trout fishing?’ Back then, this moment seemed like only the threat of a storm. She’d laugh at your calling me ‘doctor,’ and wonder if you were teasing me about how old-time, honky-tonk, folks used to call musicians, especially whore-house piano players, ‘professor.’ But you liked the symphony’s recordings of music I wrote.”

I’m filling up and breaking down, so I back away and sit down in the first-row pew to get a hold of myself for a few minutes. Sitting there with the bright sun streaming in the windows is a little like it was sitting on a shady stand in those ancient hills where we went year after year.

Over the years, Modoc became symbolic to him, and to me. It became part of the neighborhood of my life. Lookout, the Baker Place, White Horse, the Egg Lakes—all of that country became as familiar to me as downtown Monterey. We took many a nice buck out of that country. Being in that vast, wild and powerful place—the first time and the last as well—watching mere men hurl themselves against those mountains and those volcanic remains, and dreaming of what happened to the people and things that preceded me there
seemed to bind me to the earth. And living through those hunting 
rituals and patterns reinforced my sense of order in the world, gave 
solidity to the core of my being, like tracings along my nerve paths. 
It must have been the same for my dad, for it was out in the hills 
and fields that he was most himself.

There he was most at ease, most clear about the nature of the 
world and the proper place of humans in it. I don’t think he ever 
knew it, or would have admitted it, but he really was a kind of 
Pentecostal deist, strange as that may sound. Nature was God to 
him. The farthest he would have gone would have been to say that 
out in the wil ds he was most in touch with God’s handiworks.

I’ve hunted deer in Modoc County many, many times. At dif-
f erent times, various ones of the old party have gone or not gone. 
Willis moved away to somewhere down in the Mojave Desert, Unca 
Billy died of cancer, and Deke’s high blood pressure forced him to 
give up such strenuous activity. I never saw Jack Heater again—he 
transferred to somewhere else, retired, or died, I suppose. But the 
Old Man, Bub, Smitty and I continued to hunt in pretty much the 
same places and ways.

I’ve kept returning to the sensations, attitudes and insights I 
encountered on that first trip. I’ve continued to observe my father’s 
life, and my own, and how men relate to each other and the world, 
partly through the lens of that early experience. And when I look 
at my daughter, and my two sons, I understand that my dad faced 
the central question all parents come up against: how to teach 
their children what they know and what the children might need 
to know without violating the children or themselves; how, as the 
Old Man often put it, to enable ones’ children to grow upward 
from ones’ shoulders rather than repeatedly slogging through the 
same mud on the ground.

“Set your sights high and then go for ’em,” he’d say.

I remember when I was asked to apply for the assistant direc-
tor’s job at the Symphony. I was uncertain about leaving the faculty 
at State to take the position. Claudia wanted me to do it. Mom 
said, “Do what’s best for you and your family.” He drove up on a 
Thursday afternoon and stayed for dinner. Sitting back from the 
table drinking coffee and giving sips to Michael on his lap, he said,
“I don’t see how come you can’t make up your mind, son. You say the money’s good an conductin an composin are what you always wanted to do. What else is there? All them years a school an all the strugglin y’all did. You done stuck to it this long. What else you been workin so hard an long for? I can’t tell you what to do no mo, but I sho would do it if I was you.”

That’s largely what he was about—sticking to it. Hunting, work, religion, no matter. Stick to it. I went after the job and got it. First black symphony conductor in the Bay Area, first in the whole state of California, for that matter.

As I’ve gotten older, and according to Mom more like him—proud, I guess—I’ve sometimes caught myself asking, “Would the Old Man have done this? Am I acting like him or like me?” I’ve given different answers at different times. I’ve decided that he was right about Heater, the money and all of that, but he wasn’t right about everything. And I needed him to be right about everything back then. No, that’s not it. What I really needed was for him to show me that what he was like was possible for me.

How long have I been sitting here? I can hear car doors slamming outside. And voices. As I get up and move back over to his coffin, I notice how cold and clammy his skin feels, like the clay he would say we’re made of.

“I guess this is it, Dad. These tears, and this snot are for you. And for me, too. They are both thanks and promise. I don’t have your ramrod stance toward life, or your piercing eyes, or your moral lessons, or your Bible-bound rigidity. But I have my own stuff, along with the memories—the stories and the humor and the gentleness—and all the rest that you gave me. You always struggled toward things that were bigger than you were. Higher goals, you called them. I guess I do that too. I expect that sometimes I’ll feel you looking over my shoulder. But that’ll be okay. I’ll just go ahead and keep doing what I think best. I’ll keep on going after the big stuff.”

Well, I’d better get on up to the house now. Mom and Bub are going to need me.