

**Those Boys**by **Susan Moldaw**

Despite my skepticism, about a year ago I went to see a medium at a mindfulness spa in Arizona. The medium met me in the hotel lobby and led me to a small, windowless room with two straight-backed chairs and a desk between them. We sat and faced one another across the wood divide. She had full cheeks, a snub nose, and a blond bouffant that fell blowzily past her shoulders.

“You’re here because your father wants you to understand he’s with you all the time,” she said. Her clear voice conveyed authority. She tapped her high-heeled sandals against the concrete floor.

I reached for the box of Kleenex on the desk, my rational mind already a muddle. My father died five years ago.

“Is there a Bill in your life?” the medium continued, looking dreamily off to the side with a slight upward curve of her lips.

“That’s one of my sons.” I drew in my breath.

“He talks to your father. Out loud. So do you.” She smiled kindly. “Your father wants me to tell you that he hears you.” She cocked her head and looked away. “Bill is doing well. Your father says he’s proud of him.” She frowned. “Wait. There’s another son. You have others?”

I nodded. “Triplets,” I said. “They’re twenty-four.” Bill, Jack, and Stuart.

“He’s telling you not to worry about them. They’re going to be okay.”

I dabbed my eyes with the Kleenex. My father hadn’t liked my sons’ father—my ex. We’d suffered years of family drama, divorce, and the aftermath, and all along my father reassured himself—and me—that his grandsons would be okay.

The medium smiled. “He’s a funny man, your father,” she said. “Good looking too. Wait! He’s putting his hand over his heart.” She laughed softly and said, “He loves those boys.”

I wiped my eyes and mumbled that I knew.

I stumbled out of there towards my room, clutching Kleenex, but by the time I slid the electronic key card into its slot and had flung myself face down onto the quilted bedspread, I was furious at the medium’s presumption. I didn’t need her meddling. I’d felt my father’s presence many times since his death. Except, I wished I could tell him that, despite everything, the boys and I *were* doing fine.

Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, Hawaii, 1992

From the patio adjoining our beachfront rooms, I saw my four-year-old sons curled up on their grandfather’s—my father’s—lounge chair, stationed by itself in the middle of a vast lawn that stretched from our rooms to the beach. He was leaning back, smoking a fat cigar, and the four of them were laughing. A breeze ruffled palm trees that lined the grass along the long, curving, fine white sandy beach. The pungent, noxious odor of the cigar wafted to my room. This was our family’s third Christmas vacation with my parents at the Mauna Kea.

*What the hell is he doing smoking in front of them?* I thought.

Inside the room, I took smoked salmon and a bagel from the minibar. Breakfast was included in the hotel’s costly charge and—following my father’s example—we’d order extra from room service, stashing salmon, kippers, cottage cheese, bagels, muffins, papaya, berries, shrimp, and tomatoes in the bulging minibar.

“At least we’ll save on lunch!” my father would say.

My mother, deferring to his humor and what she deemed his superior judgment about money, life and family, went along too, as she mostly did, though since his death she runs her own show.

Back on the patio, I ate while watching the lawn scene. My father sat up and the boys jumped off the chair, sprawling at his feet. He leaned over and traced something in the air just above the lawn, using the cigar as pointer. His navy T-shirt hung loosely over red bathing trunks, his straw hat lay on a towel. He always brought the hat Hawaii-bound, stowing it in the airplane's overhead bin on top of his neatly folded navy blazer, finally plopping it on when we disembarked.

I stopped eating and walked over.

"Dad, can I talk with you for a minute?" I said.

We walked slightly away from my sons. My father smiled and familiar grooves appeared along his eyes and cheeks. His brown eyes were serious.

"Yes?" he said.

"I don't want you to smoke in front of them," I said. "It sets a bad example."

He held the cigar behind his back. "Is your mother around?" She hated his occasional cigars and for years he hid the evidence, until he finally stopped smoking.

"She's at the hair salon," I said.

He took another puff. "They know I'm not really a smoker," he said, just loud enough so the boys might hear. "Besides—I'm telling them about the facts of life!"

I looked at my sons. Jack and Stuart were giggling and rolling on the lawn, silly together, as they often were. Bill was sitting quietly, with his head turned, trying it seemed, to catch the conversation.

"The facts of life?" I said.

"Not that." He spoke more loudly, so there was no mistaking they could hear. "Hard work and discipline! Good values! All the things that matter." He gave me a kiss on the cheek. "They're good boys," he said. "They're going to be okay."

San Francisco, California 1997

My husband, nine-year old sons, and my parents were eating dinner at the Matterhorn, a cozy, wood-paneled restaurant that reminded my husband and me of our vacations spent hiking in Switzerland, both alone and with our sons. Cheese fondue bubbled in a brass pot on the white linen tablecloth. Everyone's plates were stacked with sourdough bread. One of our sons stood in front of my husband, his face white, his eyes wide and terrified, while my husband berated him for spilling water. The other two stared at their plates, knowing any one of them might next become the object of their father's anger. My father watched briefly with a set expression, then looked away—unable to stomach the humiliation of anyone, least of all his grandsons.

A few days later, my father told me, "I can't keep watching him tear those boys to shreds. Have dinners without us. We'll visit when he's not around."

We sat in our family room on a deep, red corduroy couch. My husband was out of town and my parents had dropped by. My mother was upstairs with my sons. I was struggling—privately—with my own decisions—leave the marriage, stay? What would do the boys the least harm? No options were good. My eyes fell to the white wool carpet. "I need you, Dad," I said. "Please come with us, sometimes."

Wind rattled the old paned windows behind our heads. Bare tree branches tapped their code on the wavy, rippled glass. My father leaned into the softly textured pillows. Then he patted my hand.

"I'll be there," he said. His voice was kind, his eyes, sad.

Five years later, I finally got out, in a contentious divorce that went to court, where a judge ordered my sons to attend Connecticut boarding schools for their first year of high school. They'd only applied to boarding schools to satisfy their father. My attorney asked for a stay, and a week later I brought the boys to testify. One by one they took the stand. They wore button down white shirts, khaki pants, and white athletic socks bulging out of their brown loafers. They looked impossibly young.

Jack and Stuart said, no, they wanted to stay in San Francisco and didn't want to go to boarding school. Bill said his father told him he'd bring him home on weekends, and if so, boarding school would be okay. Bill trusted his father's promise; Stuart and Jack doubted.

I rolled my eyes. Home to San Francisco from Connecticut on weekends. The judge and I locked glances. I felt certain she read my hollow-eyed plea for her not to send my sons away.

A week later, determined to get them out of the marital fray, she upheld her prior order and sent them to three different high schools in Connecticut.

I visited my sons midway through the first term in October for conferences and vacations. I walked into Stuart's dorm room at dusk and found him ensconced on a bottom bunk, leaning against the Indian bedspread that covered the wall behind him.

"Well?" he said, looking at me from the darkness. Stuart had had enough of boarding school; they'd all had enough. My sons were counting on me to bring them home.

"I've changed my mind. Boarding school *is* the best option." My voice cracked. "There'd be no peace in San Francisco." Their father and I agreed on nothing.

Shadows darkened, obscuring Stuart's expression. A door slammed, somebody turned up the volume on a stereo and Metallica blasted. Stuart got up and picked a gray hooded sweatshirt off the floor.

"Whatever," he shrugged, pretending he didn't care, though I knew he was angry. He pulled on the sweatshirt and we left for dinner.

Bill understood boarding school was for the best, when I told him; Jack was resigned. No one had come home on a weekend.

"You're doing the right thing," my father said later, in San Francisco. His encouragement loomed large for me. He was determined to step into the void left by my sons' father. He and my mother were already making plans to fly East to visit each school in February on Grandparents' Day.

The four years of boarding school melded into one long visit East for me and my parents, punctuated by the boys' school breaks and summers in San Francisco. My parents would meet the boys and me in Connecticut or New York; sometimes they met the boys without me, usually one son at a time because their school calendars differed. In New York, we always stayed at the Regency Hotel. I had stayed there years before with my parents during college, and later, on business. The Regency had morphed in style since those days, from Louis Quatorze to business sleek. Dinners were at Gino's, one block over from the hotel. The Maître d' greeted me and my mother and shook my father's hand, calling him by name and bringing him a Grey Goose vodka, and the boys each a Roy Rogers. Breakfasts, my father and the boys ate around the corner at the Viand Coffee Shop, my father always having scorned the Regency breakfast as overpriced, though my mother and I ate there. My sons told me how they perched at the counter with its view of Greek cooks yelling orders, frying eggs, and making to-go bags at the register. On one of their trips they coined an expression, "LBTJ" (let's blow this joint), a phrase they employ to this day in honor of their grandfather. Always, at the end of a visit, my father smiled and shook his head.

"Those boys," he'd say to me, "they're going to be okay."

We were lucky that their high school graduations fell on separate days, during two consecutive weekends at the end of May. In April, my father and I took all three boys shopping for graduation suits at Paul Stuart in Manhattan, where years before my dad had shopped with my now ex-husband. The manager fitted their jackets and pinned their trousers. Afterward, we went to the shoe department, where my father insisted on buying the boys expensive dress shoes.

"They'll last a lifetime," he said, well pleased, as if a good pair of shoes could protect his grandsons from the vagaries of life.

The summer after the boys' graduations, my father called to tell me in a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice that he had cancer. "It's a question of attitude," he asserted. "I'm going to beat it."

I wasn't worried. He was invincible. A few days later, my mother phoned, using the voice she reserved for emphatically stating her husband's needs. "Your father must hear from his daughters every day," she said. My sister, in Santa Fe, said she had called to tell her the same thing. I felt slightly more concerned about his health then, but thought this was just my mother's usual overzealous protection.

Nonetheless, I began daily calls and weekly visits to their home in Atherton. One Sunday my father and I drove to a small strip center a few miles from his home for non-fat frozen yogurt. He wore his favorite navy-blue sweats and a baseball cap. Now that he was retired from a lifetime in the retail business, he had time to kibbitz, and he quizzed the manager about sales figures.

"Terrific!" he said, learning that business was outshining last year's. We ate the yogurt in the car and rushed home to watch the start of his beloved *Washington Week in Review*. In his library office, he settled into the leather recliner, and after a few minutes, I looked over. He was snoring under his mohair blanket.

That winter, he announced he was cancer-free, and I was elated. My parents spent a joyous two weeks with my sister and her family in Hawaii. But soon after they got home, the cancer popped up in a new spot.

I asked the cancer surgeon why. We stood in a long hallway at Stanford Hospital. My father was getting radiation treatment.

"It's an invasive cancer," he said. "You knock off a few tumors and new ones take their place."

It flashed through my mind that maybe he wasn't going to beat this disease, but what I mostly thought was how discouraged my usually optimistic father would be—good news followed by bad, on and on. I must have looked dejected because the surgeon touched my arm and said, "It's tough." He had invented a cyberknife and had used it to remove tumors from my father just

months before. “I’m going to invest!” my father had said, after the operation. He loved all things entrepreneurial.

In May, after their first year of college—Bill in LA, Stuart in Massachusetts, and Jack in Florida—my sons flew home. My father was spending most of his time in bed by then, worn out from his radiation treatments. I picked the boys up from the airport and drove to my parents’ home. I was worried about how my sons would react to seeing their gaunt and ailing grandfather, but they went straight to his bed and got under the covers with him. Later, after they left, I walked into my father’s room. He patted the bed. I sat down and leaned close. His expression was earnest, the way it always was when he spoke from the heart.

“Those boys,” he said. “They’re going to be okay.”

After a week of sleeping at my parents’, one night I went home to take a breather. The next morning, I returned to take my father for his radiation treatment, but when I got there I saw that he was sleeping heavily and knew I’d never get him up for the appointment. I went to find my mother. We stood uncertainly by the side of the bed. My father’s chest rose and fell. I grabbed the phone and called his doctor, and then a hospital transport service. I phoned my sister. “Come now,” I said.

A few hours later, three men with a gurney came into my parents’ bedroom. They went to the bed and lifted him. My father cried from the pain in his back. They put him in the ambulance and my mother went with him. I followed behind. Midway to the hospital, sirens started. Someone stuck a hand out the ambulance window and waved at me to follow. We sped to the hospital and they whisked my father into the emergency room. By now, my sister had arrived.

In the emergency room, my father perked up when the doctor asked him who the president was.

“George Bush, the bastard!” he said.

He spent three days in the hospital, hooked up to machines. My sister, mother, and I took turns staying overnight. My sons came and went. My father

mostly slept, breathing through a plastic mask. One afternoon, I was standing in the hallway with my sons. A nurse rushed out. “He opened his eyes!” she said.

We filed into the room. One by one we went to his bedside to say good-bye.

“I love you, Dad,” I said. Tears streamed, though I knew he didn’t want to see me cry.

His eyes were warm and kind. “I love you,” he said, through the plastic mask.

The day of my father’s funeral, the sun shone and the air was cool. The boys wore their graduation suits and shoes. My mother, sister, sons and I each put a rose into my father’s grave and a shovelful of dirt. At the end of the service, as everyone was leaving, I looked at my sons. They stood in a group hug, their arms around each other, their heads and hearts close. They’d grown into loving young men—straight shooters, too— like their grandfather.

A few years before he died, my father walked into my home office in San Francisco. The bookshelves were filled with photos of my sons.

“There’s no photo of us!” he said, referring to himself and my mother.

He was wrong. There was one photo hidden behind my sons’ photos. How little I understood, then, that someday I’d long to see my father’s smile, his eyes, his face. There are many more photos of him now. There’s a picture I particularly like from Stuart’s high school graduation. He and my mother flank Stuart, who has a big unlit cigar stuck in his mouth. My mother’s pearl earrings and gold and ivory carnation pin sparkle. My father and Stuart are both wearing silk twill ties, my father’s an all-over pattern of yellow and white ovals on a red background, Stuart’s a red and white stripe. They’d bought them together at Paul Stuart. My father looks pale behind his oversize sunglasses. It was a broiling Connecticut day. He’d had cancer then, but we didn’t know it.

I woke in the middle of the night in tears two months after my father died. I had the start of a eulogy for his memorial service. On the small notepad by the side of my bed, I wrote, 'When my heart broke, his heart broke.'

I sometimes stay at the Regency on visits to New York. One time, I took Jack, who transferred to a college there, to see the musical, *The Book of Mormon*. Afterward at the hotel, Jack did homework sprawled on the enormous bed. He talked about his friends and life in the city. Listening to him, I realized he was only a few years older than I'd been on my first stay at the Regency with my parents. If my father were with Jack and me, he would shake his head and complain about my breakfast bill, then scrounge around the mini-bar for shelled peanuts. He would quiz Jack about his homework, and want to know what exactly did he plan to do when he finally got that college degree, knowing that—whatever Jack decided—he, and his brothers, were going to be okay.

I'd like to tell him he was right—not that I ever doubted. Each of my sons inherited their grandfather's entrepreneurial spirit and desire to live a purposeful life. He'd be proud.

At the end of my visit with the medium she told me to watch for hawks—they were messengers from my father, a sign that he was around.

A simple Internet search reveals that hawks are believed to be messengers from the divine, with powers of awareness and enlightenment. Any medium worth her salt could have said it, to anyone.

And yet—a few years ago I noticed hawks flying at the place north of San Francisco where my husband—I'm happily remarried now—and I spend summers. I like to sit outside and watch them soar.

"How do they do that?" I asked my husband. He's a pilot; he knows these things.

"They're carried by rising air currents," he said.

I watched the hawks, thought of my father, and knew our boys would be just fine.

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