

I Dream of Dave Barden

by Brian Huba

I asked my uncle Dave if we could speak in private. He told me to come over but only if I brought him a Labatt's twelver and deck of Marb Reds. "The cover charge," he called it. After using my fake ID to buy the requisite items from the Haji Mart, I pulled into Dave's driveway, demarked by a mailbox that read *The Barden's* in grammatically incorrect stick-ons. The house was a ranch style in West Rexville, about five minutes from my parents' house, where I still lived. A lopsided shed anchored the driveway. The above-ground pool was half-covered in tarp. I parked my Probe GT between Aunt Nora's Taurus and Dave's Escort wagon with the dealer plate. Even though Dave was management at Orange Ford, he never chose a high-end demo. Other managers drove Eddie Bauers, Crown Vics, F-Series with the bells and whistles. Bells and whistles didn't matter much to Dave.

In the kitchen, Nora sat on a backless stool, smoking a joint while talking on the phone. Scattered about the countertops were tins of Chinese food. Into the cordless, she said, "Deb, hold on a sec, my handsome nephew just walked in."

To me, "Hi, hon, he's downstairs."

The stairs began behind a wall that held matching glamor shots of Nora and her twelve-year-old daughter, Courtney, both wearing feather boas and too much makeup. Five steps down was a landing where Nora kept litter boxes for her four cats. A second stairwell went to the semi-finished basement, and there was Dave, beer in one hand, half-smoked Marb in the other, standing near a sliding door that led outside, one pane of which was cracked. Classic rock blared from a woodgrain speaker.

Nora met Dave when he was twenty-four, fifteen years younger than her. Back then he was a rail-thin salesman, whose black-soled shoes were worn through from walking the Orange Ford lot. Now the rail-thin version of Dave was gone. At thirty-two, he was sixty pounds overweight, and his fleshy face was shadowed in stubble. On that

night, he wore a Dolphins sweatshirt over jeans and beat-up Reeboks. Dave never did t-shirts or shorts, on account of the sores that blanketed his body. He'd been diagnosed with psoriasis, prescribed countless creams to treat it, all of which worsened his condition.

Seeing me, then seeing the beer, Dave said, "Enter."

For the next half-hour we talked and drank, taking turns using the bathroom, as the empties collected, and the music played.

Finally, Dave said, "Okay, what's up?"

"Umm...well..." I took a deep breath; told Dave I'd been gambling on NBA basketball. "Just a few bucks at first--"

"How deep?"

"Sixteen hundred. But I got four hundred in savings."

"You need twelve?"

"Yes."

"When ya need it?"

"Today. Tomorrow at the latest."

"Of course." Dave finished his beer, then went to the basement laundry, where he kept his suits. To be perfectly accurate, Dave's suits were in a wrinkled heap on the floor in front of the dryer, while the rack held empty hangers. I heard him rummage around. When he came back, he handed me a wad of rolled bills.

"I'll pay back every penny."

"You better. I know where you live. *And* where you work."

"Thank you, Dave," and I hugged him. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat. He didn't move a muscle. It was like hugging a sack of flour. Because it was nighttime, the sliding door doubled as a mirror. And because of the cracked pane, our reflected embrace had a jagged, funhouse effect. My mouth at Dave's shoulder, I said, "I love you," and it came out muffled against his sweatshirt.

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Dave let me work for him at Orange Ford only if I stuck with college. In high school I'd been an average student. My only extra activity was to pen a few cheesy articles for our school paper, my star piece being a fake interview with O.J. Simpson entitled "Do you

still work for Hertz Rental Cars...*Not Exactly.*” During senior year, I grudgingly applied to a few colleges, places with huge acceptance rates. I got denied by every one of them, including SUNY Cortland. After graduation I did what every non-academic in New York’s Capital Region does: I went to Hudson Valley Community College in Troy. I hated HVCC. It was too big. There were too many students. It was college with none of the fun. I convinced myself I wasn’t wired for higher learning. Dave disagreed. He said I was too smart to walk away. He said I’d regret not getting a degree. Then he said if I quit, he’d fire me. “You’ll be a dropout with no job. Good luck getting laid after that.”

The spring '99 semester I took three courses. Independent Cinema met on Tuesday nights, Intro to Ethical Theory on Thursday nights, and my third class: English 200, which met three times a week at noon. On those days, Dave allowed me an extended lunch. I’d leave Orange Ford at eleven-thirty, speed out of Albany to HVCC, look for a parking spot (most times striking out and having to park at Wendy’s), then dash across campus to the humanities hall. After class, I’d race back to work, zipping in and out of highway lanes at 75mph while shoving fast food down my throat.

Off the highway, through a series of traffic lights, to Albany’s Auto Mile, where a network of new-car dealers framed the busiest strip of Central Avenue. Dodge, Pontiac, Chevy, Chrysler, Honda, Hyundai signs as far as the eye could see. I craved the action. The predatory excitement. I never wanted to be anywhere else. Perhaps it’s weird to wax romantic about the car business, but I loved it.

When I pushed through the showroom’s double doors, a swirl of A/C met me. The brightly lit space smelled like coffee and lemon-lime freshener, and the retail reps’ desks were arranged in a Cube Farm. From leather swivels on a dais, Orange’s five floor managers looked down like titans staring from Olympus. On the wall behind them, a dry-erase board listed every salesperson, followed by a row of squares representing total vehicles sold that month. The longest line was next to *Barden, D.*

A narrow stairwell led to the attic office, and a sign beside that stairwell read *Commercial Accounts* with an arrow pointing up. Four years before, Dave had left the showroom to start the department from scratch. He cold-called companies and introduced himself as the newest face in fleet sales. The first year was lean. Year two wasn’t much better. Year three he submitted a longshot bid for the state contract and

won. Suddenly, Dave was charged with supplying every unit required for New York's myriad of services. The scope of such a thing was unthinkable. Dave recruited a salesman named Greg Betts to play wingman. Greg worked hard and possessed a micro-knowledge of the Ford line. Then Dave employed a team of retired truck drivers, dispatched them to deliver units all over the state, so many deliveries he brought in an assistant to coordinate the action. By 1998, Dave had the busiest fleet team in the city. If you saw a pickup, Econoline, or sedan with business markings and an Orange Ford plate bracket back then, it was sold by Dave Barden Jr.

Once upstairs, I flung my school bag aside. Greg was on the phone, the receiver tucked between his jaw and shoulder as he worked some credit rep for a lower rate. My desk stood next to Greg's, an L-shaped veneer job with deep file drawers. I refused to admit "administrative assistant" and "secretary" were synonymous. I hated the idea of being anybody's secretary. I preferred to see myself as a salesman-in-training. But when I came to work on Secretary's Day, the week before, an overflowing bouquet of daisies waited on my desk, the card signed *Dave & Greg*. They were total ballbusters like that. One time Dave made me do pushups for money, a dollar per, while he and Greg watched. I cranked out forty-five, rolled over red-faced and winded, but forty-five bucks richer, at which time Dave declared mine weren't "regulation military pushups," so no dough. (Later on, in private, he gave me the money.) They'd rip on the way I dressed, my dyed-blonde a la Eminem hair, the music I listened to. When I confessed my dream was to one day write a novel, Greg made a jerking-off gesture, and Dave said, "Dream in one hand, shit in the other." But the worst abuse, by far, was when Dave sent me to the archives room above the body shop to find a file from some long-ago deal. The low-ceilinged space was crammed with rickety file cabinets caked in dust. It always took me hours to locate anything up there.

If I came back with the file and complained, Dave would say, "Welcome to life without a college degree, kid."

It was obvious Dave had no plans to coddle me because I was his nephew. One time, when I accidentally dropped a customer's call while transferring it from my phone to Dave's, he called me "shit for brains." Another time he said I was so dumb I should be watered twice a day. He never praised me. Never said I did a good job. Dave believed

compliments were for wimps. “Obedience,” he once said, striking a palm down on his desk, “is a prerequisite to independence.” I told him I didn’t know what that meant. He “splained” it in simpler terms, “Me the boss, you the bitch.”

I once pumped unleaded gas into the diesel engine of a just-sold F-350
I got a dealership demo towed from the fire zone outside Bruegger’s Bagels
I accidentally sent two drivers to Johnson Ford in Kingston, when they were supposed to go to Johnson Ford in Springfield, Massachusetts.

By then Dave had a decade of sweat equity into Orange Ford. Now here comes his moronic nephew screwing up. So why didn’t he fire me? I think he got a kick out of my nonstop blunders. Dave prided himself on solving problems, and I definitely provided him with ample opportunity to put this skill to the test.

A few seconds after I sat down, Dave’s phone rang from the other side of the attic. “Dave Barden, pick up 555.” I punched a two-button code into my own phone and answered, “Commercial accounts,” and that’s when I heard Dave thunder up the stairs, shaking the sidewall as he came. He entered the office, huffing and puffing and hacking up phlegm. He wore a chalk-lined suit and plastic name badge. A pack of Marbs bulged from the breast pocket. I muted the line, told him, “Kurt at Enterprise.” With a grimace, Dave said, “What’s *he* want?” but the grimace was for show. Dave loved this. Dave lived for this. There was a legend about Dave that said during his first year in the attic, instead of hanging up on a client and losing a potential sale because he needed to use the bathroom, he shit his pants where he sat. When I asked if he’d really done that, he said, “Made the deal, didn’t I?”

Dave plonked down in his chair, told me to hold the call while he ate lunch. Off the heap of file folders on his desk, he lifted an Arby’s bag that one of the drivers had delivered, unwrapped the sandwich, devoured it in five hyper-fast bites. After slurping a sip of coke, he said, “Ready,” and I transferred the call.

Whenever a salesman or manager got canned it was tradition to take the guy out and get him shitfaced. The more popular he was, the bigger his sendoff would be, and nobody was more popular than Orange’s used car manager, JT Hawkings.

I was halfway home when my Nextel buzzed. I answered and could hear music blended with bar sounds in the background. Dave loudly asked, “Where are you?” I could tell he was drunk. I told him I was on the highway. He said, “Turn around. I’m gonna need you to drive me tonight.” Dave never drove drunk, not anymore at least. In his twenties, he netted two DWIs and totaled a Ranger pickup by smashing it into a guardrail, a wreck he was enormously fortunate to have walked away from.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled into the parking area behind Beff’s, a bar one block east of the Auto Mile. Demos with Orange Ford dealer plates filled every slot. I walked around the corner, through the front door, and the place was a sea of salesmen, some standing, others riding stools. Neon Miller Lite signs blocked the windows. Beyond the bar, through a screen of cigarette smoke, I spotted Dave, his suit coat open, tie tugged loose, top two buttons of his shirt undone. As I approached, pressing myself between the crush of bodies, Dave put a Marb to his mouth, lit it under a cupped hand.

When I reached him, he said, “What took so long?”

“Came as fast as I could.”

A few hours after I showed up at Beff’s, the Goodbye Hawk party moved up Central Avenue to a topless joint called DiCarlo’s. Twenty of us sat at a table near the main stage, where a leggy redhead in clear heels wound herself gymnastically around a floor-to-ceiling pole. When the other girls—those trolling to give lap dances or peddle private sessions—came to Dave, he’d pull a dog-eared bill from his suit coat, and say, “Not interested,” and I don’t think that had anything to do with monogamy. I’d heard Nora and Dave didn’t sleep in the same bed. Was this because Dave crashed out on the couch? Or was it something else? I never saw him hold Nora’s hand. Never saw him kiss her. On Nora’s fortieth birthday, Dave gave her a t-shirt that said *I May Be 40. I May Be Fat. But Here I Is!* My aunt dismissed this as Dave’s twisted sense of humor. Then she blew out her breath, “I know he loves me.”

We drove home in silence. Dave continuously coughed up phlegm, then spit it thickly out the window. When I pulled into his driveway, the sensor light clicked on, bathing my windshield in brightness, setting the constellation of sores on Dave’s hands aglow. “Some bad shit with Hawk today,” he said, and I agreed. “What can I do? I’m stuck here. This’s my fate.” He lodged the last cigarette in his mouth, lit it. “Not you

though. This ain't no life for a kid like you. Go to college. Get a degree. Do something great."

"Yeah right," I said.

"Why not?"

"Even SUNY Cortland said no."

"Fuck SUNY Cortland. There're a thousand schools." He sucked a deep drag, blew it out the open window. "I wasted my youth. I don't want you to waste yours then blame me." He looked at me, the sensor light illuminating the right side of his face, making it look like he was wearing a Phantom of the Opera mask. "There ain't no happy endings in this business. Loyalty? Yeah right. That's how you can treat people when there ain't a college education in the place. Half the sales team didn't even finish high school." Dave often talked like this after a few beers. And I always chalked it up as a role he liked to play, the sad clown to conceal the fact he loved being Orange Ford's commercial accounts manager. I wanted to see Dave as the greatest success story I knew. But that night his message felt genuine. Then he said something I'll carry forever: "I'm telling you this because you're like the son I never had."

I nodded but said nothing. What could I say? He thanked me for the ride, then rolled himself out of my car.

Through the windshield, I watched him walk across the driveway, flick his finished Marb in the grass. When he disappeared into the dark house, I burst out in a loud, body-racking crying. And if I was still clinging to any small idea about going away to college, bunking in a co-ed dorm, pledging a frat, playing intramural Ultimate Frisbee, that idea died then and there. No way was I leaving. I was with Dave.

That September, I reluctantly signed on for three more courses at Hudson Valley CC, one of which met during the workday, prompting another sixteen-week stint of racing from Orange Ford to South Troy. But there was some good news. Somehow, I was on track to graduate in May of 2000. You must understand that back then I didn't see college as the conduit to a better life. I saw it as an obstacle to overcome, the place that was pointlessly sinking me deeper into student-loan debt with every passing semester. I

just needed to get through, and when I did, thus satisfying my quid-pro-quo with Dave, I could put college behind me. “Eight more months” became my motivating mantra.

September of ‘99 proved to be the most profitable month in the history of Orange Ford’s fleet department. Dave delivered seventy-six total units. Greg made sure the paperwork on every deal was airtight. I typed quotes, dispatched drivers. The phones never stopped. Dave was happy the whole time. Regardless of what he told me in his driveway that July night, there was no denying how much fun he was having. He made sale after sale, moving a thousand miles an hour, promising the moon and stars to every customer, before handing the file off to Greg, “Button ‘er up, Betsy.”

Dave was convinced that record-setting September was the start of something big. He talked about one day doing a hundred deals per month. To hit that kind of quota, he’d have to bring in another sales rep. I thought that rep could be me. I’d be good at fleet sales. And if I wasn’t, I’d have the best teacher in the biz to manage my learning curve. After so many years of thinking nothing worthwhile was in store for me, I saw a real future take shape. When all seventy-six sales were busting bugs, the General Manager, Burt Kendall, came upstairs to shake Dave’s hand and thank him.

The lump in Dave’s left armpit began small, roughly the size of a grape, but had steadily grown all summer. Dave repeatedly said it was nothing to worry about, surely because he didn’t want to miss work for a doctor’s appointment. According to Dave, doctors were the biggest crooks going, only interested in wasting your time and taking your money. By mid-November the lump had gone from a grape to a golf ball, so big it pained Dave to put his arm down, forcing him to hold it sideways, as if wearing an invisible cast. Finally, a week before Thanksgiving, Dave left the office an hour early to meet Nora at the medical park. The diagnosis was an abscess of some variety. An outpatient procedure was scheduled. Although there was no talk of the lump being anything serious, Dave was agitated about the time it was taking to deal with the lump, time better spent making deals.

Dave’s procedure was set for the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, yet when I arrived at work that morning, there he was, hunkered behind his desk with a cup of

coffee, same way he was every other morning. I asked why he was in the office, and he acted like mine was an idiotic question. “Where else would I be?”

A half hour later, Greg showed up, then the drivers, and the department moved through its usual routines, until nine a.m. when Nora appeared and told Dave it was time to go. Indicating a random file folder, Dave said, “Can’t you see I have important shit to do?” He folded his arms across his chest, a childlike gesture.

Nora checked her watch, sighed loudly. “David, *please*.” Dave scrunched up his face, shook his head, kept his arms crossed. Greg and I followed their back-and-forth like a fast-moving tennis match. Finally, Dave said, “Jesus!” turned to Greg, and said, “I’ll be back in an hour.” Greg told him to take his time. When Dave stormed out, I wished him luck. His eyes skipped quickly over me, then he was gone.

At one-fifteen, I returned from Hudson Valley, and Dave wasn’t there. His desk chair was pushed aside the same way he’d left it, his unfinished cup of coffee by the rolodex. I asked Greg if he’d heard anything. He said Nora called. They’d opened Dave up. It didn’t look good. “Suspicious,” he said, putting air quotes around the word. The next step was a biopsy and Dave wasn’t coming back until tomorrow.

“Is a biopsy bad?” I asked.

“Depends what it is.”

“Do they know what it is?”

“They don’t know anything, pal.”

I didn’t see Dave again until the next morning, and by then he was tired of waiting around for answers. He called his doctor’s office, somehow persuaded the receptionist to get a nurse on the line. The nurse confirmed that Dave’s test results had been received and if he could schedule a time Monday. Dave had no intention of going through the weekend without knowing. Into the speakerphone, he said, “Please, you don’t have to say anything that’ll get you in trouble. Just...do I have cancer? Yes or no?” There was a long, pregnant pause. This nurse, whomever she was, weighing professional protocol against humanity. Then she blurted, “Yes.” I felt something in the fabric of the world rip away.

Greg and I stared at each other, both our faces holding a holy-shit expression. “See, that wasn’t so hard,” Dave said to the nurse, and right then his second line rang, “Dave Barden, pick up 555.” Before I could intercept the call, Dave disconnected from the doctor’s office, punched the incoming button. It was Kurt at Enterprise Fleet. When he said, “Hey, Dave, how the hell are you?” Dave answered with one of his recycled Bardenisms, “Finer than a frog hair cut five ways,” shifting back to salesman mode with a facility that shook me.

Dave hung up with Enterprise, and the office fell silent, save the sound of snowflakes slapping the attic window wetly. Greg squirmed in his chair, the casters groaning under his girth. “Umm, Dave,” he finally said, “I’m sorry. That totally sucks,” and I nodded. Dave studied the oozing sores that caked both hands. “Psoriasis they said? Fuckin’ crooks.” Again, Greg said how much this sucked. Again, I nodded. Dave said, “Well, better tell Nora.” He turned the speakerphone on, turned it off, wrestled a pack of Marbs from his pocket. “First a smoke.” He stood, walked past Greg, then me, then down the stairs. I asked Greg if I should follow him out, and Greg said, “Maybe he needs a minute.”

On Tuesday, November 30th, 1999, three weeks past his thirty-third birthday, Dave was diagnosed with non-hodgkin lymphoma. Because the medicine would undoubtedly drain his energy, the oncologists at Albany Medical Center suggested he take a leave of absence from Orange Ford. To this, Dave said, “I’ll run that past my union rep.” Even if Kendall okayed a medical leave, Dave had no interest in taking one. He saw his sickness as a bump in the road, something he could manage around work.

Thursdays were Dave’s chemo days. He’d leave Orange Ford at nine a.m., return at noon. As predicted, the heavy medicines drew the vitality out of him, like sugar being sucked through a straw. His skin turned pale and ashen. Droopy bags settled under each eye. His voice softened, as if the act of speaking required monumental effort. No longer did he thunder up the stairs or bounce out from behind his desk. He could stomach nothing but mac and cheese off the Friendly’s kids’ menu. He was insatiably thirsty, always chugging gulps of water from one of the plastic bottles he kept at the ready. He quit coffee, stopped smoking and drinking. “I don’t wanna be addicted

to anything when this ends,” he declared. Several times a day he’d get so cold his teeth would chatter and his shoulders would shake, so he’d drape a trench coat over his suit. Then he’d take the trench off, doff his suit coat, crank the attic’s A/C to full blast. He forgot things. He asked the same questions again and again. He told jokes with no punchline. He’d dial up a customer, “Dave Barden, Orange Ford, returning your call,” only to have the guy awkwardly remind Dave they’d talked ten minutes before. I couldn’t make sense of what was happening. It was as if one morning I woke up to a whole new reality, a reality where up wasn’t up, down wasn’t down, and Dave wasn’t Dave.

January was cold and snowy. During those weeks, several classes at Hudson Valley were called off, a measure only taken when the weather is especially bad. Dave hunkered at his desk, trench coat buttoned to the throat. His phone never rang, a situation he blamed on the season, yet another example of his unwillingness to face what was happening. He’d lost ten pounds. He had no eyebrows. On a slightly positive note, the oozing sores that once blanketed his body had dried up and disappeared. Dave did his business on speakerphone, so Greg and I were always privy to his negotiations. Dave began negotiating with a woman who did purchasing for a large furniture store in Albany for an E-van. Dave’s once-sharp pitch was now sloppy. He made mistakes. He contradicted himself. They went back and forth for days. Dave couldn’t close the deal. The Barden magic was going, going, gone.

His gift at sales was disappearing as fast as his hair, which was now coming out in clumps. Watching him succumb to baldness in real time was soul-crushing. He finally phoned the Denise Madison School, one of his long-standing clients, and asked them to send a beauty student. A few hours later, a bundled-up blonde with a nose ring entered the attic, hefting a bag of supplies and a nylon cape. Dave gave her fifty bucks to shave his head. When the job was done, he studied his new look in a little mirror she’d brought, declared his shorn locks “an improvement,” but the next day he began wearing an oversized newsboy hat.

One afternoon that month, when I returned from Hudson Valley and was walking through the showroom, Burt Kendall called me onto the sales tower, “Giddy-up, boy.” I went to him, and when I did, he glanced at the managers in their leather swivels, a hint

of a smile on his face. Then he kicked two empty boxes at me, knocked over a trash can, spilling its contents across the industrial carpet. “Get this garbage outta here,” he ordered. I looked at him in disbelief, then down at the empty coffee cups, wadded tissues, uneaten hash browns. “Move your ass,” he said, so I got on my knees and hand-swept the rubbish back into the can as Kendall watched. I grabbed the boxes and brought them out to the dumpster by the body shop. When I made it back to the attic, Dave was face-planted on a pile of folders but jerked awake when I flung my bookbag against the wall. Straightening his hat, he said, “Fuck’s wrong with you?” I told him what happened, and he stayed silent, rocking back and forth in his chair. Finally, he asked “Who saw Kendall kick the garbage?” His tone was cool, calm.

“They all saw it,” I said, trying to keep my voice from quavering. “*Everyone.*” Another swath of silence. More rocking. “Type an incident report,” Dave said, “I’ll take it to the Board.” I looked at him. He looked at me, his face full of resolve. Of course, I wanted to write that report. I was angry, humiliated, supercharged by the idea of exacting revenge on Kendall. But no way could I let Dave make waves on my behalf. Not now. Not like this.

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s no big deal.”

Years later, while having dinner with my wife, a bartender began tossing liquor boxes at his barback, and the memory of that day with Kendall on the sales tower sprang back. I confronted the bartender. “Excuse me,” I said, “please stop throwing those boxes at him.” He told me it was a joke and his barback agreed. “It’s not a joke,” I said, “it’s not funny.”

At some point in February, a few hours after Dave left for his weekly chemo treatment, he called Greg to report he’d been admitted to the hospital. “...some tests didn’t look good,” he was saying when Greg put the call on speaker. “They wanna tap my spine. Waiting on insurance.” My uncle’s voice was dry as tissue paper. Before Greg could respond, Dave said, “I gotta go.”

Greg hung up, started massaging his mustache with two fingers.

I asked, “Greg, is a spine tap bad?” When he looked up at me, his face was blank. He said, “It’s time to accept the truth about Dave, pal.”

After work that day, I drove to Albany Med. When I got off at the fifth floor, the air was saturated with a mix of disinfectants and hospital food. I asked a busy nurse where Dave's room was. She pointed down the wing, "Just brought him up, honey." I walked towards his closed door, glancing inside the other rooms as I went. Most were occupied by people hooked to tubes. Many had no hair. One woman wore a toucan-colored do-rag. When I entered Dave's room, he was in bed on his stomach. I couldn't tell if he was sleeping or pumped up on meds. He wasn't connected to any machines. No monitors tracking whatever monitors tracked. A gown was tied loose at his nape. I stood there, feeling awkward and unwelcome. Should I wake him? Should I stay a respectful amount of time then leave? I didn't know. And right then, I wondered where was the Dave Barden I knew, the guy who'd shit his pants to make a sale? Lying in bed at thirty-three years old? This was all wrong. I willed him to wake up, to say, "Let's blow this joint." But he didn't do that, which made me hate him, a volcanic hate I never knew myself capable of when it came to Dave. And standing there, I thought: if you're gonna die, just die.

On the second day of March, a clipper storm cloaked the Capital Region, the latest in that never-ending winter. One of those tow trucks with flashing lights rumbled past Orange Ford as I pulled Dave's Explorer up to the showroom. A moment later, the dark-glass entry door opened, and Dave walked out, snowflakes pelting his newsboy hat and trench coat. With his body bent against the weather, he asked, "Heat on?"

"Full bore," I told him, and he said, "I'm coming back, you know," but I could barely hear his words on account of the wind that whistled across the lot. I watched him drive off, under the oval Ford sign.

A few hours later, Dave called from the hospital. Greg put it on speaker so I could listen, and that's how I heard Dave say, "...shit spread. I'm gonna be in here for a while," to which Greg said, "Umm, Dave, I'm sorry, that sucks." When their call ended, Greg sniffed wetly, began smashing his phone with the side of his fist. I just sat there watching him pound that number pad to pieces. I couldn't move. I was numb.

The new plan was to zap Dave with an experimental kind of chemo. If it worked, his cancer would be wiped out. But the potent cocktail carried serious risk. They began

blasting him on Friday, March 17th, and by the time I showed up at Albany Med that night, he was looking better than he'd looked in months. Holy shit, I thought to myself, could Operation Last Resort work? I sat in a stiff chair by his bed, then dug a hand in my pocket, retrieved a roll of small bills. "I got back two-fifty from taxes," I offered, still intent on settling the gambling debt he had covered.

Dave refused. "Pay me back some other day," he said. It was the fourth time I'd tried giving him part of the twelve hundred I owed him. It was the fourth time he'd refused.

About twenty minutes into my visit, Aunt Nora entered the room, wearing one of Dave's newsboy hats with a shamrock pinned on front. After closing the door, she lifted two cans of Labatt's Blue from her purse. Dave said, "Gimme! Gimme!" and Nora cracked the first can open, passed it to him. He took the beer with both hands, one of which was bandaged from his IV, slugged a big sip, then "aahhhhh." Nora opened the second can, poured some into a plastic cup, before giving me what remained. As the TV showed an Al Gore rally and a persistent rain soaked the window, we drank.

The next morning, I drove towards the hospital, and police crews were barricading roads for the Saint Patrick's Day Parade later that day. When I entered Dave's room, his bed was empty, and that's when I heard a toilet flush. The bathroom door opened, and a nurse stepped out. A beat later, Dave emerged, dragging an IV pole. And seeing him put a shock through me. I probably mouthed the words "My God." It looked like Dave had aged ten years in ten hours. He was concentration-camp skinny, everything flaccid, as if his body was trying to consume itself. The few wisps of hair that remained on his otherwise bare skull had gone grayish white. Even more jarring was the way his eyes looked. They were milky-pale and distant, like Dave, or the essence of Dave, was already gone.

The nurse helped him back into bed. He yanked the blankets to his throat. "I'm so fu-fu-fu-fucking cold," he said. A few minutes later, "I'm burning up," so the blankets came off. And this is how it went for the next hour. Blankets on. Blankets off. At ten a.m., Dave's breakfast tray came. He didn't want it. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen him eat anything. Days? Weeks? Maybe a month?

The sun reflected brightly through the window, dousing the room in translucent light. I still remember how that sun hit Dave's bed when he began to breathe arrhythmically, little half-breaths, as if he couldn't quite manage it. Between gasps, he said, "Brian, get a doctor." I sprinted to the nurses' station, told them what was happening. Two or three minutes later a doctor entered, trailed by a nurse. "What seems to be the problem, Mr. David?" He spoke with a heavy accent.

Dave explained he was having trouble breathing. "I can't...I can't catch my breath." The doctor directed him to move this way and that. When Dave tried shielding his eyes from the sun, one sleeve of his johnny slid down, exposing the skull-and-bones tattoo that swallowed his sadly thin shoulder. The doctor sent his nurse to fetch some sort of medical equipment. "David, you MUST listen," the doctor snapped, and the sharpness of his tone was it for me. I blew my cool. "Is there someone else who can help him?" I asked, approaching the bed, even though the doctor had told me to stand back.

The nurse returned, hauling this big peace-pipe thing. The doctor placed Dave on his back with the peace pipe in his mouth. The doctor was telling him, "Breath in. Breath out." I saw Dave go wide-eyed, blowing with every ounce of strength he could muster. A minute or two of this and his breathing began to level off. When Dave was stable again, the doctor directed me to step outside. As I passed by Dave's bed, I leaned down and fingered a ball of blanket at the foot. "I'll see you real soon, Dave."

On Tuesday, March 21st, 2000, Dave died at Albany Medical Center. He was thirty-three years old. Later that day, I went to Aunt Nora's house, and she greeted me at the back door dressed in sweatpants and one of Dave's worn-out flannels. Her living room was lit by candles, like something you'd arrange for a séance. Nora rolled a joint and we smoked. I asked her to describe the last few moments of Dave's life. "Peaceful," she told me, "Dignified." She said it was just her and him in the hospital room. "I turned out the lights, closed the door, got in bed with him." Around two a.m., Dave took his final breath. "I didn't tell anyone he was gone. I knew they'd take him away."

One of Nora's cats, the fat tabby she called Butterscotch, dashed through the kitchen, crashed into the fridge, then raced away again. Nora said, "They've been

insane ever since I came home from the hospital.” Then she said, “I married a man fifteen years younger. My second marriage. Not like the first one counts. This was supposed to be it. We’d be a family. He’d be a father for Courtney,” and she gestured to the back of the house where my thirteen-year-old cousin now slept. “Did I think we’d ever retire to the ocean? Probably not and that was okay. But I would’ve never... Married five years and the fucker croaks.” She snuffed out the joint, added it to the pile of roaches in the ashtray shaped like New York State. When she looked at me again, her expression had totally changed. “Brian, what am I gonna do now?”

Almost every night I dreamed of Dave, or some version of him. Their central theme was always the same: Dave didn’t die and now he’s back. In one such dream, Dave walked into a lecture hall at Hudson Valley, told me he was starting a business selling “golf greens.” In another dream, Dave revealed he’d been hiding out in South America, waiting for the perfect time to make his return. In one particularly vivid dream, I performed psychic surgery on Dave, pulling out long pieces of meat-like tumor as Dave lay awake on the table. No matter how deep I dug, or how much I pulled, the tumor just kept coming. I once dreamed that I sat in my car, staring out at the ocean, when Dave folded himself into the passenger seat. I told him, “You’re dead.” It was always my job to tell Dave he was dead. And each time he received this with disbelief before slipping away, at which point I’d wake up, a coppery taste coating my mouth.

I saw a grief therapist. She said, “Your brain’s trying to process Dave’s death. Having to watch a man you idolized, even mythologized, die the way he did, that’s not easy.”

I pressed her. “What if it’s more than that? What if Dave’s trying to tell me something?”

She considered my question. “If he’s trying to tell you something, he’ll eventually tell you.”

Then...he did.

In another dream, Dave and I stood in the main atrium at Albany Medical Center. He told me, “The answer’s in my camel-hair coat.”

I called Nora and asked her, “Did Dave have a camel-hair coat?”

Nora said, “Yes. Why?”

I told her about my dream, then asked her to locate the coat and search its pockets. “What am I searching for?” she asked, and I said, “I don’t know.” An hour later, she called back. “Brian, I found the coat. There’s nothing in any of the pockets.” Convinced she’d somehow missed it, whatever “it” was, I drove to her house, rifled the coat myself, and stuffed inside the chest pocket was a wad of money. When I showed it to her, she said, “I swear on Courtney’s life...” The wad was wrapped in a one-dollar bill. On the backside of that bill, around the border in blue ink, it read *Saint Lazarus, anyone who receives this bill will be blessed*. I counted the cash. “Eighty-six bucks,” I said. When I offered it to my aunt, she refused. “It’s yours. The coat too.”

I did some research on Saint Lazarus, and that’s when I understood what Dave was trying to tell me. I learned that among other New Testament references, in the Gospel of John, Lazarus of Bethany is the subject of a miracle in which Jesus restores him to life after he has died.

Fascinated by my findings, I researched the subject more, and discovered that both Michelangelo and Sebastiano del Piombo composed paintings depicting Lazarus’s resurrection. The authors Truman Capote, John Knowles, Sylvia Plath, and T.S. Eliot referenced Lazarus in their works. The last song David Bowie released before succumbing to liver cancer in 2016 was entitled “Lazarus,” which includes the line: “Look up here I’m in Heaven/I’ve got scars that can’t be seen.” Lazarus is sometimes referenced when political figures return to power in an unlikely fashion. The “Lazarus Taxon” describes organisms that reappear in the fossil record after a period of apparent extinction.

“The answer’s in my camel-hair coat,” Dave had told me, and now I held tangible, touchable evidence of that answer. Was Dave suggesting he was going to push his coffin open, dig out of the dirt at Saint Agnes Cemetery, zombie-style? Probably not. I needed more.

I returned to Nora’s house. She rolled a joint. I told her everything I found out about Lazarus. Of course, my aunt was dealing with her own difficulties around Dave’s passing, and deconstructing my dreams probably wasn’t her top priority. But I knew she’d understand. Nora always fancied herself a “spiritual being.” She frequently visited

psychics and fortune tellers. She believed crystals possessed magic powers. Daily horoscopes were a must read. And every October she and Courtney spent a weekend in Salem, Massachusetts, so it was no surprise when she said, “Brian, just because someone dies doesn’t mean they’re dead.” She exhaled a ribbon of smoke. “David will always be watching over you. When you need him most, he’ll be there. That’s what he’s trying to tell you.”

In February 2020, on a bitter-cold afternoon, we make the forty-minute drive to my Aunt Nora’s house. I pull into the driveway, demarked by that same mailbox that now reads *T e B r n*’s in papery, peeling stick-ons. I park our Subaru Forester next to Courtney’s Honda Civic, which is thickly coated in road salt. There are slush-covered garbage bags, broken chairs, other odds and ends strewn about the property. Both the shed and above-ground pool have collapsed, as if walloped by a tornado. I follow Lynda over the un-shoveled path that leads to the screened-in porch at the house’s rear, holding our three-year-old daughter, Annalee, to my chest.

We pass through the kitchen, to the living room, where Courtney sits with a few of her close friends on the afghan-covered couch. One guy has a shock of curly hair and thick-framed glasses. Another sports a sleeve of colorful tats.

A rerun of *The Office* plays on TV.

Since Aunt Nora is still asleep, we thumb through photos that Courtney plans to display at Nora’s funeral service. We have no idea when such a service will take place, but we know it will be held at McVeighs in Albany, the same viewing room that hosted Dave’s almost twenty years earlier. I see several images of myself as a baby, a few of me as a toddler and teenager. Then I’m handed a heap of Dave photos, and suddenly I feel everyone’s eyes on me as I slowly go to work. After each one, I come to the same frustrating conclusion: Dave on film is less impressive than I remember him. In my memory, Dave is larger than life. But in these photos, he looks no bigger than 5’8” or 5’9,” even shorter than his mother in a group shot taken on his wedding day.

Before I fully absorb this disconnect, Courtney announces, “Her Majesty has risen,” and we laugh. Quieter now, to me, she says, “Mom’s asking to see you.”

When I stand to go, Courtney whispers, “She’s only eighty-two pounds.”

“Understood,” I say.

I enter a small bedroom, and, despite my cousin’s warning about Nora’s weight, I’m instantly unnerved by how thin and frail she looks. Her jawbone protrudes dramatically. She appears to have no teeth. Her right hand is claw like and purpled with sores. Her body seems nonexistent under the heavy blankets. I walk my eyes around the room, see figurines on a windowsill, the Irish Blessing in a frame on a water-warped table, a collection of crystals hung off the side of a wood-framed mirror. This is the room where my aunt’s life is going to end. It seems unfair. Anticlimactic.

“My handsome nephew,” she rasps.

I sit in a sagging recliner by Nora’s hospital style bed, trying hard not to stare down at the commode between my feet. We both understand Nora is on borrowed time, as doctors predicted she’d be gone before the new year, and this will most likely be our final visit, so we spend the next hour just talking. Every imaginable topic is covered: Lynda, Annalee, Courtney, life, death, Donald Trump, Heaven, Hell, God. Nora is remarkably alert, recalling long-ago events with laser-like precision. I tell her about my students at Liberty High, an inner-city school, where I teach 12th grade English. “We’re researching current events,” I say. “Most of my kids are doing Kobe Bryant,” and Nora tries to smile. “But one girl did her report on that Chinese virus.”

“What Chinese virus?”

“I think it’s called Covid.”

Finally, we come to Dave. On this subject, Nora says the following, “Listen to me, Brian, my David loved you very much. He loved you like a son. He wanted to help you anyway he could. He wanted to protect you. And he knew how much you loved him. How much you looked up to him. And I know how much his death destroyed you. How much it still hurts you. But, Brian, I’m begging you now, *please* let David go, let all that pain go. You need to focus on your beautiful wife and that perfect little baby girl. You did it, Brian, everything David wanted you to do. You finished college, got your degree. Now you’re a teacher. You’re doing exactly what you were destined to do. And David would be so proud of you.” She leans over the sideguard and slurps a sip of Vitamin Water through a straw. “You don’t need David anymore. His work here is done. Let him rest in peace.”

“Okay, Aunt Nora.”

“I will miss you, Brian, but right now I’m tired and need to sleep.”

Before leaving, I go downstairs, past the landing where my aunt once kept all those litter boxes, to the semi-finished basement. I turn right and see layered clutter everywhere, boxes and piles of clothes that look like nothing but slopes and shapes in the darkness. There’s the little laundry room where Dave used to store his suits—suits that were surely moldering in some landfill by now. It’s packed floor-to-ceiling with crates of crap, and I think: whoever buys this house from Courtney is gonna have to bulldoze and start over, a complete rebuild. Then I stand near the sliding glass door with its cracked pane. I feel myself being teleported to the past, back to that April night in 1999, twenty-one years ago. I see Dave, donning his Miami Dolphins sweatshirt over jeans and beat-up Reeboks, half-drunk Labatts in hand. I see myself enter the room with his beer and Marb Reds, “the cover charge,” he calls it, and classic rock blares from a woodgrain speaker. I tell Dave I’ve been betting on basketball games. I watch him palm me that wad of money, then I hug him. I smell his cigarette-and-sweat smell. I want this moment to last forever. But I know it can’t. No matter how hard I hug him, how close I hold him, I know how this story ends. My mouth at Dave’s shoulder, I say, “I love you,” and it comes out muffled against his sweatshirt.

“Brian?” Lynda’s voice snaps me back to the present. I turn around and there she is, standing at the bottom of the stairs with Annalee. “What are you doing?” she asks, and I sort of shrug and shake my head.

“Ready to go?”

“I’m ready,” I say, and I am. Never again will I stand in this basement. Never again will I be in this house. That part of my life is over. As we start up the stairs, Annalee extends her arms, and says, “Daddy, I’m tired, can you carry me?”



Brian Huba's creative nonfiction has been published on *101 Words*, in *Reed Magazine*, *The Griffin*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Literary Juice*, *Men Matters Online Journal*, and *The Storyteller*. His Op-Eds and essays have appeared in the *Superstition Review*, *the Satirist*, *the Sports Column*, on Yahoo.com, in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, *the Democrat & Chronicle*, *the NY Journal News*, *the Syracuse-Post Standard*, *the*

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