Atonement

By Paul Edward Johnson

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of a strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid . . . . He must be, to use a weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world . . . If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in.

- Raymond Chandler
from "The Simple Art of Murder"

I wasn't anywhere near ready yet.

It was getting to be late afternoon and I was still waiting in line at a department store's checkout stand. Somehow, I'd get home with the new bathroom towel set, pack our trash bags into our car, drive to the dump, and get back home in time to greet Howie and Carol for dinner.

Howie and Carol had been to our apartment before. They knew Alice and I were slobs. But there wasn't any excuse for the two weeks of trash piled high in our kitchen. And every time we'd been over to their place, they always had a set of matching bath towels, matching hand towels, and matching wash cloths hanging in their bathroom. It was time we had a matching set to show off, too.

Howie and I were attending Mankato State College. We had part-time jobs, but it was our wives who were somehow putting us through college. They worked at the Mankato Public Library for peanuts.

Maybe that's why a complete set of matching bath towels, hand towels and wash cloths never went unnoticed.

The bath set I chose to buy was the most expensive in the store. Much too expensive. I knew Alice might get upset. But only until she heard Carol rave on about how much she admired them.

While the cashier made change for the customer in front of me, I stacked the towels in two piles on the counter.

I started each pile with the wash cloths, placed the hand towels on top of the wash cloths, and then covered the hand towels with the large bath towels. With a hand on each pile, I sunk my fingers into their deep blue plush.

When the cashier finished ringing up, she told me the total was less than ten dollars. I had been hoping she would make that mistake. I had kept my hands on top of both piles. She had only noticed the large bath towels covering the smaller hand towels and wash cloths. The total sale should've been more than twenty dollars.

I gave the cashier a ten and kept my mouth shut. Her assistant had bagged the two towel sets and did not notice the cashier's price mistake.

Grabbing the change and the shopping bags, I broke toward the door. I'd made out like a bandit. All I had to do was get the hell out of the store.

I felt as though I were in fourth grade again, wrestling with that same old guilty feeling I always got whenever I stole a bag of peas for my pea shooter from the old neighborhood grocery store.

I jumped into my Chevy and made my getaway.

After arriving home I lied to Alice. I told her I'd taken advantage of the store's Abraham Lincoln Birthday Sale. She was proud of me.

It was around 4:30 when I crammed the garbage bags into the trunk and back seat of the Chevy. Although my old 1950 Chevy had gone through sixteen Minnesota winters, she was still in "mint condition" and I hated putting all those garbage bags on the clean gray felt seats. A few weeks earlier Dad had been down to visit from Minneapolis and had said, "Next to marrying Alice, buying that 1950 Chevy for $200 was the best deal you ever made."

As I drove out of Mankato and north toward the dump on Highway 169, I kept feeling guilt twinges.

The sky was the same hue as the new blue towels. Why hadn't I just told the department store cashier she'd made a mistake? And why in hell had I lied to Alice about it being an Abraham Lincoln Birthday Sale?

The afternoons were getting longer. In a month or two it would be spring again. Popcorn shaped clouds filled the northern horizon. My geography teacher had recently given a lecture on clouds like these. What did he call them? Columbus clouds? Cumulous clouds?

Gazing up at them, I imagined Minneapolis had been hit by atomic bombs and was blanketed with mushroom clouds.

Then I thought about how Dad would wail my fanny whenever he found out that I had stolen a yo-yo or a bag of peas from our neighborhood grocery store. Before his belt welted my bottom he'd scream, "Why in God's name didn't you just charge it on our family charge account?"

Whenever I did something bad, I'd seldom get past Dad. He was like a smoke detector. Whenever I said something rude or whenever I acted in ways he could not approve, I'd feel him breathing down my back. Whenever he'd catch me being too sassy with Mom, he'd swing out a hand and rap me a good one against the back of my head. Sometimes he'd give me his warning, "You're cruisin' for a bruisin.' Ya want a honkus on the bonkus?"

Most of the time, though, his blows seemed to just come from out of the blue, with no warning at all. Always, afterwards, as I rubbed my head and blinked back instant tears, I knew I had it coming and that Justice had once again prevailed.

Dad expressed his disapproval or approval with his hands. If he found me washing the dishes or coming in from outside from emptying the trash baskets, or if he found me simply sitting at the dining room table in front of my high school algebra book, he'd approach from behind, bend down close, and say something, such as, "It's good to have you around," and then give the muscle between my right shoulder and neck a gentle firm squeeze.

And now, in Mankato, almost a hundred miles away from him, I could still feel how Dad would give my shoulder that appreciative squeeze whenever I got an *A* on an exam.

But that afternoon, while pausing outside the store, grinning at the towel-set sales receipt, I once again felt that familiar anticipation of his lightning-fast slap stinging the back of my head. Even then, at age twenty-four, married, and no longer living at home, I still needed his approval, and feared his wrath.

The garbage dump was located several miles north of Mankato, just off of Highway 169. My mind was still in the clouds, not on the road. I was feeling Dad's presence again. But this time he wasn't behind me, sitting in the back seat with the garbage bags, about to rap me on the back of the head for what I thought I had managed to get away with at the cashier's counter.

This time I felt his omnipotent presence ahead of me, as if he were way up there in the mushrooming clouds, compelling me toward him, toward Minneapolis.

As I continued driving on up the highway, the same highway that always took me straight to his apartment that was across from a funeral home on 50th Street, I had not noticed I had driven past the side-road to the dump.

I began recalling the last time we were talking together in his produce brokerage office, located directly under his apartment.

We were sitting at the side-by-side desks. He was on the phone arguing with a Florida grapefruit grower about a fair price for two truckloads of grapefruit, while I averted my eyes away from the black hearse parked across the street in front of the funeral home. The hearse mirrored splinters of sunlight through speeding salt-stained cars splashing cold slush onto the sidewalk as they sped down 50th Street.

Except for this view through the wall of windows, it was a pleasant office. It was on the first floor of a brick mansion. All my boyhood life I was forced to share a bedroom with my brother Larry. Then, after Larry and I moved away from home, Dad bought this mansion with more bedrooms than I can recount. Before he bought it, the place had been rumored to be a fancy whorehouse.

When I was in high school, friends and I would always slow down and pause whenever we walked by the place at night and then gaze up at the bedroom windows.

After Dad bought it he christened it The Queen Mary because the furnaces were so complex he was required to get a boiler man's license.

A carpenter helped him convert The Queen Mary's wing of bedrooms into offices. Then soon after he and Mom had divorced, he then rented out the main part of the house (a duplex) and then converted from the wing of bedrooms two rooms above his office to become his own living quarters.

But even with all the new rental units, Dad still had to spend his mornings arguing on the phone with growers and wholesale buyers about the prices of watermelons, apples, celery, oranges, lettuce, and grapefruit.

As I sat there that morning at the desk next to his, glancing at the hearse parked in front of the mortuary across the street, I half dozed and half listened to him talk on the phone while he tried to "do a deal" with a Florida grapefruit grower.

It was always the same damn routine: A little joking. Then a little complaining. Then the loud pretended anger. Then the burst of profanity.

My favorite was, "Morrie? Stop squeezing my balls!"

His phone conversations often ended with a business deal or Dad promising never to do business with the produce grower again. Sometimes he'd just slam down the receiver.

That's how this phone conversation ended. He hadn't even reached the loud, pretended anger part yet.

We were both watching an old lady try her best to walk upon the slippery sidewalk in front of Dad's office and also avoid slush from being heaved upon her by the passing cars.

She was carrying two sacks of groceries.

Dad didn't even say goodbye to the Florida grapefruit grower. He just slammed down the phone, jumped up, and sprinted toward the office door.

As Dad yanked the door open, he shouted out to me, "Bring my coat, will ya?"

Before I could take my elbows off the desk, there he was, standing before her, the old lady carrying the grocery bags, his shirt-sleeved arms extended out to her.

He hoisted her two grocery bags and turned so as to be standing between her and the street.

A salty car sped past, heaving slush over the snow bank and onto the back of his white shirt.

Wild-eyed, he rolled out a loud laugh. A deep, raucous, crazy man's laugh. The same laugh I heard whenever as a child I'd throw a cold glass of water on him while he was soaking in a hot tub.

They were both down to the corner when I caught up. From behind he looked as though he had fallen flat on his back. The cold slush soaked clear through his white shirt.

As I handed him his coat, he handed me the two grocery bags. She scolded him for not wearing a coat, and she told me to zip up my coat.

Dad offered her his arm. And then, the two of them together, in front of me, walked some long blocks before we came to her little house.

She invited us in for hot cider. And while we sat in her kitchen stirring cider with cinnamon sticks, Dad gave her his business card and then said, "I go to the same grocery store you do. From now on let's go together."

Nobody could make Dad happier than someone he could rescue.

While I continued driving north up highway 169, gazing at the expanding cumulous clouds, I thought about how Dad loved blizzards.

He had bought a red Jeep and he had contracted with nearby churches and gas stations to plow their lots before sunrise. On mornings when the snow was deep, before Alice and I had moved down to Mankato, I'd sometimes help him.

Plowing church parking lots was easy. But the gas stations were tricky. We had to grope around in elbow deep snow for the bell hoses that ran from the gas pump islands. If we didn't first find the hoses and get them out of the way, the blade of the steel plow would find them and tear them to shreds.

Around sunrise the snow plowing was done. On our way home he would take the side streets, looking for people who were trying to get their cars out of snow drifts. My job was to jump out of the Jeep and attach the thick chain from the back of the Jeep to under the stranded car's bumper.

Almost always after we pulled a stranded car free, the rescued driver would ask, "How much do I owe you guys?"

I'd throw the chain in the Jeep, jump in back, and yell, "Nothing."

We always got a kick out of that. Sometimes the question went, "What do I owe you and your brother?"

I think he enjoyed that question the most.

What I enjoyed most was seeing Dad’s eyes smiling in the rear view mirror.

Then I'd wave back to the rescued driver, with me feeling he was probably asking, "Who are those two men?"

Every morning following a blizzard, Dad became his own version of the Lone Ranger.

It wasn't until I reached the sign on Highway 169 that read how St. Peter was approaching that I realized how I had been day dreaming; realized how I had become "spaced out" in the pink mushrooming cumulous clouds, and that I was seemingly driving up to see Dad in a car stuffed with plastic garbage bags.

I thought how I'd never be able to explain this to Alice.

I saw myself calling from Dad's place around 6:00 and saying, "Hi Honey. I'm up here at Dad's. Don't ask me why. I'm not sure I know why. Yes, I know Howie and Carol are waiting. Go ahead. Have dinner without me."

Perhaps I felt compelled to let Dad know it was now all right with me if he didn't rush into marrying Pat Scott.

A few weekends earlier I had righteously admonished him that the time had finally come for him to either marry Pat or to let her know he never would.

They had been secret lovers for 15 years. Going all the way back to 1951. But since his divorce from Mom a year ago, Pat had made it clear to Alice and me how much she wanted to become Dad's wife. So a few weeks ago I had "advised" him while he sat in his rocking chair gazing into the glow of his fireplace.

He was wearing his frayed white sweat shirt and a pair of rumpled brown slacks and was rubbing his big bare feet.

A few years earlier I had found “religion” and I was now again letting him know what it means to be a righteous Christian.

When I had finished my marriage sermon, he looked up at me as I stood over him, his ears red against his black hair, and he said oh so softly, "Has it not yet occurred to you Paul that I am now a happier man? Is it possible you've now become a Puritan? I like my life and enjoy not being married. I hope Pat accepts that. A Puritan . . . a goddamned Puritan!"

We stopped talking and we gazed for a long while at the flames in the fireplace.

I moved around to his side, bent down, put my hand on his broad right shoulder, up near his neck, and gently squeezed.

"No matter what you may do Dad, I want you to know . . . I love you."

He pressed his head against my ribs, gave me a hug, and said, "Pat's coming by in about an hour. Seeing as you took a Greyhound bus up from Mankato, I’ll ride you over to your mom's house."

No. I didn't feel the need to drive up to Minneapolis to talk with him again about Pat. She was probably with him. It was Saturday and she'd be staying overnight with Dad.

Did I feel compelled to tell him about my dream last Thursday night?

After last Thursday night’s Bible discussion group at church I went home, put on my pajamas, went to bed, and took a long time lingering upon the words in the Lord's Prayer until I went to sleep.

At three in the morning I awoke from a nightmare, perspiring, and took off my sopping pajamas, threw them in a corner, and ran a bath.

While I was soaking in the tub, Alice poked her head into the bathroom and asked, “Why are you taking a bath at three in the morning?”

I told her about how I had been dreaming I had been sleeping in one of the twin beds in Dad's bedroom. And dreamed we had suddenly been awakened by two teenage burglars climbing through his bedroom window.

And then as the two burglars entered Dad's bedroom, I panicked, couldn't move, could not even speak. All I could do was hold the bed covers to my chin while Dad sprang from his bed and stood naked between the two burglars and me.

He asked them to leave.

When they would not leave, when they threatened us with their pistols, he spun out a series of leg kicks and arm chops, effortlessly tossed the two teenage burglars through the open window, and slammed it shut.

I said to Alice, "I woke from this dream, shaking and soaking wet. At first I was relieved that it was only a dream. But now I'm angry about having been so damn cowardly and unable to move or even scream."

As I continued to drive onward toward Minneapolis, I doubted that I wanted to tell Dad about this dream.

Last Thursday evening, only hours before that dream, Alice and I participated in the weekly church Bible study group. We discussed an article written by Pastor Huxhold, who was my spiritual mentor before Alice and I moved from Minneapolis to Mankato, and Pastor Huxhold had moved from Minneapolis to a big congregation in Indianapolis.

Huxhold's essay was about death, resurrection, and atonement. About how a Christian is empowered to accept death, to walk through fear of death, and to be courageous for Christ. Huxhold defined atonement as the process of becoming at one with God.

In his essay, Pastor Huxhold wrote of atonement as being in a state of “at one ment” with God.”

There was, for me, nothing really new in his essay. I'd heard Huxhold talk about the same stuff at least a hundred times. He always made it clear that God was his creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

Perhaps I wanted to tell Dad how I had to confess to the discussion members that I couldn't give them any additional insight into the meanings they gave Huxhold's essay. Actually, I had to confess to them that I had a problem with the message. It registered only in my head, intellectually, and not in my heart as a felt truth.

I told them I probably would have to experience a death in my family before I could ever truly feel the validity of Pastor Huxhold's words.

As I drove through the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant, I began to wonder if driving up to Minneapolis to talk with Dad about my dreams and religious meanderings made any sense at all. The sky was beginning to glow a dark shade of pink above the blackening hills.

When I reached the Le Sueur exit ramp, I turned off, turned the Chevy around, and sped back down Highway 169, toward Mankato and the dump.

At the dump I backed the Chevy to the edge of a cliff. The smoke billowing from below was so acrid I tried to avoid breathing each time I hurled one of the trash bags into the flames below. I became overwhelmed by the notion that this place would make a perfect hell, and tried to imagine how anyone could endure more than five minutes.

I turned away and retched. I had left the car doors open and the interior was full of smoke and soot. I felt as though I needed a bath and a change of clothes.

It was sundown when I walked through the door of our upstairs duplex. Howie and Carol and Alice were nibbling carrots.

I told them what had happened to make me late for dinner.

They believed me.

Howie and Carol had also been to the garbage dump that afternoon and they too felt it was a hell hole. Alice wasn't angry. She said she had become worried and she then reminded me our phone had been recently disconnected, and reminded me how I would not have been able to call her from Dad's apartment.

I had forgotten that. Maybe it was because the phone company had only done half the job. Although we could no longer receive calls, we could still make them.

Around 6:30 Howie said grace and I had carved the roast. It was a skill Dad had taught me the last time he came down with Pat to have dinner with us.

As slices of beef flopped into their puddle of bloody juice, I knew Dad would be proud of the way I handled the carving knife.

We feasted, drank burgundy wine, and I grew silly and didn't care anymore about how I had delayed dinner.

Carol told Alice she admired our new bath towel set. Alice beamed and said, "It's not easy keeping up with you Schmidts."

We cleared the table and set up a world conquest game: *Risk*.

While we were deploying our armies on the game board, we heard a loud knock on the door.

Our front windows were glowing a pulsating red.

I descended the staircase and opened the front door to a tall policeman who said, "Are you Paul Edward Johnson?"

As I said "Yes," my thoughts flashed to my afternoon getaway from the department store and I wondered how in hell the police got my name and address.

But he only gave me a telegram and said "I'm sorry," then strode toward the red lights flashing on his patrol car.

The telegram said, "CALL ME NOW. UNCLE DOUG."

Howie and Carol and Alice sat at the table, all looking at me apprehensively while I dialed our telephone that rested on a waist-high bookcase.

Uncle Doug answered and asked if I was sitting down. I tried to joke and said, "Sounds like bad news."

I was leaning against the wall, fingering a crumbling crack in our pale green wallpaper when Uncle Doug said, "Your father died tonight."

A vision of a suddenly illuminated light bulb flashed between my eyes. And then burned out. Black.

He asked if I remembered the neighborhood grocery store, where for fifteen years our family had kept a charge account.

I asked, "A heart attack?"

I turned and saw Carol reach across the game board to hold Alice's hands, and white dice fell from the table and skittered across the bare wood floor.

Uncle Doug said, "No. Your dad and Pat got in his V W camper and drove down 50th Street to the grocery store to pick up something for dinner. When he parked in front of the grocery store, he said to her, 'I'll be right back.' "

I imagined a big city bus hitting him full on and killing him instantly. Dad would sometimes casually say to me, "Someday I'll probably get hit by a bus . . . SPLAT! And die in a puddle of blood." And every time Dad shouted "SPLAT," he'd clap his hands together and grin.

But Uncle Doug kept talking on, about Dad entering the store and then coming out again with a bag of groceries.

Doug said, "He and Pat heard a gunshot coming from inside the store. According to Pat, your dad put the grocery

bag on the trunk of a parked car, looked into the store windows, then back at Pat sitting in the front seat of the camper. Pat said he shrugged his shoulders, looked up to the moon, sighed, turned, and walked back toward the store's entrance."

Uncle Doug didn't need to tell me more.

But he went on: "Your dad had cut in front of a man about to enter the grocery store. Told the man to stand back. And as your Dad reentered the store Pat then heard more gunshots. As I understand it, Paul, the cashier said the two boys who shot your father were robbing the store. Two boys wearing masks or scarves covering their faces. Pat thought they might have been age fifteen. Boys who probably lived in the neighborhood. Guessed they were under the influence of drugs because according to the lady behind the store's counter they were incoherent and one had shot his pistol off toward the ceiling to prove to her they were holding real guns. The cashier said she was terrified and when your dad then came back into the store, the boys, they panicked."

Uncle Doug then went on to say, "The cashier said your dad was blocking the boys' escape. She said he had started to say something to them when they shot him and then fled. He was shot four or five times, maybe once through the heart. And once in the neck. The cashier, she said that as your father then fell to the floor he shouted out, 'Oh my God!' And minutes later, he died in Pat's arms."

Uncle Doug assured me his wife, my Aunt Helen, Dad's sister, and my brothers and sisters and my mom had all been notified.

I told him I'd get up to Mom's place within about an hour, hung up the phone, put my hands on Alice's shoulders and cried, "Dad died."

Alice jolted, as though I had electrocuted her. I turned away from Carol's and Howie's wet eyes, went into the bathroom, closed the door, and buried my face in the new blue towels.

While we silently approached St. Peter on Highway 169, I sat with Alice in the back of Howie and Carol's little Volkswagen staring up at the cold stars, cursing myself for not following my feelings on that highway just hours ago.

I would have arrived maybe more than an hour before Dad and Pat had chosen to go to the grocery store.

My stories and Dad's and Pat's stories, gosh, they would have held us in his apartment long beyond seven o'clock, long beyond the time and place he was murdered.

After arriving at Mom's house, after falling into my brother Larry's arms, after holding Mom, and holding my teenage brother Rick, and holding my younger sisters Sue and Sylvia, the two of them saying they both had seen the horror on the TV news while they were attending a party, after seeing Dad was now dead was true, I trudged on up to the bedroom upstairs, to phone Pastor Huxhold.

About three years earlier, during my "Religious Period," I had told Pastor Huxhold many stories about Dad. And before Pastor Huxhold moved to Indianapolis, the two of them, Pastor and Dad, actually met for a long talk at the University Lutheran Chapel. By then the two men had become, to state it clearly, the bookends of my life.

Now, within that cold February night, there was something I had to hear Pastor Huxhold say to me. I had to hear him say that Dad was now, somehow, okay. My biggest problem with religion was always all that hocus-pocus about how God could slap a sinner into hell. It never made sense to me. After all, God Himself knows we are each and all sinners.

As though I were again a small child, I wanted Pastor Huxhold to tell me where Dad now was and where I could find him again.

When Pastor Huxhold answered his phone, I told him what had happened, and I apologized for wanting to ask him for his thoughts about where Dad might be now.

"I mean, Pastor, if you look at him from one point of view, you could say the guy was one whale of a sinner, and yet if you look at him from another view, what an angel he seemed to me to be. So now where is he?"

I didn't want a sermon. All I wanted was an address.

I wrote some of Pastor's words on a napkin next to the lamp on a night stand.

When he finished talking with me, I took the napkin downstairs and read from it to the earnest eyes and ears of my brothers and sisters and my mother.

I don't know why I no longer have the napkin. Maybe it's in a cardboard box someplace. I wouldn't be surprised if years from now I open up an old photo album and see it fall upon my lap. So here's my best guess at what I had written upon it, my best recollection at what I had moments later read to my family:

There's not a lot I can tell you, Paul. [He actually said that. Those were his first words to me.] We both know he was restless, always searching. Wrestling with the questions and concerns that Alan Paton and Thomas Wolfe and other writers confronted.

Your father once talked with me about his guilt and inner struggles and the weight of the world.

He's now at home with his Father, where I think he sensed he always yearned to return.

You have told me that he always said the Lord's Prayer with you at night when you were a child and that he taught you a song that you would sing together.

What was it called? 'Jesus Tender?'

He's now finally free of his flesh and all the corruption in this world that each day kills a piece of you and me.

As harsh as this may sound, it might help you to behold his flesh in the casket. To confront and see your loss. To face those opportunities with him that are now lost forever.

And then, let him be at one with his Father, who gave him to you, your family, and me.

Eventually, I hope you'll feel ready to give all of the gifts and talent he gave you to give, joyfully, courageously, before you too soon leave this world, a world where you once told me and our congregation is only our temporary home.

If being "good" was all that was required of us, of your father, to be saved by God, then Paul, none of us would be saved. And you know that by now. No matter how good we seem to be, we always fall short of doing God's will every hour of every day. The good news of the Gospel is that God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer, that God the Father gave us a gift.

> The gift was He reconciled us unto Himself. God in His grace through Jesus makes just and holy the sinner. He has reconciled the world to Himself. To let us be at one with Him. He adopted you and me and your father as His own.

Now I must confess I knew that. I had trusted that all along. Or at least since Dad had taught me all about it since I was a child. I just wanted to hear Pastor Huxhold tell me again. And during that cold night, so did Mom and Rick and Larry and Sue and Sylvia. We wanted to hear it over and over and over until we could finally go to sleep.

I had once asked Pastor why I never felt a need to go to church on Sundays. I'd always go to the classes he taught on Wednesday and Thursday nights, often go to the twenty-minute chapel services at nine during the week nights, but almost never go to church on Sunday.

He said, "It's probably because of your father. God is often described as 'our Father' and for many people who attend church services they need to be assured over and over that God is gracious, loving, and forgiving. A lot of people have a hard time accepting and believing that. A lot of people are not as fortunate as you."

"What do you mean? I'm still not sure what that has to do with why I don't feel compelled to go to church Sundays."

"Some people have not been as blessed as you. They have fathers who were as strict and as demanding as your father, fathers who would 'lay down the law.' But, unfortunately, their fathers, unlike your dad, they were often lacking ability to show their children that they were also capable of forgiving their kids' transgressions. From what I know about Ed Johnson, your dad's quick and eager to show you his love, his desire to be at one with you, to forgive you after you screw up."

"You're right, Pastor. He can get pretty pissed-off at me, but after he belts me one, he's quick to let bygones be bygones. But still, what's that got to do with my not needing to go to church on Sundays?"

"Well as I said, some people have a hard time believing that a father can be forgiving, accepting, and gracious. You, on the other hand, you Paul don't have any problem with that at all. You expect a father to be forgiving and generous with his love. It's what you're accustomed to. But again, people who show up every Sunday? They need to hear again

and again that God forgives and loves them. My guess is they weren't blessed with a loving forgiving father. You just take it for granted that God the Father is loving and gracious. To you that's what fathers are; what your dad has always been for you."

Alice and Pat and I spent much of the days and the nights before the funeral sitting in Dad's apartment, above his office, across the street from the funeral home, sipping scotch.

At some point during that time, Alice and I went across the street to the funeral home and chose a coffin. The coffin's wood was the same as our family's dining room table, cherry, and had the same hue and smooth feel as one of his favorite pipes, oiled dark and deep. Masculine and strong. Inside, it was white satin and lace, feminine, soft. As far as coffins go, we felt it was right for him.

Dad had told us long ago that he wanted his body cremated and his ashes tossed upon the St. Croix River at Taylors Falls. But his parents would not allow it and his children knew he would not want that to add to their grief. Only a few years earlier they lost a daughter, and only one daughter, my dear Aunt Helen, remained.

I was remembering what Dad had said a few months earlier on our way home from a young friend's funeral: "Funerals are more for the living than the dead. Bill Wolf is home free now and doesn't give a damn about where we put his body or what any of us at his funeral service said."

During years following Dad's death, I had held the hope that the day would come when we could cremate Dad's remains and scatter his ashes at Taylors Falls, where he'd take my family and my friends camping most summer weekends.

But some important moments have happened to me since then. At my 25th class reunion, I again met with one of my old camping buddies, Wayne Swanson, who said to me:

> It's been more than twenty years since I last saw you, Paul, and I hope this doesn't bother you much, but I've more memories of your father than I do of you. Your father was a unique natural man, way long before "being yourself" became fashionable.

Every time I take my family up to Taylors Falls, I feel your father's there with us, at our campfire, where I tell my kids stories about this man who was shaped like a bear, who was the damndest scout leader a kid could ever hope to have.

I tell them about how he loved the water and the land. About how he laughed at state park signs that said "No Camping Allowed Here," and then set up tents and sometimes passed around a beer.

He showed us how to properly build small camp fires and take the right kind of care for what was still left for us to enjoy up there. He showed us how to paddle a canoe, make strong knots, how to set up a lean-to, and when to fold a bad poker hand. He taught us songs I've taught my kids, even though I never could sing one note on key.

I'll never forget that day by the St. Croix River when the park ranger rode up and said we couldn't camp there. How your dad rose up on his big hind paws, and in his own magical way, made it clear that he wasn't about to spoil this beautiful day for all of us kids who were so happy at play.

He made that park ranger feel like a stump your dad had just peed on. Then he slipped the park ranger a twenty and away he rode, never to bother us again.

I don't know if you know it or not, but your father lives in those woods. He's in the rocks, the air, and the river up there.

During the spring of 1967, more than a year after Dad's death, Pat Scott drove up to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to visit Alice and me. I had enlisted in the Air Force and was serving at a Strategic Air Command base up near Marquette, Michigan.

One afternoon while she was visiting us we went for a walk along the Lake Superior shoreline at Presque Isle. We wandered over massive slabs of glacial rock that slope to meet the vast lake, whose other side lies way beyond the long horizon line, beyond eyesight.

As Alice and Pat dawdled far behind me, I found a place down along the shore. I wanted to rest lazily in the warmth from the sun, and tease the lapping water with the soles of my tennis shoes.

I sat upon a sloping rock, curled my arms around my knees, clasped the back of my right hand in the palm of my left, and watched the long waves softly fold toward me, as though I were their destiny.

Clouds furled white and pink, while the sea's rhythmic waves, variegated grays and greens, transformed me into indolent hypnoses.

Within the sun's warmth and the sound and the sight of the sea, I welcomed again the heft of Dad's hand upon my right shoulder, near my neck. And then his gentle squeeze. Again, then again. I didn't move; didn't want to. Between the low cello sound of the water's ebb, the water's flow, and the piccolo sound of the seagulls, I heard him say, softly in my right ear: "Let it be. Everything's okay. Let it be."

I rubbed my palms and itched my ears. And when I cooled and turned around, I saw Alice and Pat standing about a hundred feet away, staring at me.

They turned away, and walked slowly up the long smooth slabs of glacial rock.

It was sundown when I finally returned to Pat's little Volkswagen. She and Alice were waiting.

I sat alone in the back seat.

All the way home not a word was spoken.

Dad once told me what he loved most about Pat and Alice: "You can sit with them in silence and all the while never feel uncomfortable."

I was comfortable . . . gazing up at the first stars, breathing the green pine air blowing through Pat's hair as she drove her Volkswagen with her window down.

When Pat took the turn into our driveway and stopped, neither she nor Alice moved to get out.

Alice said, "Should we ask him?"

Pat said, "Sure, why not?"

Alice turned and said, "We want to talk about what we sensed back there on the rocks along the lake. You might get upset, but I swear I saw your father sitting beside you, his hand on your shoulder. He was saying something to you. I wanted to join you. I thought both of you were going to stand up and walk out into the water. But we just stood there and gazed, afraid we'd break the spell."

Pat stared at the steering wheel and said, "I don't care what you think. It's true. I didn't actually see him, but

sensed him sitting beside you. What bothers me now is what did he say to you?"

I blurted out, "Let it be."

Pat misunderstood me and she asked again.

I leaned between them and I whispered, "He just said let it be. Everything's okay. Let it be. He said it reassuringly."

Pat lighted a cigarette. So did I.

Light from the street lamp filled Alice's wet eyes and glittered down her cheeks. She smiled brightly and she said again, "We didn't dare approach, break the spell."

I had never felt comfortable hearing stories like this, especially when they were told by Mom, who seemed to so often get visits from God at the foot of her bed.

She'd tell me about those visits from God on mornings when I was slurping up a bowl of Wheaties and in a hurry to get to school on time. When she'd finally finish, she always had to write a note explaining why I was late, notes I imagined my teachers enjoyed sharing during their lounge breaks. But rather than leave any impression that Mom's many revelations are now dismissed as subjects for good-natured humor, here's a story she wrote years ago:

> Early one morning in 1956, I dreamed I was standing in a pool of light. It encircled me with warmth and comfort.
>
> Looking upward, I saw at the far end of the light beam a figure clothed in a white robe, arms extended and face hidden by darkness.
>
> On one side of me stood some people within a gray mist.
> On the other side of me stood another group in bright colors.
>
> A beautiful voice proclaimed, "There is no death!"
>
> A woman left the people standing in the mist and she walked into the middle of the light. She knelt and wept. She was holding a baby and I wondered if the baby was going to die.
>
> I tried to force myself forward to tell her there was no death. But I could not move.

The scene disappeared and I was standing beside my bed looking down at my sleeping form, feeling my sleeping form must be my shell and this must be the real me standing here.

I soon found my total self beneath the bed covers, awaking.

I looked at your sleeping father and wondered how I could tell him about this dream without him scoffing.

I was elated and frightened. Could this be a premonition or a shield to protect me from something that could happen to one of my family? Was this to make death easier to bear?

As a girl, an only child, I worried about my parents dying.
Approaching forty, I was still fearful of the death of any of my relations or children.

I eventually told your father about my dream. Surprisingly he understood. He knew people whose heart had stopped during an operation, and he said they had similar visions.

Later, when I told our minister at Lake Harriet Methodist Church, Dennis Nyberg, I thought he must think I'm crazy, as though I were telling him I saw a flying saucer.

"Mary Jane, your story surprised me, but this will astonish you. Just minutes before you sat down in my office, a woman left my study having told me the same story."

I confided this to Mrs. Krier, a friend of my mother's who was like a second mother to me. Her response was also startling.

"Recently," she said, "a friend of mine had the same experience in downtown Minneapolis while waiting for a bus. The incredible light and all the rest you told me."

> Ten years after I had this dream your father died, and for the next four years other losses occurred.
>
> This dream helped me transcend despair, seek new horizons, and live with a joyful expectation of life to come. After all, where is that fine line between a dream, a vision, and reality . . . and what is reality?

Dad had his stories about friendly visits from two of his deceased relatives: dream conversations with his oldest sister, Vivian, and some special encounters with his Aunt Amelia. He believed his sister Vivian and his Aunt Amelia were his guardian angels.

So I listened to his stories about their ghostly visits respectfully. They seemed like secrets.

They occurred far less frequently than Mom's.

Ever since that afternoon with Alice and Pat on Lake Superior's shoreline, I'm no longer a doubter about communications from sacred souls separated physically and geographically, and I now welcome with my opened arms mysterious encounters with folks we may think are dead.

As a child and as an adolescent I felt left out, because unlike my mother or my father, I wasn't receiving spiritual revelations or epiphanies.

But now? Now I've had more time to reflect. More time to take spiritual matters into my heart.

I'm guessing way back then, while being my youthful father's young son, I wasn't anywhere near ready yet.