

Two Dead Dads
by Kurtis Davidson

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My dad died first, so I get to write first.

In the grand scheme, his death was sudden. Aged 62, he had just about recovered from triple-bypass surgery when—surprise!—he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. He had two rounds of chemo, but he was too far gone for it to do any good.

My father never met Kurt's father.

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Aged 69, my dad died three months after David's father, but he worked harder at it with 57 years of smoking leading to asthma, emphysema, and congestive heart failure. I have more difficult things to say about my father than David has to say about his, and this is the natural place to begin: Smoking is a succinct, yet elaborate, way of saying "fuck you" to your wife, children, and grandchildren.

David never met my father, but I met his. David's father was a famous philosopher, so much so that he rated an obit in The New York Times. My father would have been impressed by that—he was impressed by academics, which is why my being a professor made him proud—but he wouldn't have had much more to say about David's father than "Wow, that's something. The New York Times!"

I corresponded with David's father by email for a year or so before we met. In fact, the first novel that David and I wrote together, What the Shadow Told Me, started out as a joke that I emailed to David's father.

I never sent an email to my father.

† †

When I first heard of email, my immediate reaction was to call my father. It was the fall of 1989, and I was a new graduate student at the University of Illinois. On the door to the computer lab in the basement of the English Building, a sign announced that this was the place to get an email account. I phoned my father and asked him: What's email? Is an email account worth having? He wasn't sure of the answer to my first question, so he assumed that the answer to my second question must be no.

It would not be long, though, before my father would be sending bushels of email. I do not know if this is the last email that I received from him, but it is the last one that I have:

From: James Rachels <jimrachels@charter.net>
Date: Thu May 15, 2003 10:13:39 PM US/Eastern
To: David Rachels <drachels@rockbridge.net>
Subject: Contagious

Our next-door neighbor, Bob Rojas, is having bypass surgery on Monday.

My father died on September 5. That's a long gap from May 15, but for many weeks prior to September 5, he was in no shape to be sending email.

† †

My father, to my knowledge, never used email. Maybe they had email at the security firm where he last worked, but I never heard of him using it. I don't know what he would have written other than acknowledgments like "Okay" or "Yes" or "Sure, I'll work a double shift."

My father was one of the all-time great schmoozers, but he was a listener and not a yakker. He had a friend wherever he went because he would listen to people's stories and absorb them. The three of us, my mother, my father, and I, would be somewhere—an airport, a restaurant—and my father would disappear and remain gone for a while, returning to report that he had made a new friend. He would then relate in detail this friend's life story. You can learn that much about someone in ten minutes only if you let them do all the talking.

So when I think of my father and email, I think of passivity. If he had had access to it, he would never have used it, just as he never initiated a phone call to me that I can remember. When forced to answer the phone, he always did so reluctantly and then terminated the conversation as quickly as possible with the words "I'll get your mother," or, "Your mother's not here."

† †

My father was always eager to talk on the phone, though I think this may have changed, ever so slightly, early in the

summer before he died. He had symptoms of his cancer—all dutifully reported to his doctors—for weeks before the pain finally put him in the hospital. (Doctors were unable to diagnosis his problem until, with nothing else left to try, they cut him open and looked inside.) Whenever I called him during this period, my mother would answer the phone, and she would find him sitting on the back porch at work on his last book.

We knew that something was wrong with him, something that was forcing him to live with a urinary catheter, but none of us imagined that he was dying. Unless *he* imagined it. As I said, there was something different about our phone calls, something different in his voice. Of course, this may have been a reflection of the fact that he had a plastic tube up his urethra and a bag of urine velcroed to his leg. But I wonder, looking back, if there might have been a bit of conscious urgency in his voice and in the way that he conducted himself on the phone because he suspected something that none of the rest of us did. I think that he wanted to talk to me, but I also think that he wanted to get that book finished without delay, just in case his time was about to run out, which, in fact, it was.

† †

My father had a urinary catheter, too, but he had a second, more important plastic tube tethering him to an oxygen generator. For the last two years of his life, this generator rumbled away in his bedroom while he shuffled around the house, trailing coils of plastic tubing, huffing, puffing, fighting for air.

When his health problems erupted in grand fashion in the summer of 2001, landing him in the ICU for three weeks, I flew

home to California. He was out of the hospital by the time I arrived, living like a dying fish at the end of a hollow fishing line. While I was there, we had to drive 60 miles to Fresno to a National Guard office for my mother to renew her military dependent's ID card. My father served 20 years in the Air Force, guaranteeing both of them lifetime health and other benefits, but in order for my mother to get her ID card renewed, he had to go with her. I, of course, had to drive.

It was so difficult for my father to walk the 100 feet from the parking lot to the National Guard office that when we left I borrowed an office chair and used it as a makeshift wheelchair, steering him down the sidewalk, negotiating cracks and bumps. Because of their small wheels, office chairs make horrible wheelchairs. Every little obstacle jolts them toward disaster: overturned chair, sprawled father. I know my father felt humiliated by his ride on the office chair, and I felt like crying, but more than that, I felt like disemboweling the CEOs of R. J. Reynolds and Philip Morris and strangling them with their own entrails.

† †

Kurt has already named three villains in the death of his father: cigarettes, the makers of cigarettes, and his father for smoking the damned things. In the case of my father's death, the only verifiable villains were bladder cancer and death itself. All evidence seems to indicate that my father's death was a genetic fluke, though my pet theory is that he was killed by Diet Coke. My father drank a six-pack of Diet Coke every day and never drank water. If that won't make your bladder turn on you, what will? [Note: Several months after writing this paragraph, I found a postcard that my father sent me more

than 12 years before he died. In it, he wrote, "Diet Coke. I now drink 4 or 5 a day. If NutraSweet causes cancer, I'm a goner." Now, if that isn't a smoking gun, then I don't know what is!]

Of course, my father was joking about NutraSweet giving him cancer (though he may have been right!) Just as the cliché says, my family never thought that anything like this would happen to us. My father, in his 62 years, never had anyone close to him die. Never. Even his parents are still alive. He never had a chance to say "Why me?" until it really was him. But when his chance came to say it, he didn't.

† †

I do know for certain one thing my father once said, and that thing was "fuck." I was 11 years old the first and only time I ever heard him say it.

My father and I were in our Volkswagen Beetle on Buhach Drive in the town of Atwater, California, where I spent eight years of my life, from fourth grade through high school, and where my father retired from the Air Force. We were driving somewhere, I have no idea where, when the topic of Bobby and the Van came up.

Bobby Gomes was a distant relative of my mother's from Cape Cod who was also in the Air Force and who was stationed at Castle Air Base, which was right next to Atwater. Bobby had four children by then and was thinking of buying a van, which back in 1971 wasn't the same thing as buying a minivan today. What my father said, as he slowed to make a turn, was this: "What the fuck does Bobby need a van for?"

He immediately apologized, but, of course, it was too late. I had heard him say "fuck." I know my father must have said

the word many more times than that because (1) he was a guy; (2) he was a Hawaiian surf bum as a kid; (3) he was in the Air Force for 20 years with tours of duty in both Korea and Vietnam; and (4) he lived with my mother for 40 years. But that time in 1971 was the only time he let the word slip in front of his only child.

† †

I don't remember the first time I heard my father use the f-word, but I do remember the last.

In his final days, my father was still trying to finish his last book. The going was slow because he was confined to his hospital bed and could work for only small stretches of time. Some days he could not work at all. But he had all the help he wanted from his two sons, both of us professors. We fetched books for him, took dictation, read back to him what he had written. On one occasion, he asked to see a copy of "Behaviorism at Fifty," an essay by B. F. Skinner. My wife, a librarian, found it in an online database. The print-out was barely readable, three columns per page in a tiny typeface. I took the print-out to my father. He thumbed through the pages, studying each one briefly.

"This isn't it," he said. "This is the wrong essay."

But he remembered that he had a copy of the right essay in a book at home, so I drove across Birmingham to retrieve it. After five minutes of searching his study, I found the book and the essay. Unfortunately, the essay was the same one. It was much more readable in a paperback book, but the words were the same. I decided to take the book to my father without comment. Unsure how clearly he was thinking, I thought that if he saw the essay in a familiar form, he might recognize it.

So, an hour later, I was again at my father's bedside in the oncology ward handing him a copy of B. F. Skinner's "Behaviorism at Fifty." He took it and read the first few sentences.

"This is the same fucking thing," he said.

† †

My father held three jobs after he retired from the Air Force: mail handler with the U. S. Postal Service, probation officer with the Merced County Juvenile Hall, and security guard with a firm that had contracts with several businesses on the sprawling landscape of the now-closed Castle Air Base. His tenure with the Post Office didn't last long. He developed rheumatoid arthritis during his first year on the job, and, though he tried to work through the pain, it eventually became too much for him. I remember helping him take off his t-shirt at the end of his shift when he couldn't do it by himself. While spending five years on full disability, he took classes at Merced Junior College, where, eventually, he earned an Associate of Arts degree in Criminal Justice. When the gold injections he was given for his arthritis were successful, he went to work for Juvenile Hall, first as a Detention Hall officer, then as the guy who drove around the county putting electronic monitors on the ankles of gang bangers and other juvenile offenders.

But he wrote! In the few papers he left behind, I have found commendations from his supervisors for his written reports. Apparently he was one of the best report writers at Juvenile Hall, a distinction that could as easily be explained by the horrid writing of his colleagues as by his own skills. Though I won't rule out the latter possibility, as a professional writing teacher I lean toward the former.

† †

I'm impressed by the commendations that Kurt's father received for his written reports, and I mean that sincerely. Surprisingly few people can write a report or anything else in a way that is easy to understand. If you can do that, then you can really do something.

I realized this for this first time while working a summer job at the local public library. My boss asked me to write instructions for some clerical work that I had been doing. If I could come up with something comprehensible, then she would give the instructions to the next person who had my job. I wrote the instructions in a simple, direct way: a series of numbered points that explained step by step what I had been doing. When I presented my boss with this document, she was amazed. "David!" I remember her saying. "I had no idea you could write like this!"

And I was amazed by her reaction. I had explained, in intelligible English, how to fill out a form. Why was this a big deal? At the time, it made me wonder: Does she think I'm a moron?

Whatever talent I have for clarity was inherited from my father, who got semi-rich late in life from his writing. In 1986, he published the first edition of a philosophy textbook, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. The book did well because, in making the subject interesting and easy to understand, my father wrote a textbook that didn't *seem* like a textbook. The book did so well, in fact, that after 15 years and four editions it became the best-selling philosophy book of the twentieth century. Or so someone told me soon after my father's death. Whether this is true, I have no idea, but I quite like the idea that

Dad has outsold Heidegger and Wittgenstein and all those other abstruse second-raters.

I must admit that thinking about my father's success as a writer makes me feel sad about Kurt's father. I try to imagine, if Jim Ayau had lived a different life, if he had gone to other schools, worked in other jobs, what might he have done with *his* talent as a writer?

† †

I'll remove any mystery from David's mind by answering his question succinctly: Not much. Despite his admirable work habits, my father was a man without ambition. My mother called him lazy, but his job evaluations praised his hard work and his knack for finding something constructive to do around Juvenile Hall when things were slow and his coworkers, presumably, were loafing. In fact, the only negative things I have found in reading through his evaluations are repeated references to "the incident."

I vaguely remember hearing something about "the incident," but it was a good long time ago, perhaps approaching twenty years now, so I'm sketchy on the details. I'm pretty sure it involved juvenile delinquents escaping, or trying to escape, from Juvenile Hall, which, of course, is what the whole system of probation officers and guards is designed to prevent.

My father's culpability in "the incident," as I recall, arose from the same character trait that made him beloved by coworkers and friends but infuriating to my mother: his easygoing nature. He trusted people, especially young people, so probably he let his guard down, befriending some teenage proto-criminal, and the kid turned that trust into "the

incident.” Although it would have been hard for him to distrust anyone, my father would not have let his guard down again. The next time, he would have been certain to do his job. But he did not carry this work ethic home with him, so to my mother he remained “lazy.”

It is fun to imagine my father as a successful writer, though. Maybe he might have written a Micheneresque novel about Hawaii, except from a real Hawaiian perspective. Or the definitive novel of the Korean War. Other possibilities, of course, would be a series of vignettes about his ill-fated stint at the Post Office—he might have called it Going Postal and Other Stories—or a novel about his years in Juvie, probably a sentimental story about a gentle, trusting probation officer who befriends tough kids with hearts of stone and turns their lives around. It never occurs to these kids that they might take advantage of his trust and cause an incident.

† †

My father read every night in bed, perhaps only a dozen pages at a time, but a dozen pages every night adds up. His favorite books were thrillers. His all-time favorites included *Marathon Man*, *A Kiss before Dying*, and *The First Deadly Sin*. He pretty much stopped reading literary fiction after he graduated from college and was no longer forced to do so. Occasionally, he would go on a self-improvement kick and decide to upgrade his reading habits, but this never lasted long. He once found *Billy Bathgate* on a remainder table and took a notion to read it. Two or three pages into the book, he quit, not in disgust over E. L. Doctorow’s self-indulgent prose style but in puzzlement. He could not understand why anyone would choose to write in a way that impeded communication. “I

guess that’s what makes it art,” he said as he put the book in the trash.

Sometimes he also took a notion to write a novel of the sort that he loved so much, but he never got far. He would write a chapter or two (at most) and realize (again) that fiction writing wasn’t his forte. He told me once, in an indirect way, why this was so. He had been reading the latest Stephen King novel the night before: “I was reading along, and it occurred to me that, for the last two pages, nothing had happened other than this guy going downstairs to get a Coke out of the refrigerator. And it was interesting, too. That’s what I don’t understand. How is it possible to write two pages about someone getting something to drink, and make it interesting? I could never do that.”

† †

Despite my father’s officially praised writing abilities, he was not much of a reader. I once gave him a book for Christmas: My Story by Anthony Quinn. I chose this book because my father sort of looked like Anthony Quinn. I decided to buy him a book in the first place, I suppose, because I was trying to connect with him on an intellectual level, I, his son the college student and budding writer, and he, the decidedly non-intellectual Air Force retiree. Not surprisingly, his supposed resemblance to Anthony Quinn was not enough to inspire him to read more than 50 pages.

But my father did keep the book. I know this because, since his death, my mother has been seriously ill and living in an assisted-care facility, so I’ve been cleaning out their house. I’ve found the commendations for my father’s writing, his job evaluations, and the Anthony Quinn book. But what I’ve mostly found is SHIT. This word must be capitalized upon its

first appearance because those of you who haven't gone through this brain-numbing experience have no idea what lies ahead for you. At some point you will have to wade through a lifetime's worth of garbage that your parents or grandparents or aunts and uncles have accumulated, and you will ask yourself a variety of questions including, "Where the fuck did they get all this shit?," "Why the fuck did they keep all this shit?," and "Why the fuck do I have to be the one to get rid of all this shit?"

To wit: in my parents' home I have found piles of tax preparation booklets for both federal and state tax returns going back to 1974. Not just the returns themselves, but the instruction booklets. Why the fuck did they keep them? I found the World Almanac and Book of Facts for 1979 and odd anthologies that must have been sold by Reader's Digest, books with titles like The Big Black Book of Everything! that include chapters such as "Closing the Cold Sales Call" and "Accounting for Small Businesses Made Simple." Why? My father never sold anything, nor did he run a small business. If he had lived another 69 years, he never would have read this book.

† †

Too much shit in your parents' house is a bad thing, but I submit that it may be better than no shit at all.

Late in his life, my father recognized a great truth about comfortable living: the more of a pack rat you are, the more unpleasant your home is. Rich people understand this. They are not pack rats. Walk into a rich person's home, and you will not find it cluttered with bric-a-brac—or, as Kurt more accurately terms it, SHIT. Rich people don't even fill their

homes with *expensive* shit. Rich people buy a few big and expensive things that they either keep outside—boats, cars, summer homes—or inside where they can be displayed against a backdrop of spaciousness and a decided lack of shit. To people who aren't rich, however, every piece of bric-a-brac can seem precious, despite the fact that it's all shit and despite the fact that throwing it all away would make their homes infinitely nicer places to live.

So, when my father converted the success of his textbook into a fancy new house—not a mansion, but a much nicer house than anyone else in my family has ever owned—he set about streamlining his life. Put simply, I think that he wanted to live like a rich person, which he imagined would be a better sort of life than he had ever lived before. So he tossed stuff out. Clothes he knew he would never wear again. Books he knew he would never read again. Tools he knew he would never use again. And so on.

When he was done, what a great house he had! "Look, family," he might have said to us, "no shit!" But none of us realized just how much stuff he had thrown away until he was dead. When we began looking around the house for bits of him, we found surprisingly little. There were almost no keepsakes, almost nothing sentimental, and certainly no bric-a-brac, nothing readily identifiable as "Jimbo's shit." It made us wish, if only fleetingly, that he had been a pack rat.

† †

Most of the shit in my parents' house was not my father's but was, and still is, my mother's. They were both children of the Depression, but my father was from the non-materialistic culture of Hawaii, where people didn't have much shit to begin

with, and my mother was from a second-generation immigrant family to whom buying things and spending money—her father was a compulsive gambler—were signs of “making it.”

My father was a Catholic, but his Chinese ancestors were Buddhists, and he had a Buddhist ascetic quality to him, or maybe just a Catholic ascetic quality, that made him decidedly uninterested in accumulating shit. When he died, nearly all of his shit was in his bedroom. Going through the den, the only shit of his I found was the Anthony Quinn book. Even in the garage, usually the man’s domain, precious little of the shit piled in there was his.

Perhaps the most significant shit in my childhood home, certainly the most voluminous, is the BETTY BOOP SHIT, which deserves its own paragraph. For some reason I have never understood, my mother is a Betty Boop fanatic. A Betty Boop mental case. She owns all things Betty Boop. My former bedroom is now the Betty Boop shrine. She’s got Betty Boop snow globes, Betty Boop lampshades, Betty Boop dice, and Betty Boop figurines in quantities to boggle the Un-Betty Boop mind. There are Betty Boop jewel boxes, Betty Boop coin purses, Betty Boop calendars, Betty Boop key chains. Think of something, anything. Now think of it turned into the huge-headed totem of Betty Boop.

Betty Boop freaks me out. Look at her head! It’s huge and concave at the top. She’s a deformed cartoon curiosity with large breasts and shapely legs. A creepy cartoon Marilyn Monroe before the fact. I’ve asked my mother many times, “Why do you buy all this Betty Boop stuff? Why?” And this is how my mother once answered me: “Because she’s sexy.”

So, on the four occasions I’ve been home since my father’s death, I’ve spent much of my time sifting through my mother’s landfill of Betty Boop. In so doing, I have found precious little

evidence of my father’s life. I’ve found some old photographs, paperwork from his jobs, a set of jazz tapes I made for him, my old record player that he inherited when I left for college, some clothes, an 8mm adult film, some novelty items that once belonged to me (fake vomit, fake dog shit), a Gideon’s New Testament.

Perhaps the most significant thing, other than the 8mm film, is a small, well-worn ring that he won in the Air Force as part of the East Coast Division Champion volleyball team. He was a good athlete, could play baseball, basketball, football, tennis, volleyball, you name it. But volleyball was his best sport, and he wore that ring for years after he quit wearing his wedding ring.

† †

Obviously, Jim Rachels and Jim Ayau were very different men. Which makes me wonder. First, I wonder how is it that these men raised sons who, at some level, are so much alike that we function—when things are going really well—as if we are one writer with one brain? Second, I wonder what would have happened if they *had* met? Would Jim Ayau simply have listened and nodded to my father’s life story? Or might he have recognized that he had some kind of special connection to my father, a connection that would reward an effort to shake off his usual passivity?

† †

My father was not only very different from Jim Rachels, but very different from me, too. We never talked about books or films. I remember seeing only one movie with him: Pete ‘n’

Tillie, starring Walter Matthau and Carol Burnett. We saw it at the base movie theatre—\$.35 for kids, \$.60 for adults (your tax dollars at work). Suffice it to say, ours was not an intellectual relationship.

But I did email and talk about movies with Jim Rachels, who was a great movie fan. One species of shit that I know he left for his family was a treasure trove of Laserdiscs and DVDs. And, as I wrote earlier, if it were not for an email I wrote to David's dad, you probably wouldn't be reading this right now.

Here's the story:

David and I knew we wanted to collaborate on something since we were both fiction writers and we were friends. We tried a short story, but it went nowhere. We then turned to a screwball project we call *The Sentences*. The concept: 1001 opening sentences to short stories or novels that writers can use to spark their imaginations. Here's one of my favorites, written by David: "She was like a Dickinson poem—short and difficult to understand." And one of David's favorites, written by me: "The best part, the part everybody loves, the showstopper, really, is at the end when Necron and Mobitrexia, the robots, copulate." We've not yet found a publisher for these and our 999 other chestnuts, though several editors have responded with good humor.

Our next project was a screenplay titled "Flagrant Fouls" about four basketball-obsessed English professors and the immoral lengths to which they go in order to win the intramural championship at their university. We wrote it in a week, sent it off to the Virginia Film Festival's screenwriting competition, and were chosen as finalists. We didn't win the contest, but by late summer of the following year, the script had been optioned by a small Virginia production company

with a promise of good things ahead, and we imagined ourselves on the cusp of Hollywood. In the meantime, however, we had entered the original HBO Project Greenlight contest, which taught us in a sad and tawdry way about "the movie business" and "what sells." Disappointment in that contest led me to write an email to David's father in which I imagined "what Hollywood wants": "They're Young. They're Black. Their Father Is a Rich White Guy. Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Chris Rock ARE Santa's Bastards."

I laughed as I wrote it, David's father laughed when he read it, and somehow, over the next eighteen months, it became *What the Shadow Told Me*, our honest-to-goodness award-winning novel. This book would not exist if I hadn't somehow felt a connection with David's father and written him this facetious email.

† †

Not that either one of our fathers lived long enough to read our book. My father, for his part, now spins in his grave. I must still him by making the following proclamation: DVDs are not shit. Did not someone just refer to a "treasure trove"? The day of the Laserdisc, however, has passed, and my father knows this. He is a desperate man. He wants to live like a rich man, but he cannot escape the fact that he has invested thousands of dollars in this now-outdated technology. Grasping for a solution, he meets Kurt's father in the men's room of a Chinese restaurant. He stands behind Jim Ayau, next in line for the only urinal.

"I'll tell you what," my father says. "I'll trade you my Laserdiscs for your wife's Betty Boop Shit. Straight up."

My father, though ever the gregarious type, is a bit put off

by this proposition from a man he doesn't know and cannot see standing behind him, but the prospect of a house devoid of Betty Boop Shit makes him catch his breath. He laughs and says, "Hey! What the fuck? Laserdiscs? Ha-ha-ha." He is embarrassed that he has no idea what a Laserdisc is, but ultimately that is not important. He would trade the Betty Boop Shit for pocket lint. "That must be the latest gadget. I don't even use the VCR! My wife wants to buy one of those DVDs. I tell her, 'Hey, knock yourself out!'"

When he finally finishes peeing, he turns and looks at Jimbo and suddenly it occurs to him: How does this strange, portly white guy know that the sweat of his brow the past 25 years has been turned into the Western World's largest personal collection devoted to a cartoon vamp with a pumpkin-shaped head?

"Do I know you?" he asks.

"You might as well," my father says, stepping around Kurt's father to the urinal and unzipping. He tries to relax and coax a stream into the porcelain bowl. "It takes a while, but it sure beats a catheter, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, that damned thing. I never got used to that feeling." He fishes a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "I thought I must know you," he says, lighting up. "So what's a Laserdisc, any way?"

"It's like a DVD, except it sounds worse than a DVD, it looks worse than a DVD, and it's the size of a Frisbee. But still, if you like movies, it's better than Betty Boop, right?"

"Don't you need a special machine to watch those things? You don't need a machine to enjoy Betty Boop!" He is negotiating, trying to close the cold sales call.

He takes a drag on the cigarette, holds out the pack to Jimbo.

"Smoke?"

"Are we allowed to smoke in here?" My father stands at the urinal, still waiting for the flow to begin. He looks over his shoulder around the room to see if they are alone. "You got a cigar?" He looks down impatiently. "I'll tell you what. Take the Laserdiscs, and I'll throw in the player for free."

"Yeah, I smoke in here all the time. About the only place you can, these days. That and outside, but pretty soon they'll take that away, too. The player, too, huh? That must have set you back some. You must watch a lot of movies."

"You don't like movies?"

"Ah, you know, I'm not a real fan or anything. The one time I took my kid to a movie, sheesh, what a stinker that was. I told myself I'd never do that again! But if it's on TV and I like it, sure, I'll watch it. What kind of movies you like?"

Smelling the cigarette, my father wishes he had that cigar. "Ah, I'll go see almost anything. A bad movie is better than no movie at all. Your kid out there?" he asks, motioning toward the restaurant's dining room with his large bald head.

"What? Oh, no, just the wife. My boy's in Virginia. He's a professor." He shakes his head as though he still doesn't believe it. "Yeah, a military college. I always wanted him to try the military, you know? Retire after 20 years with a pension, free medical, dental, the works. But he didn't want to get up early." He laughs and takes another long drag off the cigarette.

My father laughs, too, considering the coincidence. "I'm sort of the opposite. It doesn't surprise me that my sons ended up professors, but it's strange that one of them ended up at a military college. We're about as un-military as you can get." He zips up and goes to wash his hands.

My father walks to the urinal and throws his cigarette in.

“You’re a professor, too, aren’t you?” he says, as if he just remembered this fact.

“Yeah, we’re a family of professors,” he admits. He moves for the door. His food is getting cold. “I’m glad we met,” he says by way of farewell. “And I’m glad about our sons. But you should keep the Betty Boop stuff. It might be worth something some day. Laserdiscs aren’t worth shit.”

My father follows him out.

“Yeah,” he says. “Hey, who knows, maybe one day our boys will meet at a conference or something.”

“You never know,” my father says. “Maybe they’ll write a book together.”

They laugh.