

The Reunion

The thing I remember most about Jody's funeral was waiting at back of the gravesite crowd, avoiding familiar faces hovering near the widower. I hadn't seen these guys in decades and this wasn't a great place for a catch-up chat.

I'd split from these boyhood friends, these middle-aged men with whom I'd come of age, over my early opposition to the Vietnam War. Most of them eventually came around to my political viewpoint but by then our paths had diverged too dramatically: me into the Age of Aquarius, them into a surf-centric clique that I was only a part of during those foolish teenage years when we all want to fit in.

The other thing I remember from the funeral was how Dan contained his grief with trance-like stoicism through the service but finally broke at the burial. I knew how much Dan hated looking weak or emotional. The only safe emotion for him – for many men, I suppose, but certainly for Dan – was anger. Jody was in high school when they met. I think he fell in love with her because she knew when to let him rant and how to tamp out the fire. Without Jody, anger wasn't a safe harbor anymore. I think his tears embarrassed him.

When I found a private moment to pay my condolences to my old friend, he clung to me as tightly as I've ever been held. He told me about the Reunion next weekend.

"You've gotta come."

Did I have a choice?

On the drive to Santa Barbara, I reviewed all my trepidations about this weekend: These were guys who surfed, kayaked and played golf; they'd all been hanging out together for the past thirty-some years, which didn't augur an easy reentry for someone who'd been out of this loop since college. Further, I had reason to suspect they would revert to the same towel-snapping, fart-assault, dick-joke, grab-ass male bonding they'd been into at age 17 ("We get really raunchy," Dan had warned); they would drink themselves into complete stupidity ("We get totally fucked up"); eat themselves into gastric disaster ("We shop for all sorts of garbage we wouldn't normally eat - and no low fat foods allowed") and they would, with all good intentions, try to make me do things I wouldn't want to do (over-eating, over-imbibing, golfing, surfing and kayaking headed the list). In other words, they would want me to fit in.

But all the way up the Coast, as the 101 turned from suburban Autobahn to palm lined four-lane, I kept hearing my wife's voice: "Remember, you're doing it for Dan. It's not about you. It's because you care about him. You're there for an old friend who is going through a difficult time. Just keep telling yourself, you're there for Dan."

I was here for Dan. I was here for Dan. I was...

I find the beach house off the Highway 101 exit with no problem, park my car half a block away and start walking with my backpack, my only luggage, towards the shrubbery-obscured front gate.

Striding in the same direction, a couple of feet behind, then beside me, is a big, salt-n-pepper bearded guy who introduces himself as Marcus.

Marcus' given name was Mark. "The guys just started calling me Marcus from day one and they've never called me anything else."

We find the front gate locked and scout for another entrance.

Marcus tells me he works for a produce wholesaler, driving from San Luis Obispo to Oxnard buying avocados.

"It's o.k.; sometimes it's even kind of interesting," he says. "But mostly I have a lot of free time." He says this as a negative. I hide my surprise when he tells me he graduated Berkeley in '72 with a degree in economics.

He asks what I do and I tell him. He follows with a couple of questions but doesn't make a big deal. I like this guy. He's one of the gang's newer friends: he's only known them for about 20 years. He is a bachelor with no kids and an avid sports fan who likes to hike and bike.

Around the side of the house towards the beach path, Marcus spots an upstairs entrance we hadn't seen before. Sure enough, the other guys are inside waiting for us.

Dan greets me with a powerful hug. He's a powerful guy.

Dennis is there with a handshake. The "Kid" amongst us is now white-haired with a prospector's moustache and sun-parched skin. He runs a landscaping business.

There are three Marks in the group - none of whom is called Mark. In addition to Marcus there are Boom (or Boomer) and Spive.

Boom and Spive are a year younger than me, two years younger than Dan. Spive, once slender, summer-blond, now graying with a barrelhouse girth, works at a wholesale nursery in Santa Cruz, about 200 miles up the coast; Boom, still The Walrus but a dramatically slimmed down version, distributes magazines and newspapers to retail outlets, four 11-hour days a week. The other weekday and at least one weekend day, he goes surfing.

I've known these four since I was 14. There are other guys I've never met - newer friends who came into this circle from two to three decades ago.

One with fashionable wireframes and weightlifter's biceps extends his hand. "Remember me?" Cary Goldberg asks. I strain to recall.

A little guy in thick glasses introduces himself as Dave. He is pasty and his eyes are filmy. I make a mental note to wash my hands. He's another two-decades old newcomer.

I meet Larry, someone whose name I'd heard since the late '60s. Now everyone calls him "Leroy." A big smile accompanies a soft handshake.

It's still well before noon and Boom, in Hawaiian print unbuttoned shirt, flip-flops and baggies has already smoked half the day's first joint. He surveys the room with an upturned chin, a tracking dog sniffing conversational breezes for bullshit. It is his self-anointed task to keep pomposity in check. No one gets too upitty around Boomer.

I'm invited to explore the modern, three-story house to stake out a bed. No single rooms are left, so I lay my backpack on one of two foldout cots on the second floor balcony. Sleeping outdoors in Santa Barbara at this time of the year won't be a hardship.

The Rams are trouncing the 49ers on television. Boom wants to go surfing. Like everything else this weekend, the movement between agreed-upon activity and engagement in activity, is leisurely thing. Dennis' mom has filled a large tin with home baked cookies. It's the only food in the house. Atop the tin is a note encircled by a rainbow she has hand colored; the note reads "Enjoy your reunion (and the cookies)!" Someone pins it up with a refrigerator magnet.

We watch the game until the spirit moves all surf-ready bodies off the sofa and eases them out the door. O.K., now it starts. I'm there for Dan. So I go along. A guy called Marty appears in the driveway as Dan, Leroy, Boom and Dave strap their boards on top of two SUVs. Marty is a bearded bear cub in his mid-forties, effusive in greeting even the stranger in the crowd. He works as a fundraiser for United Cerebral Palsy and sings in an a cappella group that does hits from the '50s.

Surf gear secured, we load up. Here comes the part I've dreaded: someone's gonna ask if I wanna borrow a board and go out on the water. I don't. This will prompt the ritual badgering: "C'mon, try it. Get off your butt." I haven't surfed in 35 years – and wasn't very good at it then. I've brought a book. I want to sit and read, I'll say with heels digging in. But nobody asks anything other than, "You all set?" And we're underway. We pull over at Rincon to watch some young hotdogs "shooting head-high curls" but there's no place to park. The fallback is Pitas Point, a rocky private beach where Dave used to live and knows a resident who gives him the updated numbers to the security gate code.

The water is crowded but our surfers pick a spot to the north, a little past the big breakers, and paddle out. Boom catches the first ride - or is it Leroy? I start to relax. No one tried to push me into coming along; no one tried to cajole me into getting on a board. I stretch out my legs from a beach chair, watching Dave maneuver his board ahead of a tube and gracefully pull up and over the crest at the ride's end.

I watch Dan battle with the sea, a few swim strokes behind every wave. Strong as he is, his timing is off just enough to frustrate every effort.

Marcus is back in a half hour. "I caught three," he announces. "That's enough."

In the moment Marcus sits down, Dan has caught one. But seconds after he stands, he is swallowed in the tube and plunges under the surf. I know when he surfaces he is cursing. But he bellies back up on his board and paddles out again.

Leroy comes in, then Boom, then Dave. Dan makes a valiant last grab at a wave that seems to crest perfectly behind him, curl south as he turns that way but breaks a tantalizing foot ahead of his board. He finally paddles in where he's met with the grace of manly indifference. (*"Suckers flatted out on ya, man. Hey, anybody see my shades?" "One of those days, bro. Anybody else need a beer?"*)

The Michigan-Michigan State game is on TV. I pull up a barstool near Dave who heard me telling Dennis about my son's visual impairment and he tells me about his own: he has no sight in one eye and 20/300 - without a lens - in the other. His diabetes also led to kidney failure a few years ago. He was running out of time and was far enough down the list for a transplant to be justified in fearing he'd never get one.

Then, one day, a friend called with the news his cousin had been killed and a kidney was to go to David. The cousin had been one of the parachute performing Flying Elvises, who died when his chute failed to open during a jump. After the operation, Dave reveled in his new celebrity, telling all the guys who came to visit that maybe he'd get some Blue Suede Shoes to make the kidney feel more at home.

Most of the guys stay to watch college football but four of us decide to go for a walk on the beach. Leroy and Boom walk ahead, more attentive to surf conditions than the tanning girls. What a difference 35 years makes.

Dan and I lag behind and begin the conversation I came here for.

The final nine months of his wife's illness were both a time in hell and a time of healing in their 30-year marriage, he tells me. Perhaps some deaths are only sad but most leave a stew of emotions. Dan says he was only planning to stay in the marriage until their youngest son graduated high school. Then he was "outa there." Their sex life had been "non-existent" for years. Hugs were perfunctory; kisses never softened or lingered. He tells of a divorced friend who vowed, "Next time I think about marriage, I'm puttin' it to her up front: When sex goes, I'm gone." Dan's body clenches as he relates this.

Mostly, he says, he always felt that nothing he did was ever good enough for her. That *he* wasn't good enough. Another outburst sprays the salt air: "Y'know, I'm a pretty desirable guy. A lotta women would consider me a good catch." Again, his anger is a flare, not a conflagration.

Back at the house, it quickly becomes evident that newly-arrived Marty is the hotwire that sparks the engine. He herds us out the door to make a grocery run.

Lucky Market is invaded by nine guys with three grocery carts. It's a scene straight out of *The Perfect Storm* - when the fishermen empty entire shelves of supplies to last three months at sea. We have no master shopping list and virtually no limit to what or how much food we'll need this weekend. Well, there is one limit: I try to put some low fat cheese in the cart and Dan stops me. "Nothing dietetic." I go back to the deli section and find a wedge of Brie.

An hour later, the kitchen filled with shopping bags, the gang performs like a drilling military unit. Dennis chops ingredients for his vegetarian chili, Boom and Leroy make a salad, Spive fires up the grill. Everyone pitches in doing something. Marty's brother "Hef" shows up with two pies from Marie Calendar's and the evening's video entertainment. *Playboy's Erotic Escapades* is slipped into the VCR and the guys who have finished their food prep chores settle in for a viewing.

I help Spive on the grill. He says it's times like these when he most misses Santa Barbara. He has friends in Santa Cruz but not like these guys. He'd move back here in a heartbeat if not for his 13-year-old daughter. Boom brings out better grill implements. Spive downs his beer and quietly goes for another. Boomer confides the guys worry about Spive's drinking.

There is no table big enough to seat more than four of us for dinner, so we sit at the small, plastic kitchen table in shifts. Dan, Dennis, Boom and I take our turn together. With *Playboy's Erotic Escapades* in the background, the conversation turns to sex. Dan, still struggling to comprehend his new status as a bachelor, admits he's "never slept with any woman but Jody." Boom and Dennis act surprised - an unnecessary social fig leaf. They've known him all his post-pubescent life. He was a virgin when he started dating Jody and if ever a man was emotionally incapable of adultery, we were sharing a table with him. Dan shrugs it off with a joke about his penis size.

I'm aware that three of us at the table have experienced spousal death. We're all barely 50 and I wonder how unusual that is. The three marriages couldn't have been more different in length and quality. But experiencing the loss of a partner changes the way you look at everything for the rest of your life, whether or not you planned to stay together for a lifetime. For a moment, Boomer is the outsider, not me: he and Chris, his wife of 26 years, met in high school - when she was dating Spive.

We relinquish the table and filter back into the living room. *Erotic Escapades* has lost its luster and *Air Force One* is the video of the moment. Dennis and I continue our

conversation off to the side of the living room. He tells me that his 14-year-old boy, Dylan, is adjusting well to public school after being home-schooled when his mother was alive. I ask how his older son, Luke, is doing.

"I don't know," he gives a short, sad laugh. "He showed up at my house a couple of weeks ago and he'd been drinking. I told him, 'you can't come here like that anymore.' He could be anywhere between Ventura and Oxnard." He has heard Luke's girlfriend is in jail for stabbing him with a kitchen knife. Luke escaped with only a flesh wound.

Cary says he's heading out to the hot tub and invites Dennis and me. I'm not quite ready. I wander over to watch a little *Air Force One*. Should I tell them I worked on it? Hef says how "great" he thinks the movie is and I test the waters by discretely telling him they built the plane on the same stage where Dorothy walked the Yellow Brick Road. His reaction confirms that I will only segregate myself from these guys by regaling them with movie stories. I stay long enough to answer the obligatory "How was Harrison Ford?" ("great guy") and excuse myself to try out the hot tub.

Cary, Leroy and Dennis are naked and I hesitate a moment only because getting in is such a commitment to staying in. But I feel foolish standing around fully clothed talking to a bunch of naked guys, so I strip and join them, taking the last corner seat. Dan shows up a few minutes later and the guys encourage him to get in. Dan doesn't wanna take his clothes off. He sits on the side, talking with us. After about ten minutes, he hurriedly undresses and gets in - making another unnecessary joke about dick size.

Leroy is the only one in the tub not drinking alcohol. He stopped about six years ago; before that, he drank "all the time." Then, one night, "my entire system just shut down." His wife, also a nurse, told him what he already knew: quit or die. They used to like taking trips to the wine country in Northern California and, a few years ago, he thought they might do it again. If that was the only time in the whole year that he drank...? She said no. He turned to the guys for backing. They supported her. "I wouldn't dare drink around these guys," he laughs. "They'd kill me."

Back in the barracks, a scene unfolds that would have appalled these same souls when I last knew them. It's not even midnight and the boys are starting to bed down.

I fold into my cot on the balcony patio. The night is warm and the blankets are thin. Spive has settled into the other balcony cot. Within minutes he's snoring. I sleep soundly - waking only once when the 3:00 a.m. train whistles by on a track that runs between our street and the freeway. I awake at sunrise to a bluejay on a nearby orange tree. Spive is still snoring.

After breakfast, Marty is determined to organize a softball game. The surfers balk. Could be a good day to be "out there." Dave is most anxious to talk Boom and Larry into surfing over softball. "I can't play softball," he of the diabetic eyes and Flying-Elvis kidney admits. "I can't see the ball."

The decision is made and Dave verbalizes his disappointment. Dan jumps all over him, "Hey, Dave, nobody's saying you have to go." Dave decides he will go and he'll be one of the two drivers. I look around but nobody explains how Dave has a drivers license. Seven guys get into Dan's Suburban. We've piled all ten of us in the jumbo Chevy before but Boom and Dennis decide they won't let Dave drive alone.

I sit shotgun beside Dan who can't seem to get over Dave's "wanting it all his way." I defend him, knowing how my son feels when all the guys want to play ball sports he can't play. Dan is unyielding.

"I just don't like being around somebody that negative," he scowls, dropping it.

A quick fuel stop and Dan's van arrives at the park. Dave is sitting alone in the bleachers; Boom and Dennis are already out on the field. Someone has brought a radio and tunes it to a station that plays oldies from the '50s and '60s. *Patches* comes on. A classic clunker but Marty and I sing along as we loosen our arms with easy throws.

We don't so much choose sides as select a theme: old guys against the young guys. The young guys range in age from 44-49. Us old guys are led by senior citizen Dan at 52; Boom, Spive and Dennis round out our five. The best years of my youth flood my senses as my old softball league teammates and I trot to positions on the field.

The rules are simple: the right side of the field is closed; two outfielders, two infielders and a mid-fielder patrol center and left. Each team supplies its own pitcher. A ball that doesn't get past the infield or is caught on the fly is an out. A single is a hit that bounces past the infield; doubles and triples are a little vague. A home run has to make everybody look up and say "wow."

The Young Guys are first up. The first out is a pop fly to me. I come in too far and catch it awkwardly over my head. It's been a long time. The next batter hits a lazy fly to right center - foul territory. Spive sprints toward it. If he can get there, the grab will be spectacular. But halfway, his knee buckles and he goes down in a heap. When he picks himself up, concern turns to laughter - not at his clumsiness but at the recognition that our teenage legs disappeared around the same time as Flavor Straws. Only Dennis is still something to watch. The last ground ball of the inning is to his right; sliding on one knee he backhands it cleanly. He makes plays like that all through the game.

Five man sides with self-pitching makes innings go fast. Spive gets our only hit in the first and my mightiest swing - which has Marty flinching at third base - yields a dribbler that dies on the grass. The radio blasts *He's So Fine* and *Tell Him*.

As the Young Guys toss us their gloves, trotting in for their next at bats, Dave asks Boom if he can "just take a coupla swings." Boom picks up a ball. "I probably won't even come close to fouling one off," Dave announces his failure before even taking a cut. But he makes contact twice, both times sending groundballs through to right field. He has that secret smile my son gets, permitting a moment of self-congratulation when his eyes convince his mind that no one is watching.

The next inning, Dave does the same thing, with Marty tossing him balls, until he gets two hits. Members of both teams start cheering him on. By the third inning Dan is shouting "good hit, Dave." Pitching to Dave between each team's at bats becomes part of the game.

My next at bat, I'm determined to make solid contact.

"Lookit Rob, gettin' all serious," Boom mocks. I loosen up and line a solid single.

The radio plays a Presley medley: *Whole Lotta Shakin', It's Now or Never, A Fool Such as I*.

"Hey," Dave shouts from the bleachers. "I can feel my kidney twitching." Then to fill in any blank stares, "You know, the Flying Elvis?"

The game ends with the Old Guys winning, 4-1. Dennis makes a diving grab to keep a ball in the infield for the final out. I score our last run with a homer that goes over the head of Marcus who was playing too shallow.

On the drive back to the house, talk turns to how much we ache. Someone says his arm feels the way Dennis's looked after his "accident." In 1978, Dennis fell while

trimming a tree, nearly severing his left arm. "A chainsaw doesn't exactly make a neat cut," he says. "I was in surgery for three-and-a-half hours and in the hospital for a few days." It was around that time that he was also in the early stages of divorce from his first wife, Ramona. It was, he recalls, the lowest ebb of his life.

But eight guys watched the last game of the World Series that year in his hospital room. The arm healed. The marriage ended. His business sank and then resurfaced. His son, Luke, put him through hell.

Through it all, the guys were there.

Dennis and Dan would have a falling out over their business partnership. Spive would get defensive when the guys talked about his drinking. Boom would get touchy about his daughter's learning disability. Cary and Marty would fight about payback for favors. Dan would shun Dave. Dave would renege on a debt to Leroy.

But after all these years, they're still there for one another.

We lunch at a barbeque joint, then it's back to the beach where Dave, Boom and Leroy go surfing. The rest of us unload kayaks. We're one seat short of accommodating everyone and I quickly defer to Spive. He more insistently defers to me. He can stay later; I have a dinner appointment back in L.A. and should hit the road around 4:00.

I climb in Marty's tandem kayak. We lag behind the one-man boats, paddling a bit more slowly perhaps because we need the extra breath to sing. He comes up with one boat song after another: *Sailin'*, *Sloop John B.*, *Michael Row Your Boat Ashore*. When we get to the spot where the others have stopped, we sit watching the swells behind us. I see Dennis ride one in, then Dan. Both paddle back out. The sun is low; my time here wanes. Marty and I fall quiet. The breeze cools us just enough to dry the sweat around our life jackets. "Here comes one," Marty says. And we begin furiously paddling, slowing slightly, then frenzied again, trying to get the timing, to forge ahead of the crest. Then we feel the surge - behind us or beneath us, we can't yet tell; hunkering down we give our strivings over to the elements... as the wave pushes our kayak like a baby carriage toward the shore.

Dennis has ridden one to the sand and is starting to paddle back out but returns to the beach for final handshake when I shout goodbye. The others are all out beyond the breakers, focused on the undulating ocean.

Spive takes my seat in the kayak behind Marty and I watch them paddle out. I try to catch Dan's eye when he momentarily turns to shout something to Marcus. He doesn't see me. I'll call him tomorrow and maybe drive up to see him for lunch next weekend. Maybe. I have a busy schedule and it's a long drive. And he's going to be fine.

As I cross the beach, I'm struck by the damning possibility that I hadn't really come here for Dan after all. Maybe I'd come to see where I might have fit in had I stayed with the guys who stayed together.

Driving southeast along the 101, the sun drops like a curtain behind me and solitary stars begin to emerge above the suburban valley.

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