

## Never Again

*from Brother Jesse's Tale, Monk In The Cellar*

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At some point early in my childhood my father lived for a year a few doors down the street, and both he and my mother went to their graves without explaining why. It's been more than sixty years, but I remember the first summer morning my mother let me walk down to his house by myself. I started just after breakfast. The katydids were still asleep in the trees. Cool air had settled overnight on the grass and wrapped the neighborhood in a cloak of moist smells.

The early sun cast my shadow on the sidewalk up ahead, pointing me toward my destination. At age four these were the first important steps of my life. I hadn't slept the night before, excited to be on my way when the sun came up. I knew the route to Dad's: straight down the sidewalk until I stood in front of the old brown house that could be seen from our front porch a block away. I had been allowed this far from home only with my mother or older brother. Now, like a novice swimmer paddling farther away from the dock, I felt a nervousness in my gut just short of fright, and I almost turned back to where I knew my mother would surely be waiting. But I looked down at my feet and willed them to keep walking.

When I raised my eyes again, I saw him deep inside his doorway, waiting for me, watching me. When my courage began to falter, he could tell. He stepped forward out of the shadow to show himself more clearly just when I was about to turn back a second time. My father wore a shirt in style that year with large panes of pastels, blue and pink and yellow and green, colors I associated with safety the rest of my life.

My father could encourage me, because he knew me well. As a child, I sometimes wondered if he read my mind. Later in life I recognized we had almost identical ways of thinking and brooding, doubting and procrastinating. Mentally, we might have been twins born thirty years apart.

I wasted much of my youth in a manner that would scandalize a modern parent, intent as they are in ensuring their child's efficiency and productivity. When I look back on my high school days, I see misty mornings and lazy afternoons, with time on my hands during the long stretch of summers. The early hours of a day held so much promise, but my young fires burned hot and quick, leaving me drained, spent on myself. There were myriad mornings in July and August when the hours lay before me full of interesting tasks ... things to write, to draw, to plan, to accomplish. But as the day warmed and the katydids raised their whining voices in praise of the hot sun, I squandered my time, letting it drift away until I burned with disappointment. And having wasted the morning, I would fritter away the afternoon, first in self pity and later dreaming about the wonderful day coming tomorrow and all the projects I would finish.

My father didn't push me. I was fifteen before I wondered why he never complained

about my lethargy. Perhaps he remembered his own youth and knew I would survive, that inside me a small clock was set to ring at the right time. And it did, although by then my father was gone.

I was still a young man when he died. I stood beside his bed as he sighed for the last time. His soul got up and left for I knew not where. I felt as I had years before as a little boy when I sat crying on my mother's porch in the hot afternoon sun, hearing the mocking katydids as I stared down the block and wished my father would come home.

After Dad's grave-side service, workmen stood by ready to roll up the fake grass and lower the casket into the earth. I didn't care if they waited all afternoon, I wanted a few more minutes with my father. I needed to say things to him I had neglected, because he would never be here again. But I had no words. I thought only of that early morning when he watched as I walked to his house, and how he stayed in the shadows until he was sure I couldn't go on without a little help. Of everything he ever did for me, I remember that as the most caring.

As a chilly spring wind blew through the rows of headstones, I walked up and placed my hand on the casket. To the east, the clouds broke on the horizon and scattered into pinks and warm greens and golds. Inexplicably, I heard my father shout and I swung around to the west where his voice had come from.

In the distance, over the roof of the little chapel and beyond the tall pines that circled the cemetery, I saw Eternity in a sunset emblazoned on a sky of deep indigo blue, and knew my father had gone there ahead of me. A majestic bank of purple clouds rolled up and away from the fiery sun into the blackness of the gathering clouds above me.

The harsh, dark colors spoke of danger, power, birth and death. Long overdue, my nativity as a man flooded me in an exhilaration of tingling from head to toe. A strong spirit like a woman beckoned me away from the boyhood skies behind me to an inevitable life ahead under a tumultuous expanse. I could have refused, but my psyche burst from my soul and my head spun with delirium at the possibilities to be lived.

Born in that moment was the day I call my life, a bright morning of promise and an afternoon of achievement, love, loss and times of failure. I often forgot I had the same mind as my father, but with different opportunities. Still, I would make many of his mistakes.

I seldom noticed the slanting sun telling me the time was getting late. The hours rolled on and on and seemed not to be numbered, but they were.

My day has now reached its evening and someday when the purple sunset rolls up to crown my life, thundering upon me as a great cloud of blackness, I will dread it and I will have no words. But I will have to accept it is finished. It will be time to leave and, like my father, I will never be here again.

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[dave@windsweptpress.com](mailto:dave@windsweptpress.com)