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The Sleeping Father

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Extract

I.

Chris Schwartz's father's Prozac dosage must have been incorrect, because he awoke one morning to discover that the right side of his face had gone numb. This was the second discovery on a journey Chris's father sensed would carry him miles from the makeshift haven of health. The first discovery had been, of course, the depression for which the Prozac was meant to be the cure, a discovery made not by Bernard Schwartz but by his son, Chris. Chris figured it out first because that was how things worked in this family. Soul of son and soul of dad were linked by analogy. No tic or mood swing in the one did not go unrepresented in the susceptible equipment of the other.

Bernie Schwartz leaned in close to the mirror in his bedroom and poked the right side of his face with the sharp bottom of the pocket-size silver crucifix his daughter, Cathy, had given him. Seventeen-year-old Chris, in his room, typed the following sentence into an e-mail he was about to send to his friend Frank Dial: 'You know you're dead when . . . your friends throw dirt in your face.' This was the newest addition to a group of aphorisms Chris and Frank were developing for a computer screensaver program that they hoped to sell one day soon

for a huge amount of money or, failing that, a tiny amount of money.

Chris sent the sentence and went to the window and opened it and looked out. It was seven o'clock on a fine autumn morning in Bellwether, Connecticut. Chris looked at the trees and the grass, he looked at his own driveway, his wooden fence, the street beyond it, several houses within looking range, back to the fence, the roses by the fence, the cars, a crushed Coke can, a small unintelligible pile of dirt, a neighborhood squirrel, a fly, a dog. He looked at the street again, and the cars parked in the driveways, and he marveled at how each car had a driveway to park in and how every driveway in the world had a street at one end and a house at the other. Chris felt that if he'd been the guy they came to when they needed someone to invent the thing to convey the cars from the streets to the houses, he'd have choked, he'd have let down humanity.

Chris thought of his mom in California. Often when he thought of his mom in California, he thought of her standing tall and strong in a long white robe at the edge of the ocean, her arms aloft, her hands clenched in fists, watching a thirty-foot wave approach her. The wave breaks on top of her head, and when it has subsided, there she stands in the same position, fists high, face wet, eyes open, wet hair streaming down the back of her white robe. Chris had the same hair as his mother, though not literally of course.

Chris thought of his dad in the next room and felt the astonishing surge of affection and sadness that had

accompanied his dad-related thoughts of the past year. Chris thought of his nervous, obsessive little sister, felt a discomfort he did not wish to explore, hurried on to the next thought, which was people all across Bellwether, Connecticut, waking up to classical music or a hangover, jogging with the dog, ironing a shirt, putting on aftershave or eyeliner, buying the paper, catching the train to the city: all the wretched conduct that made humanity God's chosen.

Chris made a stop at the mirror to study that miniature version of humanity, his own face, on which adolescent discomfort expressed itself through the medium of acne. Chris returned to his computer, where a reply from Frank Dial awaited him: 'You know you're having a bad day when . . . you wake up naked and face-down on the sidewalk of an unfamiliar city to find a policeman beating the backs of your thighs with a billy club.' Upon reading this latest of Frank's aphorisms, Chris felt so lucky to have a friend like Frank that he almost wept. He prevented himself from weeping by uttering the words 'Don't weep, shithead.'

2.

Chris entered the kitchen in time to hear his sister say, 'Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.'

'You've got to be kidding with that crap,' Chris said.

Cathy's face reddened. 'Please don't call it crap.' She sat stiffly and correctly at the table with her hands clasped not in prayer but in the left hand's attempt to prevent the right hand from throwing her rosary beads at her brother.

'Did Mom and Dad forget to tell you we're Jewish?'

'No, they did not forget to tell me.'

'So what's the problem?'

'There is no problem.'

'The problem is that you're a Jew saying a Christian prayer.'

'I have Jesus in my heart,' Cathy said, believing for an instant that a simple declaration of truth would be understandable to her brother, or anyone.

'For all I care,' he said, 'you can have Jesus up your—'

'Chris, if I'm a Jew, that means you're a Jew too, right?'

'Yeah. You, me, Dad, Mom. It runs in the family.'

'And how do you practice your Judaism?'

'Practice it? I don't practice it. That's the beauty of Judaism in this family and families like ours all across America. We're not the kind of Jews where you do anything. We're the kind where you just *are* it. Judaism isn't just a religion. It's a whole, like, thing.'

'"Thing"?'

When did this twit get so good at arguing? 'Religion is stupid, anyway,' Chris said. 'It's the crack cocaine of the masses.'

Cathy made a gesture at her brother that was definitely not a sign of the cross.

Bernie Schwartz entered the kitchen and looked at his children as if he were bewildered to find them in his house. He sat at the kitchen table in front of a cup of coffee and tapped the right side of his face idly with the back of his spoon, unaware that light brown droplets of coffee were clinging to his cheek.

In the quiet kitchen, the tapping of the spoon against wet flesh made a liquid plop like big drops of water falling from a great height onto a pile of wet towels. 'Dad, get a grip,' Chris said.

Cathy gently took the spoon from her father and clasped his hand in her two. She wanted to communicate the compassion she felt for him in her heart through the look in her eyes. She tried to be careful in her actions. She focused on each gesture she made because she wanted Jesus to love her. She said, 'What's wrong, Father?'

'"Father"?' Chris said. 'His name is "Father" now? Dad, what's wrong with you?'

'The right side of my face is numb.'

'What do you mean, numb? You mean like it's not there?'

'Oh it's there, I just can't feel it.'

'Yeah well don't tap it with a spoon, you're creeping me out, man.'

Cathy removed her hands from her father's and wiped the coffee from his cheek with her napkin. The tremor in her hands wasn't the outward sign of some kind of saintly passion, it was the outward sign of the fear of a sixteen-year-old girl whose father was falling apart.

Bernie said, 'I think my Prozac dosage may be off.'

'You should call Dr. Moreau,' Cathy said.

Bernie dutifully went to the phone on the wall by the dishwasher and punched in the number of his psychiatrist, Dr. Jacques Moreau. 'Hello, this is Dr. Moreau speaking on a tape . . .' said the faintly French-accented recorded message of Dr. Moreau.

When it was Bernie's turn to speak, he said, 'First, I wonder what idiot doesn't know you're speaking on a tape. Second, the Prozac you're prescribing is making my face numb. Third, the Prozac is also giving me homicidal ideations that I'm unaware of, so unbeknownst to both of us I'm on my way over to your office to kill you. Listen, just call me back soon.'

Chris said, 'Look, Sister, Father's got his sense of humor back.'

3.

Chris Schwartz met Frank Dial in the road. 'Frank Dial' had become Chris's shorthand for joy itself; tough joy – Frank was acerbic and dark and quick. He had a word for everything, and often not a nice one; justly so, Chris thought, for the world was often not a nice place. But it was nice for Chris to have a good friend who was accurate in speech. Chris himself was not accurate or even truthful a lot of the time. He kidded a lot in a haphazard way – kidding without meaning it – and he lied a bit as well. He had a stern principle about accuracy and honesty in speech that he said he took pride in not living up to. Anyway he didn't have to live up to it because Frank Dial lived up to it for him.

In some half-secret place inside *his* heart, Frank wished Chris wasn't white. It was embarrassing for a young black man like Frank to have a white boy for a best friend, but the Negro pickings were slim in Bellwether, Connecticut, where Frank was one of five blacks matriculated at the Bellwether High School for Upper Middle Class Caucasians. Nevertheless, Chris was an excellent example of what white people could achieve when they set their minds to it. Chris listened closely and got most of the allusions. Chris could keep up with the pace of the patter and the pain.

The boys set out on the journey to school along Southridge Road. They saw many wondrous phenomena. They saw small children in their jackets, they saw schoolbuses and birds, they saw houses, they saw the paint jobs on houses. High up in the sky, they saw a cloud in the shape of their math teacher. They heard a distant siren and thought of death. They spoke of all and sundry.

The town's commercial center embraced them curtly as they passed through it. They entered a deli and came out with a pair of bright green electrolyte-replenishment sports beverages that God had not created nor intended to create. They passed the magazine store where they saw, on the cover of a well-known music magazine, a photograph of two middle aged rock stars imitating the famous pose they had struck for the same magazine twenty-five years earlier. Frank and Chris felt that both these rock stars and this magazine had used to mean something, but now merely made reference to the thing they used to mean without actually meaning it any more.

Frank reached into the wilderness of his backpack and came up with a frayed notebook. The words 'EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD' were printed on the cover of the notebook in Frank's almost typographically neat hand. As the boys walked through the prosthetic heart of Bellwether, Frank flipped to the section entitled *Things that look like things that you already know what they look like*, stopped walking, and wrote a short description of the magazine cover. This section was getting very long. It took up more than half the notebook. That was because, in the estimation of Frank and Chris, the world was weary of itself

– had trod, had trod, had trod, or whatever; now ground out shoddy reproductions of stuff it used to take pride in producing. Trees, shrubs, cats, people, clouds, and stars were now 'trees,' 'shrubs,' 'cats,' 'people,' 'clouds,' 'stars.' The world was just putting in the hours now, biding its time until retirement, when it would cast off its worldliness and return to being void and without form.

'Nigger!' a kid in a car going by shouted.

Frank said, 'I'm so glad that gentleman reminded me that I am a nigger. I had forgotten.'

Chris said, 'I'll remind you next time if you want.'

Frank stared at his friend, startled. Chris knew he'd misspoken. Whereas an instant before each boy had been half of a two-man friendship, the one now represented a group that would always commit indelicacies against the group represented by the other. Standing in the school parking lot, they continued to stare at one another, rendered speechless by the power of language.

'Sorry,' Chris said.

'Ass,' said Frank, and went inside the school.

Chris stayed outside, stunned. He had English but now would blow it off. He was supposed to be reading *Catcher in the Rye*, he thought, or some other *Catcher in the Rye*-type disservice to teenagers everywhere. Yes, it was *Catcher in the Rye*. It had to be. They'd long ago crammed *Catcher in the Rye* down his throat till he puked. Then they'd crammed *Catcher in the Rye* plus the puke back down his throat and he puked them up and then they crammed down *Catcher in the Rye* plus his puked puke and by now it was easier just to swallow. This wasn't *Catcher in the*

Rye's fault. It was probably a halfway decent book, if you were from someplace like Bulgaria and had never heard of it; decent for a book, that is, which wasn't saying much. There was no book that was good. There was no school that was good. There was no family that was good. There was no friend that was good. There was no life that was good.