

## A Special Duck For Laura

### Summer, 1970

I worked at a place called the Bridge. It was a storefront drop-in center for at-risk youth, a tiny community non-profit with almost no staff. As a social work student, I was a volunteer. I sat around with a few counselors talking with whomever walked in. The sound was an aimless sort of chatter. It was a room with broken down furniture and a rattling fan in the corner. Kids smoked and shot pool. I played pool but not with much skill. The kids thought I was impaired and probably said mean things behind my back.

Someone dragged a phone over to me. I rarely got calls. It was my wife, Sarah.

“Mike, I didn’t know if I should call you. You’re far away and I’m afraid for you driving home...”

There was a long pause.

“Your dad died.”

I didn’t answer. The few people in the room had stopped talking and were clearly watching and listening to me. I was their break from a boring afternoon.

Finally, I asked “How? Where?”

“He was at work at Sears. They say he just collapsed and died. We don’t know... Maybe a heart attack. Please, come home now. Be very careful driving.”

The kids in the room heard these few words:

“Hello?”

“How?”

“Where?”

“OK.”

But they watched me say the words. They saw my body go rigid and then sag. I stared at the floor. So, when I said, “I am going home now,” they all seemed to get it.

I walked out the front door and into the summer afternoon heat and heavy San Fernando Valley smog.

My car was a VW bug. It was a weak little car. As I climbed out of the Valley on the 405 to Mulholland Drive, I had to cling to the right of the freeway. As the big rigs roared by me, they didn’t honk. They knew I couldn’t go faster.

Slowly, I shifted gears and climbed home.

Memories of my father swept over me inside the VW. I re-lived listening to my father tell me about his years in the Army. He loved those stories. Now, they offered me some solace.

He had been an Army Officer in the years leading up to WWII. He had been in the Army Cavalry when the Army still had horses. As a child, I often played with his spurs and sword. Dad had played polo and tried to teach me “horsemanship”, as he called his former passion. “Try not to bounce when you ride, Michael. Hold yourself erect proud. Try to relax.”

I remembered dad lecturing me on how to fold a towel and to be neat about it. He told me how to mop a floor and to do it in an orderly back-and-forth motion.

“When you are in the Army, Mike, you better know how to clean up.”

Why did he tell me that?



As I drove home, I thought, “Why am I thinking about the Army?”

Outside the car it was a Los Angeles summer, complete with choking smog. With the windows open, the traffic roared. It was a soundtrack of chaos. I said aloud in my empty car: “You better pay attention, dummy. You can get killed in this traffic. Sarah told you to be careful. Be careful.”

I arrived at our West Los Angeles apartment, which was built next to the freeway. Sarah was holding a stuffed toy duck when I came in the door. Our baby Laura was in her crib and asleep.

“Your dad was just here today. He came about lunch time... I didn’t know he was coming. He just knocked on our door. He drove here before going to work to give this duck to Laura. Laura loves it. She calls it “duck duck.”

In the following days, Laura carried the duck everywhere. Driving to Los Angeles to visit my mother, Laura held the duck and would cry out “papa! Papa!”

As our car pulled off the freeway, Sarah and I were silent as Laura joyously called out her name for my father: “Papa! Papa!”

Laura was still too young to know her grandfather was gone. We had made the drive to visit on many weekends. She understood the drive and where we were headed: To Papa.

Like the Velveteen Rabbit, Laura would hold and pet this duck until his poor little duck-head was bald. If you pulled a string he would quack with a strong loud quack.



*Laura's duck*

We listened to that quacking sound as we drove from our place down to mother’s apartment. The house was already full of friends and family. The story was being told and retold by my tearful mother.

My sister, Elaine and I went off to hide in the kitchen. Mom’s apartment was not that big. Hiding in the kitchen meant standing near the refrigerator and out of sight from the crowd in the living room.

In the kitchen, Elaine and I giggled together.

“God, stop that.”

“Stop, we shouldn’t be laughing.”

I gasped to catch a breath. “I can’t. Why are we laughing.”

Elaine asked: “What will the relatives think. Bite your tongue. Do something! We have to stop laughing.”

I walked away from Elaine and into my parents’ bedroom. I saw my dad’s bottle of green aftershave. In a flash, I was a small boy at the white porcelain bathroom sink. I watched dad make shaving lather with a brush in a mug.

He would smush it onto me and then wipe it off with the sweet aftershave. It stung my skin.

I took the bottle pulled the tiny black plug and took a deep breath of my father.