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What You & I Failed Through

Walk in front of a firing squad, set yourself on fire with matches from Bill Knapp's and gasoline, rewire all the electricity in the house down to one socket: stick your finger in it. Howard listed ways to commit suicide in his head (as he always did when he felt a panic attack approaching) while hanging upside down by his seatbelt in his sixth deceased wife Estie's¹ 1988 Lincoln Town Car, on the way to her funeral. He always failed at remembering the Dorothy Parker poem that made the listing process considerably easier to handle, just like he failed at everything, except being intoxicatingly, devastatingly handsome. This was key: when he was younger, he was a brawn 6'1" with wide muscular collar and shoulders, exceptionally-flat waistline; tan, rosy skin; brilliantly white teeth, dimples to make the legs quiver; a head full of perfect brown waviness—just enough to give it body, volume, oomph. He was a charmer, a smooth & sweet talker and as he aged, he did so gracefully, with a class that reminded people of Sinatra, Brando, Robert Redford. Even so, he was a complete failure, since looks only get you so far. He failed in school (slight undiagnosed dyslexia), failed as an army recruit (beautifully shaped but poorly-made knees), failed as a shoe salesman (not gentle enough), a cab driver (too many speeding tickets), a short-order cook (very unsanitary), a post office carrier (too slow) and hundreds of other jobs. Eventually, in his late forties, he filed for disability under the pretense of fibromyalgia. He also failed at keeping wives alive; for years he wasn't sure why he kept trying. He wasn't a needy man, that is to say, he made his own coffee & retrieved his own newspaper in the mornings, starched his own shirts & bleached his own underwear, knew how to vacuum, bake cookies, scrub his own john. Things, according to his friends, that should've been executed by a woman, things expected to be executed by a woman. He stopped expecting anything by wife two when he failed to produce children with her. (He, actually, failed at producing children, which he wanted very badly, with any wife due to the fact that no wife lasted longer than one year and that he

¹ Estie choked on a BBQ spare rib while out to dinner at China China Garden, her favorite restaurant, with her thirty-seven-year-old niece, Tanya, and Tanya's life partner, Teena.

couldn't keep an erection to save his life.) All he expected since wife two was someone to eat tuna fish and tomato sandwiches and watch *Celebrity Jeopardy!* with, someone to plant hydrangeas with, maybe some romance, some sweet-smelling shampoo or Avon perfume once in a while.

Drink Ajax. Drink bleach. Drink Ajax mixed with bleach. Take arsenic. Take strychnine. Shoot an air bubble into your bloodstream via injection. The slushy snow drifted towards his smashed window, beginning to accumulate in clumps; he cursed Estie for dying in February; for losing the twins she was carrying²; for causing his accident. He had, of course, failed to take notice of the ice on the road, failed to slow down, failed to control his vehicle. He felt the pangs of cold seep in, the heat escaping, mocking him, taunting him as it left for being so stupid. It was the first time in Howard's life he felt the world was out to get him. He remembered the question on the test at the senior center the group therapy leader—a hot young thing, mid-thirties, long legs—made him take:

121. I BELIEVE I AM BEING PLOTTED
AGAINST BY THE WORLD.

[Y] [N]

He answered no because he didn't understand the question until now. Yes he would've answered yesyesyes. His neck became heavy, his tongue thick. He wanted to take a nap but knew he shouldn't since he'd hit his head so hard he was fearful of concussion. And, to top it off, he was certain he was late for the funeral. He almost looked forward to the funerals, had become accustomed to the arrangements: the flowers, the casket, the music, the bad ham sandwiches and potato salad, the photo montages, the great remembrances. It was an all-expenses-paid party for him, with the exception of Estie, who had very little and left him less. He took a disappointed deep breath, embraced and cradled the sharp pain above his eyebrows, deep in his skull—or was it the back of his neck, he couldn't tell—and said,

“Jump off the Brooklyn Bridge.”

The statement lingered in the crushed automobile and made what was left of the windshield fog. He was saddened by how old and heavy his voice sounded. He'd never been to Brooklyn; he didn't even know what state Brooklyn belonged to. In fact, he'd never been outside of Michigan his whole life. He never saw a reason to leave. Another test question quickly lingered, gnawing

² For you see, Estie was just shy of twenty-four weeks pregnant when she passed, acting as a surrogate for Tanya and Teena. Estie was sixty-one. This was Howard's only shot at some sort of fatherhood, albeit from a distance, and he wanted to be a father more than anything. He felt Estie ruined everything and he felt cheated.

at his mind:

517. I CANNOT DO ANYTHING WELL. [Y] [N]

He thought it was a trick question at the time. Yes, he answered. Yes, I cannot do anything well. But now that he thought about it, he should've put no. No, I cannot do anything well. Either way, he believed it. He couldn't even live life well.

All of his women did, though, each with her own story. The first, Svetlana³, died in Lake Michigan, her foot getting caught in an abandoned dock hole that was never filled up. They were only married six months. Two years later, the second one, Joanne⁴, only twenty-seven when cancer invaded her ovaries, her marrow. All she ever wanted was a vegetable garden and a dog—things she had before her father left her family for the rodeo, things that represented solidarity and affection. She only got her vegetable garden.

Lock yourself in a box and leave instructions for burial alive, walk in front of a train a car a Mack truck, cut your throat with a hacksaw a razor blade a butcher knife. And it was the same for the last four: Carla⁵, thirty-two, who died in a tragic plane crash that made world news; Donna⁶, forty-three, who didn't

³ Sweet Svetlana, a twenty-four-year-old Russian import, adopted and raised by the Kirkwood family of Hoboken, New Jersey. She was the military nurse that helped with his physical examination, determining his future with the armed forces. She was large in stature, which also included her calves, wrists, ears but she was lovely and generous. She was intrigued with Howard's history, his fantastic life of sailing around the world training elephants, dining with people like Ernest Hemingway (all of which was not the slightest bit accurate or truthful; Howard held a penchant towards covering his failures with thick, sultry lies that no woman ever doubted or resisted. He, naturally, kept all personal matters and private affairs such as finances private and personal) and, of course, his gorgeous physique. This is why she loved him and why, ultimately, they all loved him.

⁴ Joanne: she was a mopey, plain, dark skinned woman of Cuban descent. She was thoroughly convinced that the sailboats Howard stole from the docks for daytime escapades (side note: he was caught three times stealing boats, got suspended from the yacht club and almost thrown in jail twice) belonged to his family because he was related to the Pope of Rome and received a stipend to live on. A devout Catholic, she felt it was a gift from God that this ravishingly delicious man would chose to marry her, especially since sex before marriage was out of the question and she had already been divorced twice.

⁵ Three things happened during this time: 1) A large settlement was given to the surviving families and Howard finally thought he hit it big but 2) it ended up going to her other husband Cecil who Carla never divorced, which Howard only found about after he queried the feds. 3) After these deaths (and especially this one), he began to be a suspect because how could all these women die of natural causes with the same man? He wasn't guilty of killing, only continually failing and lying about his failures. Eventually, the attorneys, police, community left him be but by that time it was too late, the speculation too insurmountable and he moved to another town, twenty minutes east, hoping for success that never manifested.

⁶ Donna was a spry thing, a very prominent part of this new community, a diamond in Amway, making the fat cash. She was enthralled with Howard's slightly crooked ballroom dancing that he learned in the Basque Country, his knowledge of fine wine that he learned in Italy. She told him that he looked like what President John F. Kennedy would've looked like if he would've lived long enough. This impressed her and all of her friends immensely.

wake up one day in a Super 8 in Skokie, Illinois on a business trip for Amway, just shy of nine months together; Sentrina⁷, fifty-nine, who fell into a diabetic coma the night of their honeymoon in Traverse City and passed two days later, a record for Howard. Finally, he found Estie. Estie the survivor, the overcomer, the envoy. Estie, the one that would provide children after all these years and who would make his coffee, bleach his underwear, clean his john, wear the occasional Avon perfume. Estie, the one he'd been waiting for to make it all happen for him, now dead like the rest, almost one year to the day.

160. I HAVE NEVER FELT BETTER IN MY
ENTIRE LIFE THAN I DO RIGHT NOW. [Y] [N]

He'd answered yes, of course. He had an alive wife with two alive babies inside her that he'd be able to hold and hug and buy teddy bears for and they'd, at least, call him by his first name, if not something close to dad. He was eating three squares a day, sleeping well, doing fine for the first time ever. Asked the same question now, he would've answered no-way-in-hell. He felt like a horrible failure.

Swallow a months worth of Angina pills with some Dixie-Doo Whiskey, hang yourself with a shower cord, volleyball net, guitar string. Howard heard crunching snow, coughs, footsteps. Boots on broken glass. A signal he would live. A signal he might make it to Estie. A hand wiped the snow from the window slowly, as to not knock any broken shards. Howard could make out red and blue lights behind the hand, the strong yellow from the front guiding the police officers, the EMT's, the on-lookers, path.

"Can you hear me? Don't move. Can you speak? Do you know who you are?"

His spine was sore, he began to doze off. "Sure" came out a little lower, a little slower than before.

"He's alive, let's get 'em outta here," he heard the middle-aged man tell the other pairs of boots on glass.

Howard had even failed at dying.

⁷ Sentrina Carlson, the ex-wife of Reverend Marcus Carlson. Reverend Carlson left his family—his wife and his son, not hers—for a transgendered alternative lifestyle that neither she nor Howard understood. He was up for "corrective" surgery to make him Marilyn in France when she passed.