

Dave Margoshes

Pennies on the Track

Half-way up the hill, the engine sputters and dies. For two, three, maybe four beats, the car continues its forward motion, upward, but slower, slowing, not quite in slow motion but edging toward it, like Wile E. Coyote or Elmer Fudd in one of those cartoons where they've run off the edge of a cliff and they're suspended in space, legs still churning, what's happened to them taking its time sinking in. Then the car comes to a hesitant stop, like the earth shuddering on its axis or the heart gathering itself in rather than beating in one of those arrhythmias, and everything—I mean what is happening but also the blue air itself, strained thin as if from altitude—is very clear, and I can see not only the expression on my father's face, which is a grin, a *foolish* grin, but what his hands are doing, pulling at the hand brake, snapping the key back and forth in the ignition, and the fear flashing across my mother's eyes just beneath the flowered brim of her hat, the warm brown interior of the car, the scratches and scrapes on the leather, and even outside, the avocado-green canopy of leaves above us that tells me it is spring, the honeysuckle bushes growing like scrap heaps alongside the road, the gravel on the shoulder, each chip separate, like snowflakes, and, of course, spinning my head quickly to take it in, the long, tunnel-like sweep of hill behind us, its jaw spreading into a grin wider than my father's—all of this I can see as the car, for that one moment trapped by the laws of physics between its desire to continue forward and gravity's insistence in pulling it down, trembles, awaiting instructions that cannot come.

Then there is motion: a bursting of movement sharp as the innocent explosion that sends birds hurtling out of treetops. The car begins its

inevitable roll backwards, slowly at first, the quickening pace that will lead us to destruction implicit in its force. My father's grin widens as he looks over his shoulder, then deepens into something like a grimace, his teeth showing. "Oh shit," he says, or "damn," or "thunder"—I don't remember the word itself, just its force, but he *does* say, "Hold on, everybody," that I do remember. My mother says: "I *told* you to have that looked at," because the car has stalled before, though not on a hill (this is not part of the memory itself, not *my* memory, but part of the intelligence which has gathered around the story, part of the legend). My father too is moving, his head smoothly swinging backward and forward as if packed in ball bearings, his shoulders rolling under the seersucker cloth of his jacket like fish thrashing in water, his hands darting like birds. He jams the stick up and out, his foot treading the clutch pedal like an organist caught up in rhythm, the gears grind malevolently but the stick pops into place and the constipated engine coughs, clears its throat, coughs again and roars into life. The car jerks, picking up speed. My father swings the wheel suddenly and the car, as if it is on one of those platforms they use to turn locomotives around with in railroad marshalling yards, takes an abrupt right turn, its rear end smothering into bushes that scrape and claw at the fenders and trunk and running boards and rear window, embracing us, and again the car shudders to a halt, trembling like a girl who's just been kissed. Then my father is pulling on the gearshift, his feet tap-dancing between the clutch and brake pedals, and we're moving forward again, jerking out of the bushes' embrace, swinging down, straightening, moving faster. My father's head swivels one last time to the rear, taking me in, my eyes wide not so much with fright as with wonder. "You okay, Buster?" he asks.

His head moves forward to the rushing road, then to my mother. "No harm done," he says.

My sister claims she was there, that she covered her eyes with her hands and didn't look out again until it was all over, but I have no memory of her. She was certainly not in the front seat with them, all those swinging elbows, and, in my memory, there is no room in the cramped back for anything but me, small as I was, and my fear.

This is not my earliest memory of childhood, but it may be the first which is specific to my father. It is certainly my first memory of him as brave, as something I might have called or thought of as a hero.

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When I was six, I set fire to my bed.

We used to keep candles in the house, and kerosene lanterns, because the hydro would frequently go out in bad weather and my mother, though she was a city woman, had acquired a taste during the war of spending evenings with all the lights off, the family sitting around the fireplace, the lantern by the chair where my father read glowing like the sun glimpsed through haze. I had a fascination for flame, like many children, and I don't think it was an unhealthy one, though my father, if he were alive, would look at his outstretched hands, palms turned up, and laugh at that thought.

On this night, the war had been over for two years and the lights were on in the house. I was in my room, under the bed, which, because the bed was high and the fringed edges of the bedspread hung down almost to the floor on all sides, was like a neat, well-lit cave or a clearing within a dense woods. I had toy soldiers, a candle—a small white stub of wax encrusted onto a chipped white saucer—and a book of matches, and, when the candle had been lit, the cave was even brighter. I knew I was not allowed to play with matches, which may have been why I was under the bed, out of sight. I played with my soldiers and time passed. I was not conscious of it, but I moved the saucer with the candle to the edge of the battlefield to give the soldiers more room. The flame fluttered beneath the fringes of the blue chenille spread, then one of them caught and suddenly one entire strip of fringe, running the length of my bed, was aflame. "Mummy!" I shrieked, not thinking of her specifically, not thinking of my father, only reacting. I shrunk into a ball, clutching my shoulders with my crossed hands, raising my knees and lowering my head. "MUMMY!"

They were there immediately, both of them, she a few steps ahead of him, and, as she came through the door, I responded to the sight of her ankles and feet the way a dog trained to attack a stranger might have, scrabbling out from under the bed, on my elbows and knees, the way a crab moves, my shoulders hunched, until I was clear of the bedspread, which ignited the back of my polo shirt as I went by, then leaping up, although my feet buckled beneath me and I folded in like a flaming accordion. I was howling with fright and the first intimation of pain but I was conscious of two things: my mother stopping, her face white and

frozen into a horrible, twisted parody of itself, and my father *not* stopping, moving past her with some kind of stubborn, overweight grace, bending down and swooping me up, aflame, smothering the flames with his chest and arms. Then he handed me, still screaming but extinguished, to my mother and grabbed up the flaming bedspread, bunching it in his bare hands and pressing it to his chest, smothering it the way he had done with me, pressing the heat into his own flesh, absorbing it, then throwing it to the floor, stamping out the remaining licks of flame and sparks with his slippers feet.

I had stopped screaming, transfixed. My mother was rocking me against her body, my head pressed to her collar bone, and her head tilted down so that her mouth was just above my ear, into which she was crooning, "my baby, my baby," over and over, and my father turned to us, his shirt torn away and his chest and face black, his eyebrows and the shock of shoe-leather brown hair that usually trickled down over his forehead gone. There were no flames but the smell of them, of the burning chenille and hair and skin, was strong in the room, and my father, his back to the light hanging from the ceiling, seemed to glow, as if he were still aflame, as if, rather than extinguish the fire, he had absorbed it, become one with it.

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The blacktop road from Clinton runs alongside the river, loose and lanky but relatively straight, until it reaches the abandoned mill at Potter's Mill, with its loosely spread community of half a dozen houses, then it becomes a vee, with the main branch angling north, toward Potter Lake, the smaller road bending sharply and lumbering across the river in the form of a two-span metal bridge. From there, it dwindles to a narrow gravel road that struggles up a steep hill to a short wooden bridge spanning the CN tracks before it meanders on through meadows and woods, ultimately, in some logic of its own, curving back to link with a blacktop road leading to Clinton.

I was on the railroad bridge when my father passed by on his way to the village in early afternoon and, by coincidence, I was there again when he returned several hours later. It was late afternoon now, almost supertime, and the heat of the day had gathered into a pocket of dust and intensity that made it difficult to breathe. My father had the jacket of

his gabardine suit folded neatly over his arm, his tie and collar button were undone and his face was flushed red as a slab of meat from Gabreaux's butcher shop as he rose to the tip of the hill. Rivulets of sweat poured down his face from his scalp as if an underground spring existed in the dense foliage of his hair. I had been watching him for some time as he labored up the hill and it wasn't fear I felt but some vague unease I could neither identify nor explain.

He stopped, chest and shoulders heaving, and puffed his cheeks, blew out slowly. He was, I suppose, in his late forties, an average-sized man slightly overweight but in good health, the cancer that would kill him a dozen years later not yet a tic in the rhythm of his blood. The acidic smell of rye whiskey stood on his breath like poorly camouflaged sentries betraying their position and I knew he had been sitting in the pub at the Clinton hotel, where it was always cool and you could see through a window to the corner where buses to Toronto and other places stopped. He looked at me but he didn't smile.

"Missed the stupid bus," he said, gesturing down the hill with the arm that held his jacket. I didn't say anything.

"Been here all day?"

"Just came to see the afternoon freight."

"How many cars?"

"Never the same but they all been long this summer. Yesterday, there was 117, plus the caboose and two engines."

My father pursed his mouth, the smooth skin on his chin wrinkling with the effort, and nodded his head slightly. "The commerce of the nation is healthy. Not bad a tall." My father had no head for or interest in business, but he considered himself knowledgeable about politics. He had cut himself shaving and there was still a tiny square of tissue paper stuck to his jawridge just below his ear. I reached out to flick it away and he jerked his head back involuntarily and swatted at his jaw as if he had felt the delicate footwork of a mosquito. He smiled now, almost his full grin, and some of my unease lifted, as if a sudden breath of wind had sliced through a smell hanging over me, carrying part of it away.

"Better get on home," he said, shrugging his shoulders. The straps of his suspenders, striped blue and dark red, almost maroon, stretched with the motion. He took out the neatly folded white handkerchief he always carried in his back pocket and mopped his forehead, brushing back his hair, which had grey mixed in with the dark brown like light flakes of

snow. He folded the handkerchief without looking at it, using his thigh for support. He gazed down the tracks toward the east.

"Train'll be here any minute," I said. I had a picture in my mind of us both standing on the bridge watching it thunder past, counting the cars, pointing at the funny ones.

"Not this time, Sport. Not too fussy about watching trains, anyway. Have to get home while your mother still remembers who I am." He put the handkerchief away, and, this time, *he* touched *my* head, brushing at my hair with a palm still shiny and hard with scars from fire, but I didn't flinch. "See you later, Sport. Don't be late for dinner."

I liked the bridge because it's the highest point for miles and gives up a view in all directions. Without changing my position but by turning my head to the right, I was able to watch him walk down the dirt road that traversed a barb wired field where dairy cows grazed, then curved into a woods behind the Clements farm that hid the cottages and led, if you followed it far enough, in a wide arc, to the blacktop road leading to Clinton, where, if you turn south, it continues on to the highway leading to Peterborough. I watched him, his body growing smaller and smaller, until he passed the point where the road bends, still a quarter of a mile before our driveway, and he disappeared from view. By that time, the whistle had already blown and I turned my attention to the tracks, getting off my bicycle and standing at the railing with my hand on a crossbeam and gazing east at the approaching train.

There is a slight curve to the tracks just before they plunge beneath the bridge so it was possible to see a partial profile of the engineer, his elbow hooked on the open window of his door, the grey striped peaked cap pulled firmly down around his ears, just above the eyes. I waved and he waved back, our arms lifting in ritual that required no thought. The locomotive was so enveloped in dust and grime it was virtually colorless. The bridge shook as the freight roared beneath it like an animal taking to its burrow, and I could feel wind rushing up at my face from between the rough boards. I moved quickly to the other side, but, as always, the train had been faster and the locomotive was already emerging. I shook my head, lifting my chin until my line of vision bisected the line created by the outflung branch of a thorn tree on the north slope of the hill. I waited until the second engine had passed and then, using the branch as a reference point, began counting the cars. There were boxcars, many of them with the CN logo but others saying CPR and Grand Trunk and

Great Northern, and flatcars, some of them empty, others carrying farm machines, big tractors and combines, and tank cars with strings of numbers on their sides. The train moved with a lurching smoothness and waves of heat rising from the tops of the cars made many of them seem to blur into each other, so I had to concentrate hard. There were only 97 cars and I felt let down that there hadn't been as many as the day before. "Record still stands," I said as the caboose rattled past. I waved again but there was no brakeman visible, no reply.

I watched as the train got smaller and smaller, the way my father had, and waited until it disappeared. I walked to the end of the bridge and onto the grassy bluff, then down a path that led to the brow of the hill. Shallow steps had been carved into the sloping dirt wall below and I had to pick my way carefully down the steep incline to avoid falling. Toward the end of the slope, the steps gave way to slippery gravel for the last yard or so and I jumped from the last step to the bottom, my sneakers making the gravel crunch. I walked east, placing my feet carefully on each tie, starting at the one across from a lightbox, and counting to a hundred. I crouched down between the tracks facing east and peered down at the dust lying lightly on the shining steel rail. The only trace of the penny I'd put there earlier was the faint impression of the young queen frowning up at me, her profile etched in a rime of copper dust thin as winter breath. I grinned back at her. "We are not amused," I said aloud. After a moment, I ran my finger lightly across the track, wiping her away. "We are *not* amused."

All this time, through the watching of the train's approach, the counting of cars, the scramble down to the tracks and along them and the ironic communion with the coin's spirit, I was not thinking of my father. But as I arose, he came into my mind, as if he had been waiting his turn and it had now come, and he didn't leave my mind until, 15 minutes later, I saw him, his face not yet bloodied. All I had seen of him in the morning was his crumpled form under a blanket on the chesterfield in the cottage's main room—he had been up late the night before, my mother said, and we should leave him be, and I was gone, off with my friends, before he got up. But I'd been on the bridge, with Randy and Travis Sloan, twins who lived in the next cottage, when he came by on his way to the village, startling me with his cleanly shaven cheeks and the suit.

"What're you boys up to this beautiful Saturday?" he said, giving me a hug. "Not planning on running away, are you?"

"Just playing. Why would you think that?"

"Oh, maybe you're unhappy." He shrugged and flashed his famous grin, the one my mother used to say—though she hadn't for years—could make him prime minister if he'd had any sense for politics, could have made him anything he put his mind to if he had any ambition, and it seemed to me that he looked at me closely, looking *for* something, and then, because he winked, was relieved not to have found it. "Tracks always make me think of that, because that's the route I took when I ran away when I was a boy, younger than you fellas."

"You ran away, Mr. Ossarian?" Randy asked.

"Sure. Lots of times." My father pursed his mouth. "Not that I recommend it. I had plenty to run away from, or thought I did. I don't suppose you fellas do, eh?"

He told me he'd forgotten an appointment he had in town today and was on his way to the village to catch the bus. He was stupid for forgetting and shouldn't have come out last night. He'd try to be back tomorrow, maybe in time for church. He didn't say why he wasn't taking the car, and I didn't think to ask. He brushed my hair away from my eyes, the same gesture my mother was fond of, as if that lock of hair offended them, though neither of them ever suggested I get a crewcut like the twins', and he moved off, looking back once, when he was halfway down the hill, just where the Halliwells' fence began, and waving.

"Your dad's weird," Travis said, when my father was safely out of hearing, and I wanted to hit him.

I didn't, but my irritation festered like a splinter and later, when we were swimming in the river and Travis splashed me, I told him he was stupid and there was some pushing then, bewildered Randy coming between us before anything happened, and that's how I came to be on the bridge alone later. I was sitting on my bike, leaning against the railing, my left foot on the bottom rail for support, facing south, looking down the hill at the abandoned Halliwell house where, shortly after the war ended, they had found the body of a baby in the well. I was thinking that if I had a pair of field glasses or a collapsing telescope like I'd seen in pirate movies I'd be able to see everything people were doing within the scope of that field of vision, including the sad quick closing down of the lives of babies, the disposal of their bodies in full sight of anybody who might be watching when it would be assumed no one would be, and I was staring intently across the river at the vague outline of Helen

Mackie's house on the small bluff above the road just before it turned onto the bridge, wondering if, with a telescope, I'd be able to see her bedroom window, could watch at night as she readied herself for bed, could see the blinding whiteness of her underwear, when I noticed the figure of someone walking along the road just below her house. I made field glasses of my hands, propped my elbows on the railing and watched. The figure came down off the road and onto the bridge, across the first span, and it was a man, dressed in white, then onto the abutment, then the second span, stopping once to peer downward into the river, then on, back onto the road, growing bigger with each step. The whiteness was a suit and a straw hat and just a moment before I would actually have been able to recognize him I realized it was my father. I tightened the focus of my glasses and watched him as he drew closer, along the road and past the Halliwells and up the hill, until he was close enough for me to see the frown.

He had been drinking the night before too, the fresh smell of it on his breath cutting through the stale, sour sweat clinging to his body after two hours in the sweltering Ford as we gave him our hugs, but that was not unusual; what was, was the way my mother, who never liked it, was harping at him, scraping at him the way the razor had this morning, nicking the blue-veined skin of his cheeks and jaw, drawing tiny pools of blood.

"Leave it alone, Allie," my father asked her. He was seated at the kitchen table with a cold beer, in his undershirt and suit trousers, the suspender straps loose at his waist, his socked feet in slippers. From Victoria's birthday to Labour Day, he fended for himself at home during the week, then joined us at the cottage Friday evening, letting the relaxation of standards that tempered the rhythm of his summers overtake him even in the presence of my mother, who, at home, would never tolerate an undershirt anywhere but in the privacy of the bedroom.

"How can I when you remind me all the time?" she said, her voice so bitter it surprised me. She gave me a sharp glance and I averted my eyes quickly so she wouldn't know I'd been watching them. I got up, made a business of stretching, got my ball and glove and went outside. I stood under the apple tree tossing the ball up at the almost ripe apples and catching it, seemingly absorbed in what I was doing but my ears cocked to their voices seining through the screen door.

They were arguing, I knew even without hearing all the words, not about his drinking, which was never really a problem, but about money, our lack of it, my father's inability to make as much of it as he should, and his even more maddening inability or disinclination to care, a feeling—or lack of it—she took to mean an inability to care about her, my sister and I. I knew even these subtleties of the argument because they had had it so often, I'd heard it so many times. I don't mean to suggest that my parents fought all the time, or that they fought with fervor and irreducible bitterness, they didn't, and I believe my mother still loved her husband as much when he died, and he his wife, as they had when we children were small. The only reason this particular argument sticks in my memory was its ferocity.

My father had been a promising young man when they met but he was forced to drop out of school short of his architecture degree, after she became pregnant with the child that would have been my older brother if it had lived, and settle for a draftsman's job. He was with the 12th Calgary Light Engineers during the war, serving in Italy and Africa, but never firing a shot, helping to design billets for troops and modifying villas for temporary headquarters, a service he accepted willingly. After the war, with two young children to feed, it had seemed easier to go back to the drafting table, which he loved, than to school, which he hadn't. He worked in a large firm on Yonge Street doing blueprints for buildings designed by younger men who had avoided war service. This didn't bother my father but rankled my mother, and that *did* bother him. The arguments were always worse, the indignity that caused them harder for my mother to live with, in the summer, when we were at the cottage, which had belonged to her parents. Being here was a constant reminder that we couldn't have afforded it on our own, just the way we couldn't afford a bigger house, a newer car, one of those television sets everyone was getting and so many other things.

The light faded and I put my ball and glove on the porch and sat on the step listening to the sound of my parents' voices, their long silences. Tinny radio music drifted across the thin line of trees from the cottage where Randy and Travis lived, Perry Como complaining about the moon in his face. "Goddam it, Tom, why don't you be a man?" I heard my mother shout, her voice suddenly rising above the hushed tone like a bird flinging itself out of the orbit of its flock, soaring high against the blinking sky. In response there was a bang that I knew was my father

bringing his fist down on the table, then the sound of breaking glass. Then a door slamming. Then silence.

It grew dark. Frankie Laine on the radio. Then the Ames Brothers. Then "ShaBoom." A door opened. Behind me, my mother's steps on the kitchen linoleum. "Robby, you should be in bed, dear."

"In a minute, Mum."

"Not in a minute, Mum. Now. Right now." She had a cold and had been sneezing through the day. Now her voice was thick and faint, as if she were speaking through gauze. Her footsteps retreated, the door closed again. I sat on, listening to the music, lifting the ball and dropping it into the glove's smooth leather pocket. A car came down the long looping driveway from the road, passed the turnoff and slowed down as it approached. It stopped a dozen yards from the cottage, the engine humming. After a few minutes, the passenger door opened and I could smell my sister's familiar perfume as she stepped out. "Good night, Henry," "Good night, Amy."

She stood in the moonlight watching him drive away, then came and sat down beside me on the step.

"What'dya see?"

"*Hell and High Water*. Lousy, but Richard Widmark is great. I love his eyes. What're you doing up anyway, Buster?" She looked over her shoulder through the screen door at the light from the kitchen softening the dark porch. She leaned her hand against mine. "They been at it all night?"

I shrugged. "It don't mean nothin'."

"I know, Fatso, but I wish they wouldn't."

We sat on for a few minutes, not saying anything, listening to the faint music from the Sloan cottage and breathing in the smell of her perfume, safe in the comfort of each other's bodies. Then we went inside, where my father was sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle and a glass, reading *The Star*. He looked up at us, blinking for a moment as if waiting for recognition to register, then grinning, the light of that smile washing over us in a gesture of permanence that sent me to bed willingly.

I was remembering all this as I rode my bicycle toward home now, not because I had lost my faith in that but because of the look in my father's eye when he'd pulled his head back with a jerk as I swatted at his chin, the sound of his voice as he gazed down the track from the bridge that afternoon, "I had plenty to run away from, or thought I did.

I don't suppose you fellas do, eh?," and I was filled with a longing thick as hunger rising up from my gut all the way to the back of my tongue, longing with neither direction nor purpose that I could tell, driving me not toward him necessarily but keeping him in my mind as I pedalled home.

Chips of gravel small as my thumbnail sprayed in both directions as the wheels of my bicycle rolled off the bridge and onto the hard packed dirt in the centre of the road. I pedalled with my head up, shoulders back and arms straight out to the handlebars, in imitation of a horseback rider in a show ring, my legs moving like pistons independent of the small, wiry body above them. Half a mile down the road, the Clements' driveway branches off to the left, leading to their house and barns, behind which lie the cottages. I took this shortcut, the bike bouncing up and down in the ruts, and went across the barnyard, the Clements' sheltie barking at me without menace or interest. I had to walk the bike across a narrow stretch of cultivated field, the corn as high as my shoulder, and lift it over a barbed wire fence I crawled under. Then I rolled down a grassy incline to a hard dirt trail that came out just behind the Sloan's cottage. "Hey," Randy said. He and Travis were sitting on the grass in front of their porch in their swimsuits eating ice cream from chipped blue bowls. I waved but didn't say anything, my legs pumping hard.

I wheeled around the corner of our cottage just as the baseball bat was coming down against his shoulder. He had put his suit jacket back on and the bat left a smudged grass stain on the white upper sleeve as it slid down. "Bastard," my mother yelled, "why'd you come back, bastard? Bastard, bastard, bastard. I'll kill you." Her face was bright with what might have been fever.

I braked and slid forward off the seat, straddling the bike's bar with both my feet on the ground. My breath was coming fast and my polo shirt stuck to my back like parchment, sweat rolling off my face the way it had off my father's as he labored up the hill. My mother and father were standing in front of the porch door, she barring his way in, the baseball bat—my bat, which had been on the porch, in a corner with the ball and glove—rising again for another blow. My father stepped back, one small step, as if to give her more room to swing, but he didn't lift his hands. He said her name, "Allie," softly, repeating it again and again like a child.

"Bastard," she said, and the bat came down, on his head this time, and he reeled back from the force of the blow, a blossom of blood springing up on his forehead, but, again, he didn't raise his hands, and this is the moment I take with me, the mind's photograph I snapped then that has lost no clarity or lustre over the years since: the bat rising yet again and falling, with less force, this time on his shoulders, just at the fleshy point above where the ball of the arm connects, the tears springing from her eyes, the soft round circle formed by her mouth as she said the word so low I could barely hear her, "God," the bat falling from her hand and clattering to the soft ground beneath their feet, end first, then tilting over, sparking against her shins in its fall, his standing there, blood pouring down onto his collar, eyes closed as if, by shutting out the sight of it he could protect himself from her anger, mouth looped open into some lopsided combination of pain and grin, his hands at his sides, the fingers jerking with concentration the way they had when they took the flames from me for themselves, waiting for the next blow.