

DANIEL PERRY
ODE

MARTIN

READING PAUL'S STORIES FELT WRONG, but we didn't get a choice. The morning we found out, his mother pushed the green notebook toward us.

"Maybe we shouldn't—" I started to say, but Molly lunged in front of me and took it. She buried her head in Gail's shoulder and whispered, "Thank you."

We climbed the stairs and entered Paul's old room. The desk had been cleared for us, and his mementoes were piled neatly to the left: a few certificates, a framed photo of him and Molly graduating Teacher's College, and on top, a small jade carving of a bird. Molly wrapped the statuette in her fingers. She brought it to her chest. A whimper escaped her lips and she replaced it, glaring at me, having caught me staring.

"It's a nightingale," she said. "I got it for him in China."

She sat on the chair and set the book in the centre of the desk. She opened it and turned the pages sternly, determined to read them all in one sitting.

That was two days ago. Things haven't changed much. After every reading we do of Paul's eulogy, she returns to the desk and opens the cover.

Today, she whines when she reaches the end.

"Martin, you *have* to read it."

"It's none of my business."

"You're his oldest friend!"

I've known her forty-eight hours, and already, she's yelling at me.

I keep my voice even.

"If he'd wanted me to read it, he'd have shown me."

She snaps, "You're a callous asshole, you know that?"

I sit heavily on the bed and it bounces beneath me. If I've learned anything about Molly, it's that resisting is pointless. In a minute she'll be beating her fists on the walls, her face turning blue. I reach out so she can thrust the book into my hand, and I open it in the middle, to a page that's

Xed over. The next one is missing. I flip until I find something I *can* read: a disorganized ramble about a boy who loves basketball, just like Paul did, and who, despite his big frame, is no good. (Just like Paul.) The hero misses the last shot of the finals but the team carries him off the court anyway. Perfect. The *Rudy* ending. But then, for some reason, there are two more pages, about tryouts the year after.

I skim through a story about Scout Camp next—I was there, I don't need to relive it—and it's followed by a bit about Molly. I skip this entirely. Paul was always gaga over girlfriends, and though she tells me they'd been together three years, I doubt that she was any different. This week's the first I've heard of her. I guess it had been a while since I'd seen Paul.

Last, before the blank end pages, is a screed about Paul's father's affair. I read two long and emotional paragraphs and then I close the book. No one should see this. But at the desk, Molly pouts above her pink sweater. Her face is kind of ruddy, her lipstick's too red, and her Betty Page cut and black dye-job scream *poser*.

We've been stopping and starting for two days now, arguing about which stories to tell, and which to leave out. Which ones best encapsulate Paul. She wants to use them all, and her expression is falling. She's going to start crying again. Fuck. I re-open the book to the section about Scout Camp and I take a small notepad from my blazer. I don't actually read but I scribble a few words.

As Molly looks on, almost smiling, I wonder what Paul The Writer would think. The truth is, I don't know anymore. It's already been eight years since we left our tiny hometown, Currie, for college in Waterloo. Paul studied English at the University Of, and I went for Business, at Laurier.

We expected we'd see each other all the time, at first: Thursday nights at Phil's, the seedy student bar, and in carpools home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Slack Week. We even planned a trip to Europe after second year, though it fell through when his parents split up. We had barely talked since.

Two nights ago, Paul jumped off the Main Street Bridge and he drowned in the Waubnakee River. The muddy water's not so far down, and though it's deep, it's docile. Head trauma, said the coroner. From the fall.

But we jumped all the time when we were kids, in winter, even, until our frosh year, when—drunk and home for Christmas—we set out to see who had gained more weight from caf food. The bridge is so low, there's no way you can hurt yourself. Even when the water's frozen. I went first, and I

heard the cracking sounds the moment I landed. From above, Paul watched me high-tail it off the ice, his hand on the railing as he knelt in the snow, laughing. Really laughing.

Killing himself.

Had he died any other way, I'd tell this one tomorrow. It's a perfect closer, too, I can hear it: "When his mother asked, 'Well, if Martin asked you to jump off a bridge with him?' My oldest friend, Paul Weaver, said 'Yes.' That's how I'll always remember him."

We've got to get it right tomorrow. I understand. After death, a person lives on in his words. His *story*. But for an English major, Molly's taking this awfully literally, just sitting there, staring out the window. I'd rather just get to the point. People are going to miss Paul, and it's sad that he died. He was a great friend, once.

I cap my pen and put it in my pocket, and then I say her name.

MOLLY

I hear him, I'm just ignoring him. *God*. It's like he can't see I'm in the middle of something. *Just reading my soul-mate's last words, jerk-off*. But of course, Martin doesn't stop. He says my name again, drawing it out, with about seventeen Os between the *M* and the *Ls*.

And again.

"Molly!"

"*What*, Martin? What do you want?"

"We're almost finished," he says, checking his watch. "We're just under time and we've got lots to say. Let's do one more read-through."

A read-through. Like a Tuesday-morning seminar.

What Martin doesn't know is that you can't rehearse eulogies. You just stand on the stage and see what comes out—even if you're left a bawling mess. Crying at a funeral's not weird; *not* crying is. You come across like the journalist with the obituary on file, three-quarters written and waiting.

Martin still expects me to answer. In his blazer and jeans, and balding already, he's pathetic, overcompensating with an expensive silver watch that's too big for him. I exaggerate a sigh from the back of my throat and hope that I can gas him with disgust. When it fails I say, "Sure." I don't look up.

I just want to finish this story.

Reid Watson had a party the night before the final, like he did every year. As usual, Summer School was proving itself an oxymoron, but I was one credit shy and determined to graduate. Watching everyone else move

on in April really drove it home, and the sublets in the dingy bungalows on Lester Street were quieter than ever, empty for the summer. I stopped by Reid's for a beer. Okay, two. The few meatheads who stayed in town to play softball with him were all there: Gary Connor and his girlfriend Stacey, Jumbo Joe Polak—not actually his name, but all anyone could spell—and Brad and Michelle, and Scott, John and—

Of course it's true. Everything was when he started, and he left nothing out. The list goes on for a while, but things get better when I show up.

She was a year younger than me. Maybe more like two and a half. It doesn't matter because I never found out. Having failed last summer session because of just this party, I knew I was doomed to leave early, but still I stared, watching her strum Reid's guitar on the porch and pretend she was shy, singing softly, holding it back. The next morning I wrote an exam worth a bright shining 71, and afterward, instead of telling Doctor Laskey to stuff it, that I'd failed Romantic Lit for the last time, I just bolted to Reid's to ask about the nightingale.

Seriously. Like in Keats, or The Emperor And The. He only called me that once to my face, and I laughed at him. "What a cheeseball," I said. "I will never date you." In China two years later, I bought him the figurine; a peace offering from a long-forgotten battle.

"Fifteen seconds," Martin says, checking the damned watch. He turns his wrist to show me. "I'm starting when the second hand gets to the twelve."

"I can tell time, Martin."

He breathes in. Checks again. Goes.

"Your friend and mine, Paul Weaver, will be sorely missed," he begins. "Paul's girlfriend Molly and I are honoured to be asked to memorialize a man who—"

I quit listening and let my eyes glaze over. *Memorialize?* Is that even a word? It's so unfeeling. He reads into the mirror with his hands at his sides, making sure to keep them out his pockets. I don't refocus until I hear "Scout Camp."

"We're at this cattle ranch, not far out of town," he's saying. "It's the final-year hike, an overnighter, and kids from every troop in MacKinnon County are running around playing war, shooting each other with the sticks they've gathered for firewood.

"But Paul, he wants no part of this. He picks up our tent, which is still limp on the ground, and tells me to take the other side. We carry our home into the middle of this flat and set it up. A private camp, for just the two kids

from Currie. That night, we make a small fire and cook canned soup, and we spend the night talking about the girls in Grade Eight, all spaghetti straps and nice legs and whose chest is still flat.”

I’ve read this one. It doesn’t go anywhere after the body parts. But everything since undergrad is mine: Teacher’s College, English classes in China, Paul’s first job, and moving a Toronto Girl home with him. Anything before that is Martin’s.

“When we wake up we’re surrounded by a hundred head of longhorn,” he continues. “We didn’t know it, but we’ve pitched our tent in their pasture, and now, all these cows are lowing and grazing and stomping around us, and the two of us are just waiting, cowering in our sleeping bags, hoping they take off soon.”

They do. The end.

A better story would have Paul reassuring Martin, or cracking a joke, or maybe even getting up and chase away the longhorns, but that must not be how it happened. No matter. The mourners will laugh anyway. Easy pickings at a funeral. Martin chose a story and delivers it unflinchingly: off-book, with no tears, and no choking up. Ten out of ten.

“That’s just one of our great memories,” he says.

I forgot about the slam-bang conclusion, for bonus marks.

“And though we might not have seen each other much these last few years, I know in my heart that Paul cherished our childhood just like I—”

“Martin, stop.”

He looks at his watch, to mark time.

“What?”

“When did you last see him?”

He takes his speech from the desk and raps it on the wood, like a news anchor wrapping up.

“I’ve known him since we were six.”

“No, really, Martin. When?”

The hand holding papers drifts to his side.

“I guess it was ... almost four years ago.”

“Do you even know what happened the night he died?”

“He was walking home.”

“From?”

“From Brewskie’s.”

I shake my head.

“No. He had just left our place.”

Martin's eyes widen.

"So how'd he wind up dead in the river?"

I imagine punching his accusing face. Is he saying this is *my* fault?

"He had just gotten some bad news. He went out to clear his head."

"What was it?"

"His dad."

Martin sits down on the bed. He runs a hand through what's left of his hair.

"Remarried, and pregnant with a new kid."

"Right."

"First call since the split?"

I nod. Gail must have told him.

"And that's why he killed himself?"

"You're such an idiot, Martin. He didn't kill himself."

"So what, it was an accident? He *fell* off the bridge?"

"I don't know," I say. "I *do* think he jumped—"

"But?"

"But I don't think he wanted to die."

Martin looks down at his black dress shoes.

I thought he knew all this.

"Paul talked a lot that night about getting away from old memories," I begin. "About how good life was in China. He said that he felt like he'd moved beyond this town, and that he couldn't believe he'd wound up back here. And he said he was sorry, too, for dragging me down with him, and that he'd understand if I went back to Toronto."

"So what did you say?"

Suspicious. Still blaming me.

"I said that whatever happened, we'd do it together. His contract was just a year—what difference if it was at his old high school?—and I was getting calls for sub work, in London. We were both gaining experience, and before long we'd go somewhere else: Toronto, or Hamilton, or even England or somewhere. There was no rush to decide."

Martin raises a hand to his mouth. He nibbles a thumbnail.

"So Paul was okay? Last time you saw him?"

I exhale.

"He was upset that Currie was still exactly the same, and that all his old friends were either burnouts or long gone. Hungover on the line at Ritter

Pulley every day, or never to be heard from again. He said, ‘*Oldest friend* and *best friend* aren’t synonyms.’”

Martin shifts on the bed. I pin him with my eyes.

“Yes. He mentioned your name.”

“I’m sure he did,” Martin says. “I saw him that night, too.”

“*What?*” I shriek.

MARTIN

I shouldn’t have told her. Really. It’s the last thing she needs. And now, if we don’t get past it, we’ll never get this speech done.

“I was back visiting my parents,” I say. “We ordered Chinese, and afterward, I went out to Brewskie’s. I was meeting an old friend from high school, Jill. Do you know her?”

Molly stamps her foot. I’d better cut to the chase.

“I don’t know when Paul got to the bar, but he was stinking drunk when I saw him. Did he have anything at home?”

“Two beers.”

“I didn’t notice him until he got loud, when Willy cut him off. I guess he’d been there a while ...”

“So you—?”

“So I went over and talked him down. I told him I’d walk him home.”

Molly’s lips quiver.

“You *walked home with him?*”

It spreads to her whole face.

“Why didn’t he *get* home?”

I feel the sweat gathering, moist beneath my watch. I unclasp it and set it on the bed.

“We had an argument.”

She grits her teeth.

“I was trying to help.”

“Big mistake when he gets talking about his father,” she scoffs. “God, Martin. What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Maybe remarriage will help everyone move on.’”

“That wouldn’t have made it better.”

“No,” I don’t mean to laugh. “You’re right.”

Molly scowls.

“He said I was missing the point—and that I was such an asshole,

and that everything had always been easy for me. That I always had it all figured out.”

“And then?”

“And then he got quiet for a minute. We just looked at each other. He said, ‘I don’t understand. We both got out of here, but I messed it up somehow. You’ll get in your car tomorrow and drive back to your job at RIM, or wherever the Hell you work now, and once you’re gone, this place will swallow me whole.’”

Molly sinks in the chair.

“Anything else?”

“He took a swing at me.”

“Did you hit him back?”

“He was so drunk,” I smile. “It wasn’t much of a punch.”

She doesn’t find it funny.

“I just said, ‘Fine, Paul. Get yourself home,’ and turned around. I left him on Main Street. I guess he carried on, and when he got to the—”

Molly’s face goes white.

“No.” She shakes her head. “You must have said something else. Come on. What did you say?”

Fuck. Well. I’ve come this far.

“I told him that I wished I hadn’t run into him. After he swung at me. And that maybe we’d be better off just remembering how things were when we were kids.” I put my head in my hands. That’s all I want to say, but I feel her hot glare. It draws the rest out of me. “He said, ‘Maybe you’re right.’ And for what it’s worth, he was pretty calm.”

She squints. Perplexed.

“I asked if he was alright to get back,” I continue, but the next part clangs in my brain. “He said, ‘Sure thing.’ And then he said ... ‘Goodbye.’”

I feel my jaw relax, and the first tears run onto my cheeks. I don’t look at her. I just croak, “I’m so sorry.”

MOLLY

Well, what do you know? I thought. *Martin is human.*

When he started to cry I sat down on the bed, and immediately, he keeled over. His head landed in my lap.

“Oh my God. Oh, God. It’s my fault,” he moaned, tears on my jeans and his chest heaving. “I killed him!”

I took him by the shoulders.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Easy for you to say,” he sniffed. “Paul jumped because even his oldest friend walked out on him.”

How melodramatic. And wrong.

“Martin, you said you just wanted to remember being kids. Right?”

He sat up and put his hands to his eyes, correcting the aberration, this sudden show of emotion. He stretched his cheeks as he wiped them. He nodded.

“I think he decided to be a kid again,” I said.

Martin dried his nose on his sleeve. His two hundred-dollar sleeve.

“It was a mistake,” I said. “It wasn’t suicide.”

Martin clenched his fists.

“What’s it matter?” he snarled. “Everyone’s decided already.”

“Not everyone.”

I took the notebook from the desk.

“I remember jumping off the bridge,” I read, “with Martin. We’re not friends anymore, which I feel bad about, but—”

I looked at Martin. He held his breath.

“—now, with Dad gone, that’s all I want to keep. The rest of my youth has faded, been thrown under a blanket. I can’t make sense of it. Most of it, I can’t even remember. All I have now are summer afternoons, laying our towels on the banks, walking to the bridge and jumping. Freefalling.”

Martin reached for the notebook.

“Let me see that,” he said.

I pulled back and shielded it with my body.

“I can’t believe—”

“Run with what you have.”

“You think that’s best?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You’re talking about the good parts, when you were kids, and you never suggest that he killed himself.”

Martin stared off, through the poster on the wall. Reggie Lewis. Paul’s favourite NBA player. We were all kids when he died.

“I should have read the stories.”

“You already had your mind made up.”

He inhaled and gathered himself, looking first out the window.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

And then, ever the taskmaster, he stood up. He looked at the watch on the bed.

“Okay,” he said. “Your turn. What will you say tomorrow?”

I took my speech from the desk—three pages, typed the night before—and read aloud about the memories we had made. Undergrad, Teacher’s College, China, and even Currie, Ontario.

“I know that he didn’t want to die,” I said. “This is just a terrible twist of fate. Like Reggie, Paul would have said.”

A useful cliché. A relatable example. And now, to wow them. Just like the public speaking people teach:

“He knew that he could be really good. He had written so much, and finally, he was ready to put the work in. It was magical, and for once, he was excited.

“Awakening.

“That’s how I’ll remember Paul.”

I looked up from my papers. I hadn’t cried at all.

“It’s good,” Martin said.

We knew what to expect before we finished writing. People had lined up out the funeral home door for visitation, so Gail moved the service to the church. Today half the pews seat Paul’s extended family, and the teachers from Currie High School and most of his students. In the back are a lot of those small-town types, who met Paul maybe once, maybe when he was ten, but who still can’t imagine not being here.

“He was only twenty-eight,” they all whisper. “Such a shame.”

I sit onstage, behind the curtain, between an industrial-sized trash can and Martin’s empty chair, watching his mechanical song. He says his speech word for word and never looks down, even better than he did in the mirror yesterday.

When he steps away, each silent second tamps the crowd, and when he’s finally out of sight he exhales. It betrays the weight it carries.

The minister takes Martin’s place. He leans over the microphone, “And now, I’d like to call Paul’s girlfriend, Molly Davis.”

Martin flashes a miniature thumbs up as he passes. It’s corny but I know it’s sincere. I edge between him and a cage of red dodge-balls, but then I turn back, to the trash can. I drop my speech in. From my skirt pocket, I pull out the journal.

“Molly, no,” Martin whispers. “Paul didn’t know what to leave out.”

On the stage I rest the green book on the podium, and I turn to a story, *The Jade Nightingale*. I take a deep breath and I open my mouth. All that comes out is a sob. I drop my head into my arms on the wood.

Martin taps his watch backstage.

Nine minutes.

My throaty gasp echoes through the speakers. It rattles the walls.