

# **Palliative Care**

*A novel in a few thousand words.*

Cloak the eyes. This trance though incurable can be made bearable salved by words' holy spit.

Now to Dub. Try to keep from doing what was done to you. You can't. The crazy rite you endured goes on. Nothing going, you spin in place. Take Dub Wishard. So short of names, Lou picked Duvier, her Cajun uncle's. Called Duveer, Dovey, and Douche, his freshman year he made it Dub; joined the Gams. Spinning in place, his son's Duvier.

Dub Two's a Gam. His freshman year he made it Del—throwing up vodka, Corona, and a possum behind the House. Dub was thrilled Del was a Gam. Gastric lavage done, so was Del. The spin cycle might have wrung another Dub, male or female, but a year's drunk weekends later Del dropped out and had a wreck catching the truck who cut him off. An ER nurse named Tracie remembered him from Foster High playing drums. Two weeks later they lived together.

Spin in place like the Earth. Granted, it shifts position—who's tracking it? We search our dreams. We dream our searches.

Lena Lawrence the Director died. Rochester-trained, aspiring to make Dumont Choir a Shaw Chorale, she lost to Del. Trace said the altos and Dawn could stand Del's voice absent Lena's vocalise. The free-will help pleased Pastor Mills. (Lena'd been paid.) Were they surprised when Del arrived with speakers, drums, bassist, girl singer and keyboard charts riddles to Dawn Mills. Choir rehearsals Del called *sessions* two weeks until the Pastor sat in because Dawn made him. And Del returned to Dub's rec-room. The episode discouraged Del for seven years.

Dub would have worried but for Lou, Arla, and the Siamese. Cornering the cat at last—string-garrotted—his eye-brow bleeding for the last time, Dub couldn't say where Sweetie'd got to. That left Arla and Lou, his mom who wheezed at night across the hall as the live-in took her to the pot.

*—Sixteen of us, eight facing eight, me and Lois, fifteen years boxed Models; taped the boxes. Near as you now, she died. I'd like it that way—quick as a snip. Lucky Strikes slip off wheels to packs and hand to hand. None knows it. None feels the going. Where's my smoke? That Arla's hid it. My house she waits for, Lorena, as I for this BM. Nothing you've done can make it pass.*

Lorena screamed. Del hid his phone. Arla woke Dub. He held his pants up, elastic gone; stared at Lou's hand on his new tile floor. Arla called. She was the one waiting to call all this time. He guessed this while the orange-vested driver spoke.

*—So often when we get the call they're on the toilet. Maybe you know it's death. You rush to bear down, maybe to expel it.*

After that, Del left off calling Trace. That kind of talk she said upset her life with Mike—that dirty talk. From the Bahama cruise Arla owed herself without Dub, Ciguatera sent her home itching and sleepless. So the reefs blanching from touch and commerce reached into Dub's life. Arla insisted Lou woke her nightly. Later she saw Lou afloat in daylight, puffing over coffee, which burned like ice. As her cells' gates flew open, she stalled in dingy smoke. Where does this system end—skins'edge; chair-railed surround of

supper table where Dub's sister Sis ladled soup after Grave-side; the wide-spread plans of Uncle Mick who followed Del into the bathroom smoking and talking so Del couldn't sit; or mycelium of enterprise infesting Mick, whose investments in micronils ran to millions; or blue film of gasps, wheezes, whistles, shrieks, fulminations, roars and whispers far and near—the Troposphere—or where trance ends?

Mick took Del on, showed him extruders; how loose gel hardened as it whipped and cooled. Grignard and cross-linked resins beyond him, Del preferred the show room: micronils cool to touch, silver, some jeweled for Asian markets, some jet black, others opal, intricately whorled within. Twelve women milled the edges smooth; inserted wire flowers for the line of Bagatelles, and custom-wrapped. Mick's division made Standards, Bagatelles, Economies, and Smoothgrips; employed hundreds. Del found his place.

So, on that day, left behind not by Rapture but by selves streaming off unsnagged from duties, Dub was alone. Coming home from shifting rows and columns, he knew they'd been there—a glass in the sink, a drawer ajar. They watched; recorded twenty-four seven; put itching powder in his bed; turned his stools black with warfarin; flooded his crawl space; called and hung up; wired his home; wanted all he knew so they could scrub his mind, impair his power to think through their far-reaching, sordid, festering schemes—pustulant issues which took away his mother, wife and son. And now they wanted his house to stop him talking.

Here is the issue: incommensurables, incompatibles, an antinomy—the one in many; the many, one; protean; the appetite for savagery yet able to trace the beautiful line of a forehead, to slice out a shoulder of cow or a man for butcher or bodymerchant—transactions equal in value, all the same to restless creatures who can do anything.

Try loving others as yourself. It can be done but be prepared. Things will not change or go your way. Cut with the grain.

Pray simply *Our Father*, all from one source called Parent—a kind one—wanting all our best. Sis believed this. Her Papa, Lou's Bill, was why. Touchet Parish, where Bill came from, was tallow trees, rice, scum-sheen inlets, gigging frogs mud-mushing moonlit nights, and herons. You could shout. No one would hear. Green bottle flies hopped—or changed coordinates—to reappear a yard away.

So Bill and Lou appeared in Richmond, shivarees sung, lace curtains packed, and saints appeased, to roll tobacco and lay lead pipe. The city stretched past Ginter's Hill, past burley fields around Marse Robert, past Jordan's Branch, and sprouted taps to every house. *Like roots*, Bill said, the pipe he laid—cradled down, ropes pulled back up, Finch showing off standing on it, like a boat's hull overturned in the ditch a spring had filled—spread west and north. Its runners watered shacks and mansions all from one source. *Sis girl*, he told her, *we seem to know things but it's the bayou feeds our roots. All of us tap it. We're only how it makes new life.*

Plumbing supply was Bill's new life for forty years. He passed in sleep. Lou heard him say *The anchor bolt has broken clean*. To Papa she was *ma gentille*. Lou called her Sis. *Take care your brother. Be sure you change him while I'm gone*. Now both were gone. And behind the faucets in his office Dub heard chattering, churring, scraping—like men's low talk, crickets, and patting a grave with shovels. How could she change him? Cover his eyes? An ermine cloak of water turkeys lifts off the bayou past moss-hung live oaks. Fills the sky. He sees so much he's blind, entranced. Try to see. You can't. Blue ibis, *poule d'eau*, the cape-winged crow in tupelo sing one refrain. Cut with the grain.

*Cut with the grain.*

Who can name it? Not a person, place, or thing, *Hallowed be*, but who can name it? Sis wrote down what Father Jim had said. *We want an understanding that does not exceed our comprehension. More than this is pride, denial, waking dream. The Holy Name's a space for breath alone, where words cannot take root*. Sis was eldest of eight children. Two died at birth. Two died from smoking. Two over-ate. Dub went to college, grew Wishard & Son. Here's the truth Sis comprehended: she was the last.

Mick told her Del would have to go for calling Roxanne late at night. She knew his voice. The girls in Shipping all knew his voice. Mick had moved him twice. No more. Del had to go. Sis called Old Finch. *Cher, crois-les pas. He's not chaviré*. Her Papa said Finch was not nuts; only twanging his *bombarde* made him seem so. His mother's family, the Abouettes near Petite Anse, was glad Bill took him East to Richmond. Without Old Finch, Dub would be lost. He took her call.

—*Onri ci.*

—*Henri, it's Sis. For Del again.*

—*Ma gentille Sis. I'm achalé—fichu, you know?*

—*You're not worn out—just ornery.*

—*May kingdom come! How do I please you?*

—*Find him something.*

—*Nothing comes without looking. Del expects the fish to whistle and drop in his pocket, like my Looey keeping the orders Captain gave us. Finally shot for it. Did Captain mean to hold this hill forever? I said as his head blew off. In our retreat I found the Captain in a ditch. Del don't know to leave the hill no more than Dub, shut in his office. But I will see what I can do.*

So kingdom comes. So Sis gave Mick the name Finch found. And Del then drove for Lavabo's whose PVC replaced the pipes Papa had laid. And Dub heard voices explaining what he had to do. *Thy will*, Sis prayed, *be done with us*. Unstuck from fate, we have choices. *Don't listen to them, Dub*, she said. Later that day, as he was told, Dub gave the keys to Finch, packed up, and drove away. In actions, in mind; on Earth, in

heaven: *Go where we send you*, said the voices. Dub passed through Staunton, Paris, Wando, Fairall, and Fairborn. Finally he heard them say, *Stop here*.

Sis got the call. She shouldn't worry. He had enough to live on, to have some days to grow. Said his mind was a ferment, a yeast-pocked, frothy, brooding, breadly mass stealing sleep. But in Chicago he ate quietly, found a two-flat, met a wholesaler of Tygon tubing at an expo. And *no, as far as Del, well, he's on his own*. Sis wrote the address. Vanua Levu sank, she read, while off Gwadar another island rose, caul steaming, crusted with clams. So debts are cancelled.

So in autumn, as Mick's plant released the latest SP-Micronils and locusts left their slit bodies to live with roots, Sis prayed for Dub's delivery, Del's restraint, and Mick's return. Mick's Master's was in scrambling olefins. He therefore knew the coming roll-out of Micronil's Scented Product line did not target Special People but SP-ganglia. Like a dead thing this secret lay between them. Sis prayed Mick could return as she watched him descend into roots. So few knew or understood—would ever know or understand—his life with roots. Sagging demand meant fewer jobs processing, packaging, pimping, promoting, lobbying, betting, marketing, banking, distributing—all rooted in a product multicolored, multitextured, rolled and sucked by infants and matrons, obsessively collected, sniffed by connoisseurs, sung about in ads. Lovers shared them. Heritage models in estate sales brought fortunes. All rooted in Micronils, the global brand of thimble-sized beads in signature packets uniquely etched, kept as hedges of intrinsic value. When demand sagged a tenth percent, another tenth, then four, then five, the SP line was introduced. Its neural hook through the noses of consumers pulled demand so high that Micronil became the market. As in the times when tusk-shells, butterfly-beads, crinoids, stamp-seals, and quartz bowed down to Lapis pendants treasured in Uruk, Micronil prevailed. The roots held.

Ancient history. You need to know the five events which made Mick change—five fingers pointing, pinching, tickling, promising, spanning Mick's underworld. You need to know how he returned, disentangled from roots, trance-emerged, ready for the bonfire.

First, Dub's Rescue. Sis had to see the way he lived. Mick drove. Backed up, the Dan Ryan did not release them until noon. Near Addison and Lincoln, Dub lived by tank-topped Lolla hot-damning in the hall her Lollo, a remora who gazed at traffic and his hairy legs with equal wonder. Their child, Wiinara, conceived playing Wii after marinara, said look for Dub downtown in Grant Park. Mick turned around. In the forest of biped pachyderms without heads or torsos Dub could sleep shielded from signals by metal legs—the only place the voices left him. A tiny girl in a red sari danced on the slippery slates under the arcing fountain spat from the Giant's Face. Sis called it Dub's Siloam. But for Mick, trying to see around Dub's rocking head to change lanes, Millenium Park was only a marker to find Lake Street. Lollapalooza behind, the van sped south with Dub crying and drooling on the armrest. Back in Richmond, doctors, guessing Arla's toxin passed to Dub, gave IV mannitol and mood-molding mortar rounds flattening feeling,

muting the voices, and calming Sis enough to leave Dub with an aide. Mick drove her home, stopping as always for the corner vagrant Sis gave her change.

The Altar Guild kept Sis while Mick opened the backlog on the roll-out. “Coca” every other message. The Secret out. Claims and payouts, rueful confessions, long litigation—all for a bead to finger and sniff. Mick knew how to avert it. Distraction was needed. Here is a city where half of the residents traded in counters worthless in themselves but standing for labor, love, trust, craft, and power—the roots that last as long as the trance goes unchallenged. Mick was pinched between the dream and how things were. The company line would be: Stonewall. Insist coca leaves are inert ingredients, claims unproven, cases unrelated. *Thank you for your query, but no interviews now.* Or ever. Mick knew this was coming. But Sis, always caring for hopeless cases and causes, did not know. The thought that she would soon know him differently burned. Soured his breath. *Reflux, Mick?* She said. *Did you take your pill?* He took off watch and ring, lay down beside her unsleeping, unable to fit back into their circle. He dozed.

His phone rang. Finch.

—*Ici Dub's room. Out of his head. Fou raide. Bill gone, now Dub. Me manque mes copains. He can't last. He already smells.*

—*But he's only sixty.*

—*We all only something when we go, you know. Tell gentille Sis.*

So wild on Benadryl, Dub had been dosed calm to a hypoxic end. In the hall with Mick while Sis sat with Dub, Finch frowned and said,

—*While you were gone, Del wrecked his truck on the Powwhite. Lavabo's fired him.*

—*Where is he?*

—*Back in Dub's rec-room.*

—*Too much for Sis.*

—*Ma gentille Sis says charred meat and cigs will do me in. We're all foqué you know. I'm eighty. But I tell you about Sis. I knew her since petite. She's a gombo woman. Studies on you. Makes the soup to bring you round. A healer—a sad thing in this world to be.*

Dub did not come round. Paroxetine, the last of many speculations why voices screamed, shut the remainder of his liver down. Cloak their eyes. What we do is make bearable the trance they're in. Tickled by the thought, Mick found the Distraction needed by Micronil: The Annual Turnaround Awards and Exchange Sales Event. Matchlessly made by eating, food's demand was the model Mick discovered. Coupons the donors received discounted purchases of the next new line. All the old micronils melted in vats over bonfires circled by dancers and singers in civic festivals. Memo to managers:

*Only replace what was made. Think of a soup stock in one pot, serving all.*

**The End**