

Ayana

I didn't think I would ever tell this story. My wife told me not to; she said no one would believe it and I'd only embarrass myself. What she meant, of course, was that it would embarrass her. "What about Ralph and Trudy?" I asked her. "They were there. They saw it, too."

"Trudy will tell him to keep his mouth shut," Ruth said, "and your brother won't need much persuading."

This was probably true. Ralph was at that time superintendent of New Hampshire School Administrative Unit 43, and the last thing a Department of Education bureaucrat from a small state wants is to wind up on one of the cable news outlets, in the end-of-the-hour slot reserved for UFOs over Phoenix and coyotes that can count to ten. Besides, a miracle story isn't much good without a miracle worker, and Ayana was gone.

But now my wife is dead—she had a heart attack while flying to Colorado to help out with our first grandchild and died almost instantly. (Or so the airline people said, but you can't even trust them with your luggage these days.) My brother Ralph is also dead—a stroke while playing in a golden-ager golf tournament—and Trudy is *gaga*. My father is long gone; if he were still alive, he'd be a centenarian. I'm the last one standing, so I'll tell the story. It *is* unbelievable, Ruth was right about that, and it means nothing in any case—miracles never do, except to those lucky lunatics who see them everywhere. But it's interesting. And it *is* true. We all saw it.

My father was dying of pancreatic cancer. I think you can tell a lot about people by listening to how they speak about that sort of situation (and the fact that I describe cancer as "that sort of situation" probably tells you something about your narrator, who spent his life teaching English to boys and girls whose most serious health problems were acne and sports injuries).

Ralph said, "He's nearly finished his journey."

My sister-in-law Trudy said, "He's rife with it." At first I thought she said "He's ripe with it," which struck me as jarringly poetic. I knew it couldn't be right, not from her, but I wanted it to be right.

Ruth said, "He's down for the count."

I didn't say, "And may he stay down," but I thought it. Because he suffered. This was twenty-five years ago—1982—and suffering was still an accepted part of end-stage cancer. I remember reading ten or twelve years later that most cancer patients go out silently only because they're too weak to scream. That brought back memories of my father's sickroom so strong that I went into the bathroom and knelt in front of the toilet bowl, sure I was going to vomit.

But my father actually died four years later, in 1986. He was in assisted living then, and it wasn't pancreatic cancer that got him, after all. He choked to death on a piece of steak.

Don “Doc” Gentry and his wife, Bernadette—my mother and father—retired to a suburban home in Ford City, not too far from Pittsburgh. After his wife died, Doc considered moving to Florida, decided he couldn’t afford it, and stayed in Pennsylvania. When his cancer was diagnosed, he spent a brief time in the hospital, where he explained again and again that his nickname came from his years as a veterinarian. After he’d explained this to anyone who cared, they sent him home to die, and such family as he had left—Ralph, Trudy, Ruth, and me—came to Ford City to see him out.

I remember his back bedroom very well. On the wall was a picture of Christ suffering the little children to come unto him. On the floor was a rag rug my mother had made: shades of nauseous green, not one of her better ones. Beside the bed was an IV pole with a Pittsburgh Pirates decal on it. Each day I approached that room with increasing dread, and each day the hours I spent there stretched longer. I remembered Doc sitting on the porch glider when we were growing up in Derby, Connecticut—a can of beer in one hand, a cig in the other, the sleeves of a blinding white T-shirt always turned up twice to reveal the smooth curve of his biceps and the rose tattoo just above his left elbow. He was of a generation that did not feel strange going about in dark blue unfaded jeans—and who called jeans “dungarees.” He combed his hair like Elvis and had a slightly dangerous look, like a sailor two drinks into a shore leave that will end badly. He was a tall man who walked like a cat. And I remember a summer street dance in Derby where he and my mother stopped the show, jitterbugging to “Rocket 88” by Ike Turner and the Kings of Rhythm. Ralph was sixteen then, I think, and I was eleven. We watched our parents with our mouths open, and for the first time I understood that they did it at night, did it with all their clothes off and never thought of us.

At eighty, turned loose from the hospital, my somehow dangerously graceful father had become just another skeleton in pajamas (his had the Pirates logo on them). His eyes lurked beneath wild and bushy brows. He sweated steadily in spite of two fans, and the smell that rose from his damp skin reminded me of old wallpaper in a deserted house. His breath was black with the perfume of decomposition.

Ralph and I were a long way from rich, but when we put a little of our money together with the remains of Doc’s own savings, we had enough to hire a part-time private nurse and a housekeeper who came in five days a week. They did well at keeping the old man clean and changed, but by the day my sister-in-law said that Doc was ripe with it (I still prefer to think that was what she said), the Battle of the Smells was almost over. That scarred old pro shit was rounds ahead of the newcomer Johnson’s baby powder; soon, I thought, the ref would stop the fight. Doc was no longer able to get to the toilet (which he invariably called “the can”), so he wore diapers and continence pants. He was still aware enough to know, and to be ashamed. Sometimes tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, and half-formed cries of desperate, disgusted amusement came from the throat that had once sent “Hey, Good Lookin’” out into the world.

The pain settled in, first in the midsection and then radiating outward until he would complain that even his eyelids and fingertips hurt. The painkillers stopped working. The nurse could have given him more, but that might have killed him and she refused. I wanted to give him more even if it did kill him. And I might have, with support from

Ruth, but my wife wasn't the sort to provide that kind of prop.

"She'll know," Ruth said, meaning the nurse, "and then you'll be in trouble."

"He's my dad!"

"That won't stop her." Ruth had always been a glass-half-empty person. It wasn't the way she was raised; it was the way she was born. "She'll report it. You might go to jail."

So I didn't kill him. None of us killed him. What we did was mark time. We read to him, not knowing how much he understood. We changed him and kept the medication chart on the wall updated. The days were viciously hot and we periodically changed the location of the two fans, hoping to create a cross draft. We watched the Pirates games on a little color TV that made the grass look purple, and we told him that the Pirates looked great this year. We talked to each other above his ever-sharpening profile. We watched him suffer and waited for him to die. And one day while he was sleeping and rattling snores, I looked up from *Best American Poets of the Twentieth Century* and saw a tall, heavyset black woman and a black girl in dark glasses standing at the bedroom door.

That girl—I remember her as if it were this morning. I think she might have been seven, although extremely small for her age. Tiny, really. She was wearing a pink dress that stopped above her knobby knees. There was a Band-Aid printed with Warner Bros. cartoon characters on one equally knobby shin; I remember Yosemite Sam, with his long red mustache and a pistol in each hand. The dark glasses looked like a yard-sale consolation prize. They were far too big and had slid down to the end of the kid's snub nose, revealing eyes that were fixed, heavy-lidded, sheathed in blue-white film. Her hair was in cornrows. Over one arm was a pink plastic child's purse split down the side. On her feet were dirty sneakers. Her skin wasn't really black at all but a soapy gray. She was on her feet, but otherwise looked almost as sick as my father.

The woman I remember less clearly, because the child so drew my attention. The woman could have been forty or sixty. She had a close-cropped afro and a serene aspect. Beyond that, I recall nothing—not even the color of her dress, if she was wearing a dress. I think she was, but it might have been slacks.

"Who are you?" I asked. I sounded stupid, as if awakened from a doze rather than reading—although there is a similarity.

Trudy appeared from behind them and said the same thing. She sounded wide awake. And from behind her, Ruth said in an oh-for-Pete's-sake voice: "The door must have come open, it won't ever stay on the latch. They must have walked right in."

Ralph, standing beside Trudy, looked back over his shoulder. "It's shut now. They must have closed it behind them." As if that were a mark in their favor.

"You can't come in here," Trudy told the woman. "We're busy. There's sickness here. I don't know what you want, but you have to go."

"You can't just walk into a place, you know," Ralph added. The three of them were crowded together in the sickroom doorway.

Ruth tapped the woman on the shoulder, and not gently. "Unless you want us to call the police, you have to go. Do you want us to do that?"

The woman took no notice. She pushed the little girl forward and said, "Straight on. Four steps. There's a poley thing, mind you don't trip. Let me hear you count."

The little girl counted like this: "One...two...free...four." She stepped over the metal feet of the IV pole on *free* without ever looking down—surely not looking at anything through the smeary lenses of her too-big yard-sale glasses. Not with those milky eyes. She passed close enough to me for the skirt of her dress to draw across my forearm

like a thought. She smelled dirty and sweaty and—like Doc—sick. There were dark marks on both of her arms, not scabs but sores.

“Stop her!” my brother said to me, but I didn’t. All this happened very quickly. The little girl bent over the stubbly hollow of my father’s cheek and kissed it. A big kiss, not a little one. A smacky kiss.

Her little plastic purse swung lightly against the side of his head as she did it and my father opened his eyes. Later, both Trudy and Ruth said it was getting whacked with the purse that woke him. Ralph was less sure, and I didn’t believe it at all. It didn’t make a sound when it struck, not even a little one. There was nothing in that purse except maybe a Kleenex.

“Who are you, kiddo?” my father asked in his raspy fixing-to-die voice.

“Ayana,” the child said.

“I’m Doc.” He looked up at her from those dark caves where he now lived, but with more comprehension than I’d seen in the two weeks we’d been in Ford City. He’d reached a point where not even a ninth-inning walk-off home run could do much to crack his deepening glaze.

Trudy pushed past the woman and started to push past me, meaning to grab the child who had suddenly thrust herself into Doc’s dying regard. I grabbed her wrist and stopped her. “Wait.”

“What do you mean, wait? They’re trespassers!”

“I’m sick, I have to go,” the little girl said. Then she kissed him again and stepped back. This time she tripped over the feet of the IV pole, almost upending it and herself. Trudy grabbed the pole and I grabbed the child. There was nothing to her, only skin wrapped on a complex armature of bone. Her glasses fell off into my lap, and for a moment those milky eyes looked into mine.

“You be all right,” Ayana said, and touched my mouth with her tiny palm. It burned me like an ember, but I didn’t pull away. “You be all right.”

“Ayana, come,” the woman said. “We ought to leave these folks. Two steps. Let me hear you count.”

“One...two,” Ayana said, putting her glasses on and then poking them up her nose, where they would not stay for long. The woman took her hand.

“You folks have a blessed day, now,” she said, and looked at me. “I’m sorry for you,” she said, “but this child’s dreams are over.”

They walked back across the living room, the woman holding the girl’s hand. Ralph trailed after them like a sheepdog, I think to make sure neither of them stole anything. Ruth and Trudy were bent over Doc, whose eyes were still open.

“Who was that child?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Trudy said. “Don’t let it concern you.”

“I want her to come back,” he said. “I want another kiss.”

Ruth turned to me, her lips sucked into her mouth. This was an unlovely expression she had perfected over the years. “She pulled his IV line halfway out...he’s bleeding...and you just sat there.”

“I’ll put it back,” I said, and someone else seemed to be speaking. Inside myself was a man standing off to one side, silent and stunned. I could still feel the warm pressure of her palm on my mouth.

“Oh, don’t bother! I already did.”

Ralph came back. “They’re gone,” he said. “Walking down the street toward the bus stop.” He turned to my wife. “Do you really want me to call the police, Ruth?”

“No. We’d just be all day filling out forms and answering questions.” She paused.

“We might even have to testify in court.”

“Testify to what?” Ralph asked.

“I don’t know what, how should I know what? Will one of you get the adhesive tape so we can keep this christing needle still? It’s on the kitchen counter, I think.”

“I want another kiss,” my father said.

“I’ll go,” I said, but first I went to the front door—which Ralph had locked as well as closed—and looked out. The little green plastic bus shelter was only a block down, but no one was standing by the pole or under the shelter’s plastic roof. And the sidewalk was empty. Ayana and the woman—whether mother or minder—were gone. All I had was the kid’s touch on my mouth, still warm but starting to fade.

Now comes the miracle part. I’m not going to skip it—if I’m going to tell this story, I’ll try to tell it right—but I’m not going to dwell on it either. Miracle stories are always satisfying but rarely interesting, because they’re all the same.

We were staying at one of the motels on Ford City’s main road, a Ramada Inn with thin walls. Ralph annoyed my wife by calling it the Rammit Inn. “If you keep doing that, you’ll eventually forget and say it in front of a stranger,” my wife said. “Then you’ll have a red face.”

The walls were so thin that it was possible for us to hear Ralph and Trudy arguing next door about how long they could afford to stay. “He’s my father,” Ralph said, to which Trudy replied: “Try telling that to Connecticut Light and Power when the bill comes due. Or the state commissioner when your sick days run out.”

It was a little past seven on a hot August evening. Soon Ralph would be leaving for my father’s, where the part-time nurse was on duty until eight P.M. I found the Pirates on TV and jacked the volume to drown out the depressing and predictable argument going on next door. Ruth was folding clothes and telling me the next time I bought cheap discount-store underwear, she was going to divorce me. Or shoot me for a stranger. The phone rang. It was Nurse Chloe. (This was what she called herself, as in “Drink a little more of this soup for Nurse Chloe.”)

She wasted no time on pleasantries. “I think you should come right away,” she said. “Not just Ralph for the night shift. All of you.”

“Is he going?” I asked. Ruth stopped folding things and came over. She put a hand on my shoulder. We had been expecting this—hoping for it, really—but now that it was here, it was too absurd to hurt. Doc had taught me how to use a Bolo-Bouncer when I was a kid no older than that day’s little blind intruder. He had caught me smoking under the grape arbor and had told me—not angrily but kindly—that it was a stupid habit, and I’d do well not to let it get a hold on me. The idea that he might not be alive when tomorrow’s paper came? Absurd.

“I don’t think so,” Nurse Chloe said. “He seems better.” She paused. “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

He was better. When we got there fifteen minutes later, he was sitting on the living-room sofa and watching the Pirates on the house’s larger TV—no technological

marvel, but at least colorfast. He was sipping a protein shake through a straw. He had some color. His cheeks seemed plumper, perhaps because he was freshly shaved. He had regained himself. That was what I thought then; the impression has only grown stronger with the passage of time. And one other thing, which we all agreed on—even the doubting Thomasina to whom I was married: the yellow smell that had hung around him like ether ever since the doctors sent him home to die was gone.

He greeted us all by name, and told us that Willie Stargell had just hit a home run for the Buckos. Ralph and I looked at each other, as if to confirm we were actually there. Trudy sat on the couch beside Doc, only it was more of a whooping down. Ruth went into the kitchen and got herself a beer. A miracle in itself.

“I wouldn’t mind one of those, Ruthie-doo,” my father said, and then—probably misinterpreting my slack and flabbergasted face for an expression of disapproval: “I feel better. Gut hardly hurts at all.”

“No beer for you, I think,” Nurse Chloe said. She was sitting in an easy chair across the room and showed no sign of gathering her things, a ritual that usually began twenty minutes before the end of her shift. Her annoying do-it-for-mommy authority seemed to have grown thin.

“When did this start?” I asked, not even sure what I meant by *this*, because the changes for the better seemed so general. But if I had any specific thing in mind, I suppose it was the departure of the smell.

“He was getting better when we left this afternoon,” Trudy said. “I just didn’t believe it.”

“Bolsheveky,” Ruth said. It was as close as she allowed herself to cursing.

Trudy paid no attention. “It was that little girl,” she said.

“Bolsheveky!” Ruth cried.

“What little girl?” my father asked. It was between innings. On the television, a fellow with no hair, big teeth, and mad eyes was telling us the carpets at Juker’s were so cheap they were almost free. And, dear God, no finance charges on layaway. Before any of us could reply to Ruth, Doc asked Nurse Chloe if he could have *half* a beer. She refused him. But Nurse Chloe’s days of authority in that little house were almost over, and during the next four years—before a chunk of half- chewed meat stopped his throat forever—my father drank a great many beers. And enjoyed every one, I hope. Beer is a miracle in itself.

It was that night, while lying sleepless in our hard Rammit Inn bed and listening to the air conditioner rattle, that Ruth told me to keep my mouth shut about the blind girl, whom she called not Ayana but “the magic negro child,” speaking in a tone of ugly sarcasm that was very unlike her.

“Besides,” she said, “it won’t last. Sometimes a light bulb will brighten up just before it burns out for good. I’m sure that happens to people too.”

Maybe, but Doc Gentry’s miracle took. By the end of the week he was walking in his backyard with me or Ralph supporting him. After that, we all went home. I got a call from Nurse Chloe on our first night back.

“We’re not going, no matter how sick he is,” Ruth said half-hysterically. “Tell her that.”

But Nurse Chloe only wanted to say that she’d happened to see Doc coming out of the

Ford City Veterinary Clinic, where he had gone to consult with the young head of practice about a horse with the staggers. He had his cane, she said, but wasn't using it. Nurse Chloe said she'd never seen a man "of his years" who looked any better. "Bright-eyed and ring-tailed," she said. "I still don't believe it." A month later he was walking (caneless) around the block, and that winter he was swimming every day at the local Y. He looked like a man of sixty-five. Everyone said so.

I talked to my father's entire medical team in the wake of his recovery. I did it because what had happened to him reminded me of the so-called miracle plays that were big in the sticksville burghs of Europe in medieval times. I told myself if I changed Dad's name (or perhaps just called him Mr. G.) it could make an interesting article for some journal or other. It might have even been true—sort of—but I never did write the article.

It was Stan Sloan, Doc's family practice guy, who first raised the red flag. He had sent Doc to the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute and so was able to blame the consequent misdiagnosis on Drs. Retif and Zamachowski, who were my dad's oncologists there. They in turn blamed the radiologists for sloppy imaging. Retif said the chief of radiology was an incompetent who didn't know a pancreas from a liver. He asked not to be quoted, but after twenty-five years, I am assuming the statute of limitations on that one has run out.

Dr. Zamachowski said it was a simple case of organ malformation. "I was never comfortable with the original diagnosis," he confided. I talked to Retif on the phone, Zamachowski in person. He was wearing a white lab coat with a red T-shirt beneath that appeared to read I'D RATHER BE GOLFING. "I always thought it was Von Hippel-Lindau."

"Wouldn't that also have killed him?" I asked.

Zamachowski gave me the mysterious smile doctors reserve for clueless plumbers, housewives, and English teachers. Then he said he was late for an appointment. When I talked to the chief of radiology, he spread his hands. "Here we are responsible for photography, not interpretation," he said. "In another ten years, we will be using equipment that will make such misinterpretations as this one all but impossible. In the meantime, why not just be glad your pop is alive? Enjoy him."

I did my best on that score. And during my brief investigation, which I of course called research, I learned an interesting thing: the medical definition of *miracle* is misdiagnosis.

Nineteen eighty-three was my sabbatical year. I had a contract with a scholarly press for a book called *Teaching the Unteachable: Strategies for Creative Writing*, but like my miracle-play article it never got written. In July, while Ruth and I were making plans for a camping trip, my urine abruptly turned pink. The pain came after that, first deep in my left buttock, then growing stronger as it migrated to my groin. By the time I started to piss actual blood—this was I think four days after the first twinges, and

while I was still playing that famous game known the world over as *Maybe It Will Go Away on Its Own*—the pain had passed from serious into the realm of excruciating. “I’m sure it’s not cancer,” Ruth said, which coming from her meant she was sure it was. The look in her eyes was even more alarming. She would deny this on her deathbed—her practicality was her pride—but I’m sure it occurred to her just then that the cancer that had left my father had batted on me.

It wasn’t cancer. It was kidney stones. My miracle was called extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy, which—in tandem with diuretic pills—dissolved them. I told my doctor I had never felt such pain in my life.

“I should think you never will again, even if you suffer a coronary,” he said. “Women who’ve had stones compare the pain to that of childbirth. Difficult childbirth.”

I was still in considerable pain but able to read a magazine while waiting for my follow-up doctor’s appointment, and I considered this a great improvement. Someone sat down beside me and said, “Come on now, it’s time.”

I looked up. It wasn’t the woman who had come into my father’s sickroom; it was a man in a perfectly ordinary brown business suit. Nevertheless, I knew why he was there. It was never even a question. I also felt sure that if I didn’t go with him, all the lithotripsy in the world would not help me.

We went out. The receptionist was away from her desk, so I didn’t have to explain my sudden decampment. I’m not sure what I would have said, anyway. That my groin had suddenly stopped smoldering? That was absurd as well as untrue.

The man in the business suit looked a fit thirty-five: an ex-marine, maybe, who hadn’t been able to part with the bristly gung-ho haircut. He didn’t talk. We cut around the medical center where my doctor keeps his practice, then made our way down the block to Groves of Healing Hospital, me walking slightly bent over because of the pain, which no longer snarled but still glowered.

We went up to pedes and made our way down a corridor with Disney murals on the walls and “It’s a Small World” drifting down from the overhead speakers. The ex-marine walked briskly, with his head up, as if he belonged there. I didn’t, and I knew it. I had never felt so far from my home and the life I understood. If I had floated up to the ceiling like a child’s Mylar GET WELL SOON balloon, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

At the central nurses’ station, the ex-marine squeezed my arm to make me stop until the two nurses there—one male, one female—were occupied. Then we crossed into another hall where a bald girl sitting in a wheelchair looked at us with starving eyes. She held out one hand.

“No,” the ex-marine said, and simply led me on. But not before I got another look into those bright, dying eyes.

He took us into a room where a boy of about three was playing with blocks in a clear plastic tent that belled down over his bed. The boy stared at us with lively interest. He looked much healthier than the girl in the wheelchair—he had a full shock of red curls—but his skin was the color of lead, and when the ex-marine pushed me forward and then fell back into a position like parade rest, I sensed the kid was very ill indeed. When I unzipped the tent, taking no notice of the sign on the wall reading *THIS IS A STERILE ENVIRONMENT*, I thought his remaining time could have been measured in days rather than weeks.

I reached for him, registering my father’s sick smell. The odor was a little lighter, but essentially the same. The kid lifted his own arms without reservation. When I kissed him on the corner of the mouth, he kissed back with a longing eagerness that suggested he hadn’t been touched in a long time. At least not by something that didn’t

hurt.

No one came in to ask us what we were doing, or to threaten the police, as Ruth had that day in my father's sickroom. I zipped up the tent again. In the doorway I looked back and saw him sitting in his clear plastic tent with a block in his hands. He dropped it and waved to me—a child's wigwag, fingers opening and closing twice. I waved back the same way. He looked better already.

Once more the ex-marine squeezed my arm at the nurses' station, but this time we were spotted by the male nurse, a man with the kind of disapproving smile the head of my English department had raised to the level of art. He asked what we were doing there.

"Sorry, mate, wrong floor," the ex-marine said.

On the hospital steps a few minutes later, he said, "You can find your own way back, can't you?"

"Sure," I said, "but I'll have to make another appointment with my doctor."

"Yes, I suppose you will."

"Will I see you again?"

"Yes," he said, and walked off toward the hospital parking lot. He didn't look back.

He came again in 1987, while Ruth was at the market and I was cutting the grass and hoping the sick thud in the back of my head wasn't the beginning of a migraine but knowing it was. Since the little boy in Groves of Healing, I had been subject to them. But it was hardly ever him I thought of when I lay in the dark with a damp rag over my eyes. I thought of the little girl.

That time we went to see a woman at St. Jude's. When I kissed her, she put my hand on her left breast. It was the only one she had; the doctors had already taken the other. "I love you, mister," she said, crying. I didn't know what to say. The ex-marine stood in the doorway, legs apart, hands behind his back. Parade rest.

Years passed before he came again: mid-December of 1997. That was the last time. By then my problem was arthritis, and it still is. The bristles standing up from the ex-marine's block of a head had gone mostly gray, and lines so deep they made him look a little like a ventriloquist's dummy had carved down from the corners of his lips. He took me out to an I-95 exit ramp north of town, where there had been a wreck. A panel truck had collided with a Ford Escort. The Escort was pretty well trashed. The paramedics had strapped the driver, a middle-aged man, to a stretcher. The cops were talking to the uniformed panel truck driver, who appeared shaken but unhurt. The paramedics slammed the doors of the ambulance, and the ex-marine said, "Now. Shag your ass."

I shagged my elderly ass to the rear of the ambulance. The ex-marine hustled forward, pointing. "Yo! Yo! Is that one of those medical bracelets?"

The paramedics turned to look; one of them, and one of the cops who had been talking to the panel truck driver, went to where the ex-marine was pointing. I opened the rear door of the ambulance and crawled up to the Escort driver's head. At the same time I clutched my father's pocket watch, which I had carried since he gave it to me as a wedding present. Its delicate gold chain was attached to one of my belt loops. There was no time to be gentle; I tore it free.

The man on the stretcher stared up at me from the gloom, his broken neck bulging in a

shiny skin-covered doorknob at the nape. "I can't move my fucking toes," he said. I kissed him on the corner of the mouth (it was my special place, I guess) and was backing out when one of the paramedics grabbed me. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked.

I pointed to the watch, which now lay beside the stretcher. "That was in the grass. I thought he'd want it." By the time the Escort driver was able to tell someone that it wasn't his watch and the initials engraved on the inside of the lid meant nothing to him, we would be gone. "Did you get his medical bracelet?"

The paramedic looked disgusted. "It was just a piece of chrome," he said. "Get out of here." Then, not quite grudgingly: "Thanks. You could have kept that."

It was true. I loved that watch. But...spur of the moment. It was all I had.

"You've got blood on the back of your hand," the ex-marine said as we drove back to my house. We were in his car, a nondescript Chevrolet sedan. There was a dog leash lying on the backseat and a St. Christopher's medal hanging from the rearview mirror on a silver chain. "You ought to wash it off when you get home."

I said I would.

"You won't be seeing me again," he said.

I thought of what the black woman had said about Ayana then. I hadn't thought of it in years. "Are my dreams over?" I asked.

He looked puzzled, then shrugged. "Your work is," he said. "I sure don't know anything about your dreams."

I asked him three more questions before he dropped me off for the last time and disappeared from my life. I didn't expect him to answer them, but he did.

"Those people I kiss—do they go on to other people? Kiss their boo-boos and make them all gone?"

"Some do," he said. "That's how it works. Others can't." He shrugged. "Or won't."

He shrugged again. "It comes to the same."

"Do you know a little girl named Ayana? Although I suppose she'd be a big girl now."

"She's dead."

My heart dropped, but not too far. I suppose I had known. I thought again of the little girl in the wheelchair.

"She kissed my father," I said. "She only touched me. So why was I the one?"

"Because you were," he said, and pulled into my driveway. "Here we are."

An idea occurred to me. It seemed like a good one, God knows why. "Come for Christmas," I said. "Come for Christmas dinner. We have plenty. I'll tell Ruth you're my cousin from New Mexico." Because I had never told her about the ex-marine.

Knowing about my father was enough for her. Too much, really.

The ex-marine smiled. That might not have been the only time I saw it, but it's the only time I remember. "Think I'll give it a miss, mate. Although I thank you. I don't celebrate Christmas. I'm an atheist."

That's really it, I guess—except for kissing Trudy. I told you she went gaga, remember? Alzheimer's. Ralph made good investments that left her well-off, and the kids saw that she went to a nice place when she was no longer okay to live at home. Ruth and I went to see her together until Ruth had her heart attack on the approach into Denver International. I went to see Trudy on my own not long after that, because I was lonely and sad and wanted some connection with the old days. But seeing Trudy as she had become, looking out the window instead of at me, munching at her lower lip while clear spit grizzled from the corners of her mouth, only made me feel worse. Like going back to your hometown to look at the house you grew up in and discovering a vacant lot.

I kissed the corner of her mouth before I left, but of course nothing happened. A miracle is no good without a miracle worker, and my miracle days are behind me now. Except late at night when I can't sleep. Then I can come downstairs and watch almost any movie I want. Even skin flicks. I have a satellite dish, you see, and something called Global Movies. I could even get the Pirates, if I wanted to order the MLB package. But I live on a fixed income these days, and while I'm comfortable, I also have to keep an eye on my discretionary spending. I can read about the Pirates on the Internet. All those movies are miracle enough for me.