

Richard Moore

HOMeward BOUND

The hard part of understanding important, conflicted relationships is to pull them out of you, hold them up, rotate them, examine them honestly—figure out what they mean. My father went AWOL when I was three, and for years I have resisted pulling him out of me, examining *him* honestly. Doing that would require spelunking down to a very deep place inside myself. And my risk-averse psyche tells me: *Stop. Don't do it. Protect your feelings.* Because it's not just him that will get dredged up, but also me.

I used to take pride in the belief that I was strongly introspective, sensitive to my feelings and those of others. I believed also that I had the courage to confront and deal with uncomfortable realities. I have learned, however, that these comforting self-assurances are at best only partly true. For years, I lived in denial that my father was an important influence in my life. He left before I had a consciousness of anything approaching loss, or resentment, so I rarely knowingly felt anything about him one way or the other during my formative years. I never actually *thought* about him during most of my life, except on a few occasions where our lives intersected.

Our encounters in my early youth were brief, a few times idyllic. He visited twice during World War II, on leave from the Merchant Marine. On his first visit my paternal grandparents invited me to ride out to the docks to meet his ship. Dutch had grown a great reddish-blond beard, and looked like a Viking. I was smitten. When I spotted his tattoo, my joy was almost too much to bear. It was a ship in full sail (inked in red, green, and blue) with the motto *Homeward Bound* tendriling beneath the ship like waves. He was warm towards me, touched me, and laughed and talked with me. He rhapsodized about life aboard ship, the places in the north Atlantic he had been to like Murmansk, the U-Boat danger, the wild storms at sea. At the time, I felt sure he was talking only to me. He was my hero for a few hours, then disappeared. He was like a cameo actor who does his walk-on, beguiles you for a time, and is forgotten.

My feelings about our rare meetings became increasingly layered the older I grew. Perhaps the most perplexing of these incidents was in 1961, when my maternal grandfather died. I was fresh out of the Navy and living in Los Angeles with my wife, Pat. Pat and I had recently begun to argue when an opportunity for adoption presented itself. She wanted a child fiercely. I was a full-time graduate student and didn't feel we were ready to be parents. Our fights had escalated until she left to stay with her parents for a couple of weeks. I was at home, alone, when the phone rang, distracting me from my efforts to study for a midterm exam, despite a torrent of conflicting thoughts.

"This is Dutch, your father. I'm calling to let you know that Alby died, early this morning." He paused, waiting for me to say something, then went on. "The funeral is at ten o'clock, day after tomorrow in Porterville."

The only reply I could muster was, "Alby died? I didn't know he was sick. . . ."

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"Your Uncle Hal and I are driving up tonight to make the arrangements," Dutch said. "Will you be able to come?"

"Yeah, I'll come, just have to arrange with my job and school. See you there."

"Okay, see you."

I sat down to let the news sink in. I pictured Alby's wispy, mouse-colored hair and moustache, his pale blue eyes, his railroad engineer's cap and pipe. I remembered riding in his funky old car, a 1930 Model A Ford in its original black. Even as an image-conscious teenager, I wasn't embarrassed to go places with Alby in his country clothes and Model A, though no one else I knew looked like him. Alby taught me to drive, do simple car repairs, and how to use the tools in his garage workshop, even though I invariably failed to put them back where they belonged. He also taught me how to kill and pluck a chicken, and how to catch and gut a fish, then smoke it in his homemade backyard smoker. He did all the things for me that my father was supposed to do.

Thoughts of Alby were soon replaced by a series of frustrations, like having to miss the midterm and a day's work for the trip to Porterville. I dreaded the trip, partly because I hadn't seen or talked to my father in years. How would that go? What would we say to each other?

And how was Ma, my grandmother, taking Alby's death? She and Alby were born and raised in the same community in rural Missouri, the children of poor farmers. They married early in the 20th century. With two boys in tow, my father and Uncle Hal, they moved to Oklahoma, then headed for California when things got rough. They'd been together nearly sixty years.

I recalled their house on Benner Street, in a working-class suburb of LA, where I visited regularly growing up. Their house smelled of woods in the fall, of old things and old people less fastidious about affectations like daily baths and deodorant and changing sheets all the time. The bedrooms and bed coverings at Benner Street were especially redolent. I remember that smell even today, as well as the smell of the flowers from the huge magnolia tree next door on summer nights, and Ma's green beans stewed in onions and bacon fat. It was the only house I have ever been in with a chamber pot by the bed, which made sense in this house, since the bathroom was out on the screened-in back porch.

Ma and Alby saw it as their lot to get along as best they could with a passive mix of fatalism and faith. They never owned a piece of real estate; never had health, life, or property insurance; never went to the movies; never owned a TV; never had a meal out; never had a vacation; and never read a book. They were willing to work hard, but largely accepted their place in the social and economic scheme of things with a humility inconceivable in my mother's aggressive clan. My mother's family had attitude: a commitment to work hard, get educated, and scramble up the financial and social ladder. What they lacked was the sweetness and warmth I wanted so badly, and that Ma and Alby gave me.

A standard feature of life on Benner Street was Alby's habit of sitting on the porch swing on summer evenings. About twenty feet of grass

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separated the porch and sidewalk. In the evenings a street light cast a pale glow over the sidewalk, front yard, and porch, barely enough to illuminate faces. Sometimes the passing neighbors would just nod or wave and exchange a few words from the sidewalk, then move on. A few walked onto the porch for an extended discussion. The conversations always covered the weather, the news of the day, and sports, especially baseball. President Roosevelt was everybody's hero in working-class neighborhoods, so anything he said or did was also discussed. Some conversations were about other neighbors, those who were considered white trash, and lived messy, often noisy lives and disrupted the neighborhood. Like my grandparents, the neighbors may have been poor and not well educated, but they had clear views about what constituted civilized and dignified behavior.

Passersby always asked me how I was doing, what level I was in school, and so forth. I never replied with more than, "okay" and "fine, thank you." As I sat amid soft voices, beside Alby and his scruffy dog Tim—the quiet street in the muted light, comfortable emanations from Alby's musky clothes and perfumed pipe tobacco—I was suspended in a warm broth of contentment. The visitors acted as though they had all the time in the world.

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I left South Pasadena early in the morning for the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Porterville. It was a beautiful, clear day in late fall. I drove north up Highway 99 and over the Ridge Route. It was a pleasant drive until I arrived in the flat, featureless Central Valley, flanked by dull brown hills on both sides of the highway.

As I drove, I continued to brood about the adoption I was being pushed into. Pat knew when we were married that we couldn't have any kids of our own, that I had never wanted children. Despite our unspoken agreement, while we were still in the Navy, she started pushing to have fertility surgery, which I went along with. After her surgery failed to correct the problem, she began to push for adoption. I felt that I had done my part to support Pat's unsuccessful efforts to have a baby. I didn't say so to Pat, but I felt that her obsession with having a kid was neurotic as hell. It wasn't just needing to have a kid, which was bad enough, but demanding to have one just as I was starting grad school, the worst possible time.

On the day of our last fight, I'd returned to our garage apartment from my part-time job and found her sitting at the dining table, waiting for me, reading a book, listening to the classical music station. Before I could finish a glass of water, she started in on the adoption. I resisted her, expecting our usual row until she blurted, "No, goddammit, just no, Rick. If you care for me at all, we're going to adopt this baby." Tears streamed down her face, her eyes bloodshot and glistening. She had never talked to me so aggressively, and I had never seen her so emotionally distraught. She told me she was going to Oregon for a while, and she hoped that while she was gone, I would figure out how to be less self-centered.

I turned off 99 north of Bakersfield and headed east towards Porterville. Like all the farm towns in the Central Valley, Porterville has a drab, desiccated look. The bungalows are rife with the semiotics of poverty: the

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jumble of broken-down cars in the yards, mixed in with discarded washing machines, refrigerators, tires, and couches. Most yards are just dry stubble, and most houses have a run-down look. In the summer, the sun scorches the landscape, suffocating people and bleaching colors already dulled by a coating of dust. The squalid ugliness of the surroundings reinforced my dread over the death and loss of Alby, and the looming encounter with my father.

Before I entered Porterville, I realized that I was too late for the funeral. Why had I driven so slowly? Was I simply distracted by my thoughts, or was it due to subconscious intention? Since I was late, I drove straight to my grandparents' bungalow. When I pulled up, the people who had attended the funeral were just arriving. I sat in my car and watched them as they walked up to the house. They looked like farmers and laborers, country people, their faces ruddied by a lifetime of sun, dust, and hard work. The men dressed in dark suits, the women in dark print dresses. I didn't know any of them. I figured they must be local relatives of my aunt Alta's. I wished I could just drive back to South Pasadena without going in, but I got out and followed the others into the bungalow.

Dutch stood near the front door. I walked up to him and mumbled, "Sorry I'm late, got a late start." He wore a dark suit, his blond hair slicked back, looking even more handsome, lean, and athletic than I had remembered.

He smiled. "It's okay, just glad you could make it."

We shook hands in the formal way that characterized our relationship.

"How are you doing?" he said in a friendly, relaxed voice. "Haven't seen you in a long time. When did you leave the Navy and get back to California?"

"I'm okay. Got back a few months ago, now in grad school at USC. How about you?"

"Oh, nothing new with me. Still delivering mail." Nodding towards the inside of the house, he said, "There's Ma, she's been waiting for you. Better go over to her."

Did I imagine that he touched my arm as I left his side? I felt a small jolt of electricity.

The bungalow was furnished with the items Ma and Alby had on Benner Street: the Arthur Rackham print with the blond nymph standing by a rose bower in a mountain lake, and Alby's rocker, the tired pillow, the same rag rug under it, empty now. While the furniture and the smattering of pictures were familiar, they looked out of place in this very different setting.

The swing where Alby used to hold court was not on the front porch. The old upright piano was gone, and so was the floor-standing radio. The radio's absence reminded me of the shows I particularly looked forward to, like "The Shadow," and "The FBI in Peace and War," as well as major horse races, baseball games, prize fights, and grownups talking about Joe Louis and Sea Biscuit. Since Benner Street was quiet and everyone's radio set was tuned to the same station, it would have been possible to follow

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the broadcasts emanating from all those sets just by walking down the sidewalk.

So much had changed: Alby gone, Ma living in this awful town, her house full of strangers, a house familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Everything was out of context. It looked and felt wrong, unreal.

I walked over to Ma, who stood by herself at the kitchen door. I hugged her. Her eyes were red, but she was in full control of herself. If she had any feelings of reproach for my being late for the funeral, they were not evident. She looked up at me and said in a muted voice, "Thank heavens Alby passed on easy, didn't suffer too much." She looked down, folded her hands, then continued. "I was with him every day since I was a young girl. Never lived alone a single day. Gotta get used to it."

"Ma," I said, the words falling all over each other, "I'm so sorry. I can't believe he's gone. How're you holding up? Sleeping okay? Anything you need?"

"I'm okay, but, what about you and Pat? Me and Alby heard you been back in California some time. How come you never called, never come see us?" As she spoke, she shuttled a half-empty glass of iced tea from one hand to the other.

"Well, Ma I'm working three jobs, and studying for a master's in international relations." Covering her gnarled hands with mine, I said, "The big news, though, is that Pat and I expect to adopt a child in the coming months." I tried to sound upbeat as I gave her this news.

Ma broke into a big smile, wanting to know all about the child, where it was from, who its mother and father were, its due date, when she would see the baby.

The truth was, no matter how much I disliked the idea of adopting a child, I couldn't deny something so important to the woman I loved. A part of me knew I wasn't being fair to Pat. After all, it's normal to want kids. She was the normal one in this situation, not me.

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I saw my dad sitting with a group of men and joined them. Dutch asked the men about the hunting that fall, whether it had been a good year for birds. He was an expert game hunter and most of these men hunted, too. I admired how he held everyone's attention with his animated face and gestures, his graceful way of speaking. He looked over at me several times while holding forth, and smiled with those beautiful teeth of his. Suddenly he seemed human, a real person—my father—not just an object of resentment.

My feelings toward him had soured in college. When I finished high school, I got myself accepted at the University of Colorado. Although the tuition was only a few hundred dollars and living expenses were very low, I needed help. I estimated how much I would need and asked my mother and Dutch to contribute, her more than him. I would make up the shortfall by working at part-time jobs. Dutch agreed to the arrangement. As it was, I barely had enough to eat, but I did make it, and was delighted to be in college, particularly in Boulder, which I really loved.



Sometime during my second year at Colorado, I got a note from Dutch, the first note I'd ever received from him, asking if I intended to continue there. The letter said that he was making a financial sacrifice sending me forty dollars or so per month and wondered how much longer he would have to do it. Although I hated the idea of leaving Colorado after two years, I chose to leave the university rather than accept money from him that I knew was given grudgingly. Although I assumed that I would be able to go ahead and get a degree in LA, I was annoyed at yet another example of his careless behavior towards me.

Shortly after lunch I wondered how I could gracefully break off. After an interval, I made the rounds of my aunts, my uncles, and my father, saying my goodbyes. When I shook hands with Dutch, we looked into each other's eyes, and somehow — was it the emotional impact of Alby's loss, Ma's plight? — I had felt us connect, for the first time, like two adults who had important things in common.

But something inside me pushed back, reminded me I couldn't make something out of nothing. Just because he was nice today didn't mean that he suddenly wanted to be part of my life, much as I wished it could be otherwise. *He's Peter Pan, I thought. He doesn't know any better, you can't trust him. Whatever love he may feel for you is not strong enough to change that.*

Looking back, I recognize this as the voice of self-preservation. Since Alby's funeral, I have let my guard down and allowed myself to trust Dutch only once, a decision I still regret. Ten years after the adoption, I was preparing to go to Iran in the early 1970s for a two-year assignment, leaving behind my recently divorced wife, Pat, and my daughter Mary. They lived not too far from my father's house. Despite my opposition to adopting, it was love at first sight when Pat brought baby Mary home. She was like an adorable little doll. I loved to hold her, and always volunteered to walk her at night when she was upset.

On my last visit to LA before leaving for Iran, I invited myself and my daughter to Dutch's house for dinner. He cooked, he and I drank, and we all played with his dogs. Best of all, he seemed to like my daughter. So, at the end of the evening I asked him to include her on some of his hunting, fishing, and camping outings. He seemed sincere when he promised to do so. When I returned two years later, I learned that he had never made an effort to contact her. I was furious. I told myself, *I'm used to you treating me like this, but when you do it to my daughter, despite your promises, that's the last straw.* I decided then never to see or contact him again, and I never have.

I turned away from Dutch and went over to Ma. "Sorry," I said, "but I've got to get on my way. I'll try to get up to see you soon as I can. Promise to keep you up to date on the adoption, too. I'll call you when the baby shows up."

I doubt that I meant it, even as I uttered my promise to visit and call. Maybe I was just too stressed, too miserable about my encounter with Dutch in the wake of Alby's death, around all these strangers, and could think only of getting away. In the face of stress and emotional risk, I took the path of least resistance, a chip off the old block.

Ma walked me out to the car, and we hugged. She had tears in her eyes behind her thick glasses. I knew she wanted me to stay longer, to talk

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with her, Dutch, Uncle Hal, and Aunt Alta: the family reminiscing alone together. Still, she said nothing to detain me or make me feel guiltier than I already did. Standing there, next to the car, I told her how wonderful Alby had always been to me and how much I missed him. She squeezed my hand, looked away, and we hugged one last time. I felt a deep sadness, as though something important had happened, but also a release of emotional pressure, as I drove away.

I flipped on the radio, hoping for a distraction. A hillbilly preacher was shouting in a voice like a hysterical car dealer, "Are you looking for God to touch you? Pray with me now; pray for God to touch you."

The crude evangelism offended me, and I scrambled to turn it off. As soon as the car fell silent again, a slideshow of disorderly thoughts cycled through my mind. I realized that my antipathy about the adoption had little to do with bad timing and pressures from my family. It also had nothing to do with Pat. I saw the connection between my resistance to the adoption and my father's reluctance to accept his responsibilities as a father. Like him, or because of him, I didn't want this child, didn't want this responsibility either. I feared that history would repeat itself, that I, too, would end up neglecting my wife and child.

I remembered his second visit to Highland Park when I was young. It was Christmas morning, 1944 or 1945, and he came to see me at my mother's parents' place. He was leaving that day to return to the South Pacific on his merchant ship. He didn't come inside the house. We sat on the front steps and talked for an hour. I have a black-and-white snapshot of that reunion, which shows my father—or Dutch, as I knew him—a kindly smile on his face, and me, looking sleepy, dressed in fuzzy white sissy-looking house slippers, surely some aunt's idea of what every boy wants for Christmas.

While we sat there in the warm winter sun, he told me about visiting a port in The Philippines called Tacloben; how he had seen McArthur there; what the people and the place looked like. As he talked, I could picture Tacloben: palm trees, the emerald green landscape, clear blue water, high mountains behind. I never forgot that name, Tacloben. When I visited Tacloben many years later, I stood on the old dock looking at the bay and pictured him there, his ship at anchor, strolling around, loving the place like I did.

Still brooding, I wondered why, if Dutch had cared nothing for me, he had bothered to take me on a few fishing and hunting trips, to a football game, to see *Grapes of Wrath*? Why did he visit me twice in Highland Park when I was young?

After a time of struggle with these thoughts, a switch flipped. The inner voices screamed in my ear. The emotional hyperventilation had, finally, become too painful. *Stop it! Stop all this inner churning. Just go home, go back to Pat, go ahead with the adoption, make Pat, make yourself, happy.*

Obedying the voice of self-preservation. I drove home. I stopped trying to understand my father, myself. I didn't think of Porterville—or my father—again for a long time, and I never went back.