ILUSTRACIÓN: JUDITH BAQUERIZO

ASPHYXIA

RAYMOND HOOPER

Fending off panic, I knelt with both knees in a pothole. Retrieving the rag I'd stuffed up the exhaust pipe of my father's truck was far more complicated than inserting it. Having realized that I was not capable of murder, I had to get it out.

The evening before, my father, barefoot, still in his sweaty undershirt, his pants paint and plaster spattered, sat in his La-Z Boy recliner. A cigarette dangled between his middle and index fingers as he raised a highball to his lips. My sister, my two brothers, and I sat on the floor. Our mom, also holding a highball, was stretched out on the couch she'd bought with S&H Green Stamps. We were watching television.

When our father was home, his general unpleasantness was sometimes a prelude to violence, especially if he'd drank too much. He used a belt fashioned from a barbershop strop when it came to beating us. When it came to our

mom, he sometimes used his fists, but she too could fall victim to the belt. Once, when she was still the lead soprano for the New Jersey Choral Society, he beat her the night before a two-day engagement, voiding her participation. Possessing superior wit, our mom battled with razor-sharp turns of phrase.

At an early age, my sister Judy and I were sometimes charged with making these highballs, Old Grandad whiskey in a tumbler with ginger ale on the rocks. Naively, we once presumed we could water down their drinks. I don't remember how we happened on this; I guess we'd seen it done in some television drama. Lucky for us, mom and not our father let us know she was aware her drink had been watered down, bringing our scheme to an abrupt end.

Our middle brother, Osee Junior (pronounced O C,) was born with Cerebral Palsy. He wore specially made shoes with one sole thicker than the other and metal braces up to his calf for most of his adolescent years. Our father was cruel to the core and would sometimes use Junior's handicap to provoke our mother.

I was thirteen, and Junior was ten. I am the oldest of four. My sister is eleven months younger, and Wayne, the baby, was born five years after me. My parents were ill-equipped to raise children, especially one with special needs. They had married because mom was pregnant. Love had nothing to do with this union.

When our father wasn't home, the house enjoyed a completely different atmosphere; mom would often sing, recite poetry, or out of nowhere, quote passages from literature, sometimes appropriate to a given situation. For example, at the dining table, using a British accent, she would ask for the butter, saying,

"May I have a pat of butter for the royal slice of bread?"

She would say this dramatically, rolling the R in "royal." At an early age, mom had also taught me how to Lindy Hop. Once I grew older, my knowing how to "Lindy" made me very popular at weddings with the women of my mom's generation.

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Our father's aura would hang in the air like body odor. Without apparent cause or reason, this would be another evening where a low-level tension permeated the living room. Cigarette ash flying, he gestures to Junior, sprawled awkwardly in his braces on the floor, saying,

"Look at him. He'll never be good for anything!"

Visibly holding back tears, Junior slowly picked himself up and, leaving the living room, climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

Guaranteed, had he started crying, our father would have removed his belt and, in his own words,

"Give him something to cry about."

We had repeatedly been told we shouldn't hate, but my anger toward my father had grown to an unbearable degree.

I was beside myself that night, lying in bed with my eyes wide open. Once I was sure everyone else had gone to sleep, I decided to kill him. Based on something I'd seen on television, I took an old rag and a black wire coat hanger; stealthily, I went down the back stairs, out the back door, and over to our dirt driveway. Shoving the rag deep into the exhaust pipe of his truck, I intended to kill him by asphyxia. Only thirteen years old, I didn't fully understand the dynamics of my plot, or as they say in the old movies, "I hadn't figured all the angles." Had I, I'd have reasoned why it would have fallen short of success.

I went back to bed.

Our street, Central Avenue (County Road 631), preceding the era and the use of asphalt, had been paved in neatly poured slabs of concrete.

These slabs were separated by inch-thick strips of tar-based dividers that ran perpendicular to the street. The front tires of passing automobiles, followed by the back tires rolling over these dividers, would create a double thumping sound.

There in the dark of my bedroom, I was reminded of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." As each car passed, the thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump would be accompanied by automobile light beams, traveling ghost-like through the splits in my curtains and across the walls, contents, and contours of my room. With each passing car, the thump, thump, thump, thump, in combination with mounting guilt, haunted my night. Sleep was the domain of the innocent.

I hadn't considered how I would get away with this murder until after I had impulsively committed the rag to the exhaust pipe. Accompanied only by the thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, and the beams of light moving eerily across my walls, the horror of what I was attempting loomed larger with each passing moment. My chest heaved heavier with each agonizing breath.

In that darkness just before dawn, with both knees in a pothole, I struggled frantically to fish out the ragged murder weapon. Shoving the rag in only took minutes now; trying to steal it back was taking an eternity. I was desperate. Finally, finally, I was able to hook the rag and slowly inch it out. Then, I tossed the twisted hanger and rag into the tall weeds that separated our property from nearby Maple Avenue.

I never told anyone. I had kept it a secret even from myself. I buried that night somewhere deep in my psyche, leaving it hidden until I was in my early thirties and had put myself in psychoanalysis for depression.

At an early age, as a mechanism for dealing with pain, physical or emotional, I would mentally project myself into some future time or place,

"Someday, I'll be old enough to move out of this house and start my life over.

Someday, I'll live miles away in New York, and this will only be a memory.

Someday, I'll…."

"Someday" had come, and I was in my early thirties. I had lived in my longed-for New York since I was eighteen, had gone to art school with no financial help from my father, and was well along in my career as a graphic designer, but I found I was suffering from a sporadic unexplainable depression. I had grown up, and in particularly tense situations, I'd found myself to have become passive-aggressive. I didn't understand why until the day came when I recovered the twisted coat hanger and rag and fished that night out of the ebony depths of my memory.

In a fit of anger, one might say, "I could kill him," or "I wish he were dead," but, no matter how feebly, at age thirteen, consumed with anger and animated by hate, I had taken steps toward murdering my father. All those years in-between, it was me who had been slowly suffocating, and now, having arrived at this revelation, I could breathe again. My long night surrendered to daylight, and in time my depression gave way.

Years after this revelation, I called my father and said I'd like to come and talk, "bury the hatchet," as the expression goes. When Wayne, the youngest, started college, mom moved out and, soon after, divorced our father. He had returned to Somerset, where he'd spent his youth, and several immediate family members and his boyhood friend still lived. We picked a Saturday. I rented a car and drove out.

Months earlier, I had appeared in Esquire magazine modeling a tuxedo. My father couldn't or wouldn't hear anything I had to say. All he wanted to do was drive me around with his copy of Esquire and show me off to his friends as if my achievements were the sum of his fatherly guidance and nurturing.

It wasn't too long before I'd had enough. I would not play the role of his trophy. I had him return me to my car, and I drove home to New York. When parting, we did not hug; we did not shake hands. The only time I can

remember his ever hugging me was at my high school graduation after I'd received several awards and scholarship money. His hug was not really for me. It was for his oldest sibling, my aunt Lillian, and anyone near enough he could consider to be his audience.

My son, Matthew, had only met his grandfather once. I would explain my reasons for this later when I felt him old enough to understand. With no memory of the encounter and in his blasé rebellious teens, he didn't care.

My last two visits with my father were to different Veteran's hospitals. On the first visit, I came alone. He had succumbed to dementia by this time. Our conversation was superficial and brief. Then, later, I would visit with my siblings when he was unconscious and near death in hospice care. His eyes closed, he made strange grunting noises. His arms and legs thrashed erratically. I imagined him to be wrestling with his demons.

He was, in essence, dying alone.

If there were any tears at the funeral Wayne had arranged, they were not from his four children. Neither were there tears from my half-brother nor my mom also in attendance. I did not stay for the post-funeral fried chicken, mash potatoes, and green bean dinner that often followed these end-of-life events, preferring instead to get in my rented car and drive home in silence, but first, I would chuckle as I left Somerset, recalling one of the comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley's routines about her dead husband,

"Do you know the funeral home had the nerve to call and ask me if I wanted his ashes?"

I said, "Hell no, burn them too!"

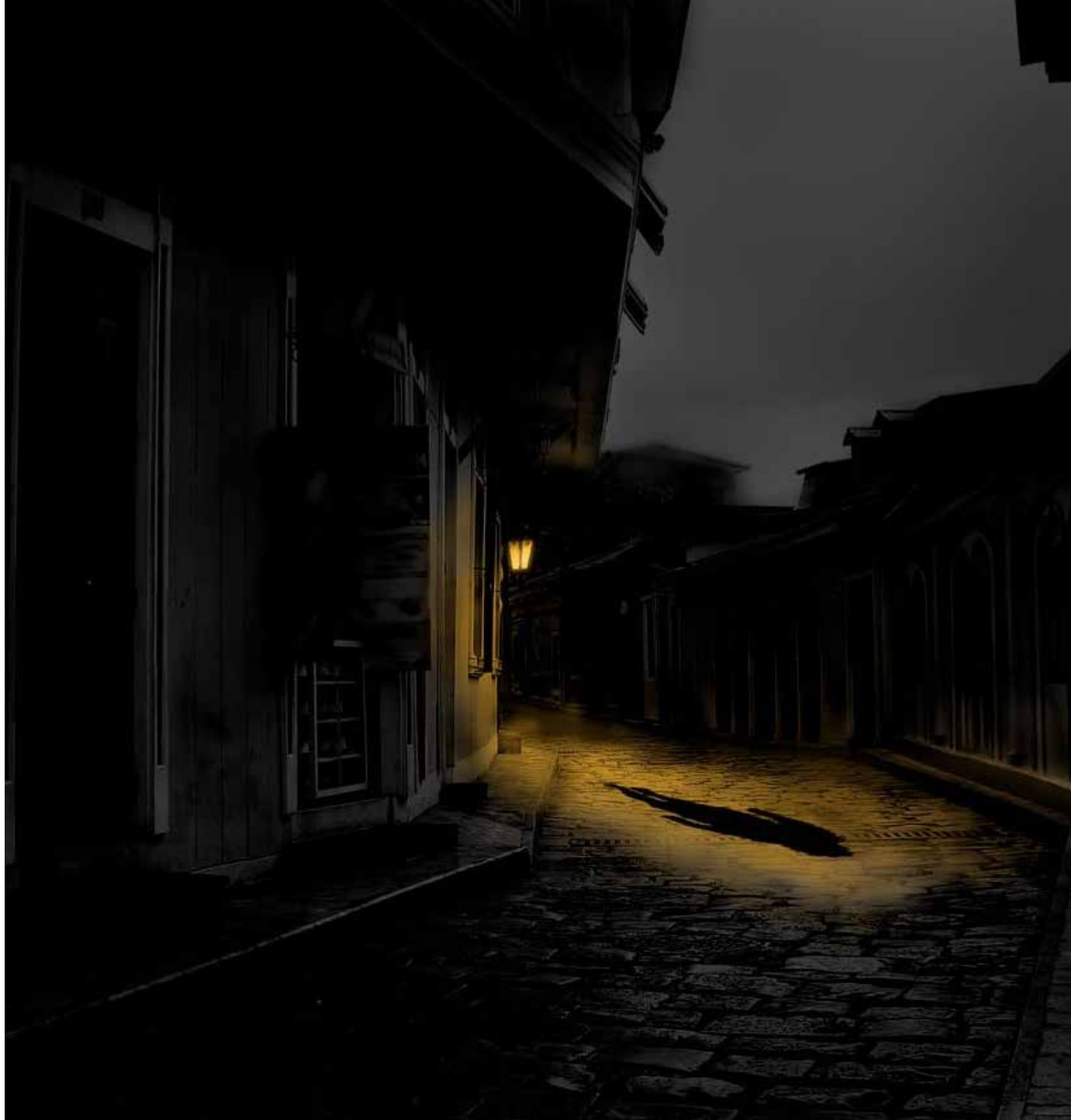

ILUSTRACIÓN: RENZO VINUEZA