

Sons

"Different—he's so different." My mother had a way of saying this, referring to Jerry, that conveyed a mixture of amusement, bafflement, and suspicion. The friends I'd had before were unremarkable as individuals: John, a boy I rode bikes with, and Skipper, whom I visited in his home, and Vonnie, whom I walked to school with. Jerry would come home with me and command everyone's attention with his self-possessed manner and politeness. He was always capable of conversing with adults as an equal.

He'd play our spinet piano if Mother or Granny asked him to, but he never really enjoyed playing for people in a casual way. Music was too important to him.

When he did play at our house, it was usually something like "Autumn Leaves", "Deep Purple", or "Mood Indigo"—tunes he'd style à la Art Tatum, his keyboard hero at that time. His mother and father especially enjoyed this music, and boogie-woogie. Hearing Jerry play these songs was a good part of their return on the investment they'd made in paying for expensive lessons (and providing the transportation to them) and for the pianos themselves. Whenever the Hunts entertained and Jerry agreed to play, it wasn't Bartok or Satie that their friends really wanted to hear.

We'd go back to my room (the Society's administrative headquarters) to work on projects, talk, and play with my cats, Melissa, Matilda, and Minerva. He'd have dinner with us, at the relatively early hour when we ate, accommodating my father's schedule. As a produce shipping clerk, he had to be at work by 4 a.m. and would be home by 2 or 3 in the afternoon and ready for a meal by 5. We always had a wonderful variety of vegetables and fruits from the market where Daddy worked or from his own backyard garden, but we didn't attempt gourmet cooking at our house. From her job as an assistant food preparer in the junior high cafeteria, Mother learned to serve Jello in cubes and a mound of cottage cheese atop a pineapple ring on a bed of lettuce (sometimes crowned with a maraschino cherry)—dishes Jerry would remember, and mock, for years. He also teased me regularly over the years about the amount of starchy food we always ate at home: navy beans, potatoes, macaroni and cheese, with rolls or cornbread, at the same meal (with fried pork chops, and baked apples for dessert).

Whatever the culture shock Jerry felt, and however much he exaggerated that feeling for its entertainment value, he always seemed to enjoy coming over.

Everyone in my family so obviously liked him, for one thing. When he hadn't been by in a while, Granny would ask, "Where's your partner? How's he doing?" (I remember being a little amused at her choice of that word, evoking as it did at that time Tonto and the Lone Ranger, Pancho and the Cisco Kid, or, a little later, Chester and Matt Dillon.)

Jerry and my sister, Judy, became good friends.

Whenever the subject of being an only child came up, he always congratulated himself on being unhampered by sibling rivalry, on being able to enjoy his parents' undivided attention and support. He claimed not to understand what it's like having a brother or a sister, and he asserted his gratitude to fate for not having to know.

Judy and I argued (I often bullied her) and we competed (I usually won), and, in the early years, I suppose Jerry didn't see much advantage to having a family any larger than three.

What happened that began to alter his thinking about siblings was that I went away for a week, during two summers, to visit my Aunt Grace in Kilgore. Jerry must have felt lonely, and he came over to visit my sister and watch TV with her while I was gone. I always think of her at that time with her hair in rollers, and I can just see the two of them sitting there on that sectional couch watching sitcoms and movies, snacking, laughing, and I like to think—missing me. A sister could be good company.

Judy and Jerry had another day together later, their first extended visit in thirty years, when she came down from Idaho to spend a week with us. They reminisced, I understand, about their childhood friendship, while I was in Dallas at work. They also talked about me, about what Judy could do to help me, when I was to be alone. Knowing that I had Judy was the single greatest solace Jerry had when he thought about what was just ahead for me.

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No two men could have been more unlike, at least in personality, as Jerry's father and mine. Daddy had had a difficult childhood, eventually running away from home, from an indifferent stepfather, to live with an older sister and her husband. He worked in the fields, had little formal education, and became a fun-loving, somewhat reckless youth with undeniable appeal to my romantic mother. He spent his early married years driving a fuel truck for Gulf Oil, when he and Mother lived in Mexia. The Depression brought them to Dallas, where Daddy found a job driving a truck for

Ben E. Keith, a wholesale produce company. He was later promoted to shipping clerk, and when he was more or less forced to retire due to disability, he had spent 27 years in their employ.

Daddy enjoyed working in his garden more than anything else—unless it would be listening to baseball games on the radio. He worked hard on the job, and he'd come home in the early afternoon, lie down for a while, and then work outside until dinner, after which he'd watch a little TV ("Gunsmoke" was a favorite program), bathe, and go to bed. Judy and I learned early to keep quiet in the evenings.

I never really felt I knew my father until I began to work with him during my last summer in high school. I was hired to fill short orders from the huge warehouse, and I had a good time pushing my dolly from one cold storage room to another, gathering the produce and sundries that would be loaded onto trucks for delivery. I'd collect the called-in orders from the front office and take them to my father; he'd shortlist the items for me to retrieve and then arrange the orders in the sequence that would represent stops on the various delivery routes. What impressed me most was his skill in working with the drivers whose trucks we'd load after our early lunch. With the greatest tact, and his usual gentle humor, he'd let them know what he had to: make the Circle Grill before Brownie's because "Old Lady Coombs is hot again today", be sure to hand-deliver the strawberries to the cook himself at the Golden Pheasant, and pick up the crate of cukes that the Magnolia Tea Room claims arrived damaged and replace it with two new ones.

As he joked with these men, guiding them in their work and smoothing over their quarrels arising from imagined unequal treatment, or personal differences, or boredom, I began to see who my father was through the reflection of him in their eyes: a considerate, fair man, and as good as his word. He even had a way of handling his frequently headstrong son, the one who had insisted on taking his cat to Kentucky on the family vacation we'd had almost ten years earlier, and who had to be shown that it wouldn't work by subjecting us all to a few blocks of frantic scratching and caterwauling: "Let him see," he'd say, sometimes to himself. He knew I liked to think most good ideas were my own.

Daddy enjoyed his job, enjoyed socializing with the drivers and office clerks, and even some of the regular customers. And everyone was fond of him, respecting him and liking to be with him at the same time. For as

long as he had his health, he was in his element at Keith's, a fact that I appreciated even more when I worked there full-time after leaving high school at midyear and before starting college. I am grateful for having been able to work with him so closely, for having been able to see him, to see anyone, derive satisfaction and pleasure from a demanding job, day after day, year after year.

But I am sorry he didn't get to know me, and much of the blame for that is mine. For whatever reason, I couldn't really talk with him about my concerns, my hopes and fears. Perhaps it didn't seem too important to me then that he knew them: he was so unlike me, how could he understand, and what could he do? Jerry and I had this in common, a sad distance between us and our fathers, men whom we sometimes feared and even resented, but whom we did come to like, and love, in later years. We talked sometimes about it. We surmised that our fathers sensed their sons were homosexual early on, that they felt threatened by this fact and utterly helpless to deal with it.

Jerry's father had the personality suited to selling and enjoyed his job as much as Daddy did his. "Mike," as his customers, colleagues, and friends referred to Clarence (a name he hated), called on grocery stores, pushing new Pet Milk products, checking displays, and taking orders. He was a tall, invariably well-dressed man who commanded attention wherever he went, and he didn't like to stay in one place long. He was proud of his talented son, never more so than when Jerry played at the country club the Hunts belonged to. As Jerry's musical interests led him into the avant-garde, Mr. Hunt grew more and more impatient with what he saw as an irresponsible career move. Why would Jerry perversely practice Cage and Stockhausen when he could so easily have renown as a classical pianist, or even as a jazz pianist? He and Jerry argued often about the subject, and one day, after what had no doubt been a long siege of Jerry practicing some prepared-piano piece, Mr. Hunt marched into the living room and snatched the oversized score off the piano, tearing it in half.

This volatility was a trait Jerry inherited from his father; they were an even match, with Mrs. Hunt never really succeeding in defusing their fits or confrontations, and eventually she seemed just to stand back and let them have their heads—although failing to remain unaffected by their anger and violence, of course.

After the explosion, everything would quickly return

to normal. From my father I inherited a tendency to withdraw and sulk, sometimes even making plans to get even. Jerry's house was a noisy one, mine quiet: he, his parents, and their two high-strung dogs were always right together in the thick of things, accompanied by the piano and the TV. At our house, we were all in separate rooms, pursuing our individual aims, only vaguely aware of what the others were up to. I think sometimes Jerry enjoyed coming over just to get a little relief from the highly-charged atmosphere in his own home.

The surface calm at my house was misleading though. In our several ways, we were all plotting, nursing wounds and seeking vindication, keeping secrets and longing for escape. Judy married right after high school and flew to Germany with her Army husband. I had already gone off to college, to East Texas State in Commerce, mainly to be with Kirby.

Daddy, now retired and ill with arteriosclerosis and emphysema, finally persuaded Mother that Granny had to go. He'd put up with her annoying habits, her continual cleaning and faultfinding, for almost twenty years, and he couldn't take it any more. Mother found rooms for her in state-subsidized private residences until Granny finally had to go to a nursing home. When I went back to visit, I'd find Mother sitting in the yard under the trees reading magazines, and Daddy would be inside asleep in his recliner, the TV on. These were Mother's hardest, loneliest years, and they weren't to end until Judy's husband, Paul, was sent to Viet Nam and she returned to Dallas.

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As younger men, our fathers had in common a certain rakish, high-spirited manner that apparently attracted their future wives. From looking at pictures of them in their 20s, one can see that these men knew how to have fun, sometimes maybe reckless fun. My father with his hat on at a jaunty angle, Jerry's in the photo-booth pictures he had taken for a lark—it is easy to look at them now and see how young women like our mothers might have been captivated by the prospect of adventure they suggested.

Shortly after they were married, my mother and father moved to Mexia. Mother had had a term at a teachers' college, but she postponed her plans to teach for the sake of her husband's job. Uncle Henry told me many years later, when he and Hazel and I drove through Mexia on a road trip, how unhappy Mother had been to leave her family and settle in such a strange, distant place. We drove by the building where their second-

floor apartment had been fifty years before; I imagined Mother up there listening to the radio, waiting for Daddy to come home, thinking from time to time with an access of pleasure about the imminent change of bill at the movies.

When I think of Mother now, I often picture her in a theater seat next to me, tapping her fingers on my hand or arm to the rhythm of some song in a film or some concert-music melody. She gave Judy and me music—or at least made it easy for us to partake of it, whenever we cared to—just as her own mother had given it to her. Until her arthritis disabled her, Granny would sit down regularly at the spinet (her chores all done) and play hymns and boogie-woogie by ear. Mother too played by ear, as I did before I learned to read music in order to be able to play the accordion.

We had a console phonograph from the time I was ten or so, and I can still hear the clunky fall of a 78 "platter" onto the one just played. We listened to the big bands, to the crooners, to Strauss waltzes and to Spike Jones (I recall how even Daddy liked "Golden Slippers"). Show tunes and music from movie soundtracks gradually replaced these singles.

Mother also gave me the movies. When we lived in Urbandale, we were just five or six blocks from the Urban Theater. Mother and I would go there often, probably with every change of program, leaving Judy with Granny until she was old enough to go too.

Movies with love stories and music were our favorites. We'd walk home after dark, vaguely aware of having sojourned in another realm, savoring the bittersweet return to the familiar. We were crazy about Doris Day.

A special treat was to go on the bus to downtown Dallas to one of the grand motion picture houses—the Palace, the Majestic, the Melba, and the Tower—that premiered the first-run films before they moved out to the neighborhood theaters. We'd do a little shopping, then have lunch at Dunton's Cafeteria, where Judy and I always insisted on eating on the mezzanine (making all those trips up and down the stairs was part of the fun). After the film, we'd go to H.L. Green's for toys: most of their basement was devoted to toys, all displayed without their packaging and within easy reach of children's hands.

We had a drugstore in Urbandale with a soda fountain and a magazine rack. When she had a day off from her job as a salesclerk at Titche's, Mother would take us there (until I was old enough to go alone, sometimes taking Judy with me). I'd buy movie books and books with song lyrics and sit looking through them while

drinking a soda. I still bought comic books as well. By the time we moved to Casa View, I was old enough to ride the bus to town alone. I remember seeing *Oklahoma* at the Tower Theater. I bought a souvenir program and pored over it on my way home. And I still remember that bittersweet sensation of being poised between two planes of existence, of having just been released from a kind of spell and rediscovering the things at hand with gratitude, but with—already rising in me at that age—a longing for the other realm.

This romantic predisposition became a bond between my mother and me. As a child I sensed something in her that I later realized I owned also: an underlying unhappiness arising, I suppose, from our disappointment that what we so easily imagined could, by so much, eclipse reality. Over the years I'd find Mother crying and ask, alarmed, what the matter was. She never really told me, and I'm not sure she always could have.

As Daddy put in year after year at Keith's, growing older and less and less fit, Mother had to reconcile herself to the distance that had come between them, to the loneliness she felt. "He's a good provider...he'd do anything for the kids...he's a good man". How often we heard her say these things as she faced Daddy's growing unwillingness to go anywhere or do anything that might vary the routine, or risk change.

With the birth of her grandchildren, though, Mother was herself reborn: her imagination stirred to life again as she held them, watched them grow. And the companionship she enjoyed with Judy as they shared the challenges and joys of motherhood put a sparkle in her eyes that hadn't been there for a while and that remained there up until a few weeks before her death. I look every few days at the photograph of her holding Paul Michael, just weeks old. That sparkle, that merriness, it radiates from the print: "Remember me like this."

Mother was a whistler, but you couldn't always recognize the tune she had in mind. I picked up that habit, from her I suppose (although my father whistled too), and Jerry pointed out frequently over the years that I tended to whistle when things were not going well. (Sometimes he'd demand that I stop, insisting that my "manic whistling" was making him nervous.) Now, fifteen years after her death, I can still hear her whistling. One of her 'tunes' I recall note perfect and whistle myself. Doing so brings me a sweet, comforting pleasure.

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"If you remain calm amidst all this confusion, it's simply because you do not understand the situation." So reads the text of a picture Mrs. Hunt embroidered the year Jerry and I met. He and his mother had a great deal in common: limitless nervous energy, which they usually channeled into making something, a pleasure in entertaining people, and a love of talking. Even after what must have been a stressful day as secretary to one or more VPs at Atlantic Richfield, Mrs. Hunt would come home, fix dinner, clear up the dishes, and then work on some sewing or craft project until after midnight. Like Jerry, she was a night person; and just as we had to at my house, she and Jerry had to be quiet after the early riser in their family had gone to bed. Earphones were a common sight at the Hunt house: they dangled from every radio and TV, ready to be called into service as soon as Mr. Hunt slammed his bedroom door.

Another interest Jerry and his mother shared was cooking. They'd read cookbooks, discuss recipes, and plan meals (I'd never heard anyone read a recipe to someone else, with sometimes the manner appropriate to narrative, until I began going home with Jerry.) Even as a teenager, Jerry was occasionally preparing whole meals for his parents and helping his mother cook when they had company. He was interested in gourmet dishes and, later, the foods of other countries: France, Italy, China, Japan, and India, to list the ones he studied most thoroughly.

Jerry and his mother were friends, good friends, and stayed up late together talking, watching TV, and playing with the dogs.

When Jerry and I moved into our house on Swiss Avenue in 1970, Mrs. Hunt would call every day or so. Sometimes she would come by on her way home from work to see him, to bring him some little gift: a cooking gadget, something for the house, or some sheet music he'd asked her to pick up at Whittle's.

I was always struck by the fact that their closeness had so few outward signs of a mother-son relationship. They talked about food and cooking, current events, programs they'd seen on TV, wildlife and animal lore, and how to do things—sharing discoveries and enthusiasms, complaints and exasperations. They'd argue, too, but rarely about personal matters. I would ask Jerry from time to time in the years to come how his mother felt about various issues, or people, that were affecting her or us in some important way, and he'd usually tell me he had no idea. Behind her vivacity there was a deep reserve, and it was never

easy to tell what might have upset her when it was clear that she was upset. And later, when the three of us were living on the farm in Canton, she'd sometimes ask me, when I'd go over to her house to visit, how Jerry felt about something important and what I thought he planned to do about it.

Mrs. Hunt's mother was widowed early and soon married the man who'd been a roomer in her house, a man Mrs. Hunt never liked.

Dan worked for the railroad and drank. As a young boy, Jerry would go to Mart (near Waco) to spend part of the summer with his grandparents. He'd tell me often about the good times he had there. His grandmother was a large woman who loved to eat; every morning she and Jerry would carry a platter of biscuits and a bowl

of bacon drippings to dip them in to the front porch swing.

They'd go to the Red and White grocery store and buy an assortment of the new box cakes, which she called "little farts", and come back and immediately stir one up and bake it.

Once Dan ran out of liquor shortly before it was time for the nearest liquor store, several miles away, to close. He was too far gone to be able to drive, so he asked Jerry to. I expect that was Jerry's first driving lesson. And I expect Jerry told his mother all about it, thus confirming her in her low opinion of her stepfather.

Dan sometimes took Jerry with him to the train yard where they'd climb aboard and Jerry would explore. The self-contained, compact world of the caboose appealed to Jerry, and he talked about it often over the years. In fact, when we were trying to figure out a way to expand our house on the farm before Mrs. Hunt died, Jerry proposed buying an old caboose, hauling it home, and fixing it up as a bedroom-and-study combination.

In Mart Jerry played with his cousin Ronnie. Their favorite game was to sneak at night into an abandoned two-story house on Mart's main street, wait for a car to approach from the distance, and then, using flashlights for illumination, enact some wild scene or strike some

pose that would cause the motorist passing by to slam on his brakes, or at least slow down. This must have been a preliminary exercise for the haunted house Jerry was to construct, with my help, in his parents' garage one Halloween several years later. We invited neighborhood kids in—and scared them so badly they ran home crying. When their parents began calling, we were forced to shut it down. All I specifically remember about it are the planks we rigged up to fall in the visitors' path.

Mrs. Hunt left Mart for Waco right after high school. She took a few courses at Baylor University; she loved biology and kept her textbook all her life. She met Mr. Hunt in college, and by the time he was drafted she was working as a clerk for an insurance company. She often told the story of Jerry's first Christmas, of how disheartened she was that her husband was away in Europe somewhere and that she was alone with their baby at such an important time. She had resolved to let the holiday pass uncelebrated, but her mother and cousins convinced her that that wouldn't be right, so she did buy presents and decorate after all. Jerry was almost a year old before his father returned from the war.

Circumstances made Jerry's mother independent, and he inherited her self-reliance. Along with this came an enterprising spirit that they shared with Mr. Hunt. Jerry's parents were always making plans to improve their fortunes and their lives. An early project was to make decorative, playful "Butt Buckets" out of small metal pails (Mr. Hunt asked me to correspond with Mexican factories about sizes and prices). Later, Petty Enterprises (named for Mrs. Hunt's father with no acknowledgment of humor I ever saw) acquired thousands of tiny gold-capped bottles for the manufacture and distribution of a new perfume. The bottles were never used and remain in storage.

Gradually the product catalogs and entrepreneurial magazines were replaced by gardening manuals, seed catalogs, and books of house plans as the Hunts made their plans to retire to the country. They couldn't wait to leave their jobs and the city, to be able to do, finally, all the things they'd always wanted to do.