

FUNERAL GAME

Baker Lawley

SO MR. CUTS is outside with my daddy before, all the time. They sit on plastic crates out in the yard drinking beers and throwing rocks at varmints underneath the house. Mr. Cuts throws empty bottles out into the high grass where my brother and me won't see them. He says to daddy over and over every night while they are out there that our house is sinking into the ground, that daddy is a bare-backed fool for marrying that woman in the first place and moving out here in the second.

One thing Mr. Cuts always does is points at my brother and my's bedroom and says Look at that end, already leaning down all whop-sided. Mr. Cuts says the blocks holding up the floor on our end are at least a foot lower than the other blocks holding up the house.

My brother and my's favorite game is to wait on daddy and Mr. Cuts to fall asleep out in the yard and pretend to give them funerals. My brother is the weeping wife. I am the priest. When my brother and my's time to play is coming, we wait in the front room, and watch the rocks bounce along on the dirt underneath the house through the floorboards. Sometimes for his funeral we roll daddy into a hole that's fell out off in the yard somewhere.

You total idiot, didn't you know, Mr. Cuts told daddy one time while we waited, that it's all limestone underneath? This whole area out here, all limestone. The groundwater'll wash it out from under your feet, he said, like a big underground river, and then, *ska-flip!* Mr. Cuts waved his arms and legs around like he's falling. The seat of his plastic crate cracked in two and Mr. Cuts' rear end was stuck inside. He dropped his beer and daddy about shitted himself laughing. Mr. Cuts' big round belly was poking way out in the air while he was stuck. He was a fat crab walking around trying to get out. My daddy's teeth smiling through his beard—gets up and does a little chicken dance around the yard. He is a skeleton. My brother and me can see all his ribs, and my's arms are about as big around as his.

My brother and me watch our daddy out there with Mr. Cuts every day since Mama ripped down the curtains and put the sledgehammer through the kitchen window while daddy was at work. My brother and me saw her take the car, spray gravel all over the front of the

house when she pulled out. Mr. Cuts and daddy used to work together at the mill, but daddy stopped going after that. He came home and finished a whole Old Crow bottle. He fell out right in the middle of the floor that time. We try to ask sometimes where's mama and all he does is drink and lay around. And talk to Mr. Cuts. They are always talking till it's real dark and sometimes neither one falls asleep out in the yard so my brother and my's game is ruined those nights. Mr. Cuts tells daddy that he is a big old idiot almost every night.

One time when daddy stands up to walk inside, Mr. Cuts says he's going to get Bobby Hondo, his buddy that works for the city, to come over one day. He says Hondo'll tell whether for sure if it's limestone up underneath.

That night, my brother starts going maybe Mr. Cuts is right. He was saying that the house is sinking for real and I was saying he is a total idiot, just like Mr. Cuts says daddy is. I tell my brother to shut up his whining like a little girl and he shuts up. When we lay down that time, my brother and me were sliding backwards out the tops of our beds some. All night, our trucks and baseballs and little rocks and things come alive and move towards us in our beds a little bit.

EARLY, AFTER THAT night when daddy and Mr. Cuts ruined the game and my brother started thinking the house was sinking, my brother and me get up to see if Mama came home like my brother thinks she will. My brother and me get dizzy when we get up this time. He has to sit back down and I call him a sissy. In the kitchen, we don't see mama again. We see daddy laid out on the table, passed out asleep. My brother starts in on his weeping wife act, rubber-chinning and sniffing. He is the weeping wife. I am the priest. I say Let us pray. Lord, thank you for this daddy who was a bare backed fool. When he gets to heaven, please give him some Old Crow. God rest daddy's soul. Rest in Peace.

My brother is snickering at me. I am glad since the game was ruined the night before. I break out into a hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy!* and my brother busts out laughing.

Daddy snorts sometimes and sometimes spits up during the game. When he wakes up he looks at us funny, gets up and goes outside. Daddy crawls up under the house with the varmints and lays down to sleep. My brother and me laugh, but inside we feel like scared stray dogs. I still tell my brother he is a raccoon. The dirt circles around his eyes make him look like one.

Then we play inside for a while until Mr. Cuts comes over with another man with him in the truck. Mr. Cuts stomps around outside the house hollering for daddy. My brother tells Mr. Cuts that daddy is up under the house, and Mr. Cuts crawls around there to get him and then drags him out by his heels. Daddy rolls over and rips a fart. Mr. Cuts spits on the ground, looks at daddy, then turns to my brother and me and says Y'all don't go inside the house for nothing.

Mr. Cuts looks at the other man that drove up and says Hell, Hondo, I sure think it's limestone. What do you think.

Hondo is walking all around the yard for a long time. He has tools and yardsticks. He is looking and scraping and measuring on the holes that fall out in the yard sometimes. Daddy lays in the gravel for a long time and sleeps. Then he sits up and Mr. Cuts drinks a beer with him. Daddy has gravel stuck right on the side of his face but he doesn't even care.

My brother and me play in the yard some when they're doing that, in a hole that fell out a while back. We pretend like it's quicksand. My brother makes like he can't get out and it's my's job to save him. I hold out a old tree limb to him and he grunts and grabs at it and I yank him out after he has a hold of it. My brother and me stand there looking at that hole some. My brother wipes his forehead and says Whew. My brother says Look at the house. He says it's all whop-sided when you look at it. He's right so I don't say anything.

HONDO LOOKS AROUND the house forever that day. When we start getting hungry, my brother and my's heads get tired out of things to play, so we go over and sit on the ground next to daddy. Mr. Cuts sits right on top of a cooler. He says Well what do you see, Hondo? Hondo says Wait a damn minute. He has this little blue book full of pictures of rocks and he was trying to match our dirt in the yard up to a picture. He walks off around behind the house.

Now, when Hondo comes back to the truck it is about past lunchtime. My brother and me can barely stand up we are so hungry. Hondo says Yep it's limestone, and a sinkhole's fixing to open up. Mr. Cuts says he thought so. Hondo says he bets the whole house is going to go

down with it. He says soon.

Next, Mr. Cuts makes daddy stand up, then tells him and my brother and me to don't go in the house for nothing. He looks around and then says, And y'all sleep outside tonight, you hear. Mr. Cuts and Hondo get in the truck and drive off and my brother and me follow daddy inside through the front door. The yard goes down, way down, when we walk up the steps.

Inside, my brother and me look around for food. We eat cereal out of the box with our hands and drink water from jugs underneath the sink. The faucet won't work and daddy can't fix it since he passed out in the floor of the bedroom.

My brother and me went to play outside. I pretend to give him a funeral and he lays in a hole. I say Thank you everybody for coming on out to the funeral today. But my brother is fell asleep in the hole and so I stop the game and lay down and sleep too. We slept but not really. It is bird sleep.

When we woke up, daddy is gone. My brother and me are up and we try crawling up under the house to look for him but he wasn't around. We look in the house but he is totally gone. We try to play some in the yard, my brother and me mostly sit outside and talk about mama. And the house made cracking noises some. Right then, my brother says the funeral game is what he misses. I tell him give me one and he is trying but he is never good at being the priest. He tries to say the prayer but gets stuck after Dear God.

We end up spending that whole day sitting around in the yard waiting on daddy. We eat ketchup sandwiches while we wait and throw rocks up under the house but all the varmints have left already. All the times outside then, my brother always watches cars come by on the road. He thought one of them will be mama but then I don't tell him he's a total idiot even though I think it. We run in and out of the holes that fell out in the yard for a while. And we look at the house some. It had gotten to where it was real whop-sided. Our end was down, way down in this big hole that come up underneath. Daddy and mama's side was on a level but was pitching forward some on a hole come up under their side some too.

At night in bed, our room has moonbeams coming through cracks up in the roof. So then we try to sleep but don't much. We lay down and our bodies slide up in our beds until we are mostly laying on the wall. My brother cries some. All the trucks and baseballs and rocks are totally rolled down on our side of the room. My brother is a little ball bundled up at the very top of his bed. He hollers out in his sleep about mama some. I told him shut up but he doesn't wake up right then.

AFTER WE LAID like that all night, in the morning Mr. Cuts comes up blowing his truck's horn to wake us up early. So my brother and me walked uphill to the front room and come outside. There is a city work truck with two men in it and Mr. Cuts is in his own truck. He gets out and says Where's your daddy at.

My brother and me both told him We don't know. And then Mr. Cuts gets mad and goes up in the house. He is on fire. Hondo gets out of the city truck and tells us Get away from the house, it's gonna fall into the ground. He says a sinkhole swallowed up a whole mall in Florida one time so don't think it couldn't happen to us.

Right then Mr. Cuts is flying out of the house yelling he's going to find my brother and my's fool daddy. We watch him peel out of the driveway off towards town. After that, the two city workmen walk around the truck and put on hard-hats. They take out a bunch of wooden stakes and nail them in the ground all around the house. Then they string up plastic tape saying CAUTION over and over between all the stakes in a circle around the house and rope it off. Hondo nails up a big metal sign in the middle of the driveway that says BEWARE SINKHOLE AREA.

Then Hondo and the other man get back in the truck and Hondo tips his hard-hat at my brother and me and says Y'all be good.

After that, my brother and me stand around looking at the tape and the signs the city workers put up, then sit on the ground in the yard and wait. We look at the holes some. My brother and me try to guess how many holes come up in the yard. My brother says about a hundred and I yell at him and call him a fool. I say about ten.

When we hear a car and look down the driveway, Mr. Cuts is driving up real fast, sliding around in the gravel on the driveway. He has his headlights on right in the middle of the day. Mr. Cuts skids and stops and a cloud of gravel dust comes floating by. It is a ghost.

My brother and me stand up and Mr. Cuts is getting out and stomping around to the back of the truck. He opens the tailgate and drags daddy out of the back, holding him up under his arms. This time daddy is a pile of rags and flops straight on the ground where Mr. Cuts drops him.

Mr. Cuts says daddy is a bare-backed fool. That he found him on the side of the road with a half a fifth of Old Crow. He pulls out a cooler from the back and gets out three beers and then sits on top of the cooler. He hands one to my brother and one to me. Mr. Cuts says I been driving around all day looking for that idiot. He spits on the ground near daddy. Daddy mumbling something real low like Getting the fuck out while I can,

it ain't no use. Something like that.

So, my brother and me crack open our beers and try them out. I didn't like it too good but I won't let my brother call me a sissy and so we both drink as good as we can. I set my beer down after about half and my brother does too. Mr. Cuts drinks his third and gets up off the cooler. He walks to the truck and says again Y'all sleep outside. He turns around and blows his horn and waves when he drives off.

Right then, my brother looks at daddy then looks at me. He starts in on his weeping wife act straight off, sniffing and rubber-chinning and all. I am standing up. I am the priest.

Thanks for coming, I am saying, to this sad, sad funeral day. Here is a man we all know and we all loved. And today we come to tell him so long.

My brother lets out a wail and goes back to sniffing. He is trying hard not to laugh. I am trying to make my brother laugh harder. I am telling daddy's stories.

We will all remember, I say, when this man built a motorcycle from a lawnmower's engine that time. And the time he won the half-mile race in high school. And he and his buddies threw those other boys in the river after a fight. Yes sir. He was a real true hero.

My brother busts out laughing but throws in a wail with it so it sounds like real crying.

I say, And don't forget him. He could've been a movie star, like mama always said. Or a army man. Or a country singer. He might could've won Wrestlemania.

My brother lets out this long long wail.

I start putting my hands together and say Let us pray. Dear God, please help this man make it up to Heaven. He was a real hero to so many of us, we'd sure appreciate it a lot.

My brother wails real loud but short. He snuffles.

Right about then daddy is opening one eye and then the other. He looks at us and then stands up real quick. My brother and me stare at him. Because, it is a scene from TV where the ghost comes out of the body and goes up to Heaven. Except, daddy is a cartoon walking off, slugging around all crooked looking. He is stepping off sideways and spinning almost the whole way around one time, walking straight through the city worker's little roped-off fence, snapping the CAUTION tape in two with his leg, walking down the slope and on up the steps into the house. The house is cracking real loud when daddy goes inside.

My brother and me stand around outside for a while. It isn't dark yet, but my brother and me are too tired and shaky to do much else except sit around and talk some. My brother says he is starving and can't barely walk

sometimes. We both feel drunk off our beers and sleep out in the yard some. When we wake up I say Wonder where mama's at. My brother says he thinks a loony bin. I say he is the one that's crazy and throw a rock at him but miss. He says mama wouldn't leave us alone unless she went crazy. I don't think so then but I tell him maybe so, to help him out.

All afternoon my brother and me just sit around and watch the sun go along. We decide to go on in to sleep because we are too weak to play any games or stay out all the time. Inside, daddy is a wrecked car, crashed into the table and broke its almost leg off, knocked a chair over and is laid out on the floor up in the middle of it. My brother and me step over him and look around for something to eat. My brother finds a dirty plate sitting in a drawer for no reason. We find a hot dog bun to eat, and split it. There is nothing to drink except Old Crow.

My brother shakes daddy but he is a lump and won't get up. So we go into his and mama's room and get in their bed. It is leaning to the side real hard instead of back, so we try not to roll out.

All night my brother and me cling on each other. I am holding the edge of the bed and my brother is hanging off my other arm. We don't want to sleep because we are scared and have no idea about our mama, or our daddy, even. Except, we are empty and go to sleep anyway.

My brother wails all night. He is the weeping wife without a funeral.

WHEN THE NEXT morning comes my brother and me are so hungry we wake up right when the sun is coming up. We are walking around the house trying to balance on the whop-sided floors. The house snaps and groans loud while we walk around. Daddy is still on the floor. The table is fell over and poking him in the back but he doesn't know.

The chairs at the table sit around looking all different ways, but my brother and me sit in them like they are anyway. We don't say a thing at all. My brother thinks about mama, I can tell. I think about her some too. The house is jittering and moving around while we sit. One time it makes my's chair turn sideways some. When Mr. Cuts drives up he is honking his horn thinking he's waking us up. My brother and me go on outside again.

Mr. Cuts doesn't get out but rolls down the window and says Where in the hell is your daddy at. My brother and me say Inside again. Mr. Cuts says Shitfire, and then he is flying inside and then flying back outside, running up out of the hole coming out. Mr. Cuts is dragging daddy, hanging on to his legs and pulling.

Mr. Cuts drops daddy's legs and tells us I done said

don't go in the house but y'all do anyway. Daddy rolls over and groans and then starts crawling back towards the door. Mr. Cuts opens the door and gets out and hollers Hey you son of a bitch. And daddy says You're right, I ain't got nothing, ain't got no reason no more. He turns and looks over his shoulder while he's crawling off and sees us standing there. We look at daddy and daddy looks right on back but still keeps crawling along, and then crawls on up under the house. Mr. Cuts says he ain't dealing with this shit no more, and then gets into the truck and flies off throwing gravel everywhere with his tires.

My brother and me stand and watch daddy for a long long time. It is totally quiet. My brother bends down to see where daddy is up under there. He says daddy is a little ball curled up near the bottom of the chimney bricks. He throws a rock up under there at him, to try and get him out of there. Then we all stand there for a while. It is totally quiet except for the house popping.

We are standing still forever, I feel like. It is totally silent and still for the longest time, until my brother and my's bedroom makes this loud snap and the ground cracks and grumbles. Everything is shaking and we feel things buckle up under our feet. I holler out Run! And my brother and me take off running down the driveway. Behind us we hear the house rattling and ripping. We stop down closer to the road and turn around.

We are watching the house move all around. It shakes back and forth and then starts to disappear. The hole come up and swallowed the whole house. My brother and my's bedroom goes down first and then mama and daddy's side goes on down. The hole that was coming up is spreading on out and out, taking on down most all of the yard. The ground is shaking around and knocks over my little brother. The house is totally gone. But a big old cloud of dust is flying out of the hole, sitting in the air up above it, just hanging there.

I run up to the edge of the hole, near the metal sign Hondo put up. Down in there, the house is not a house. It is a nothing. My brother walks out into the road and watches down it for cars, for mama's car, Mr. Cuts' truck, anything. My brother and me stand there each looking at our own thing, then we turn and look at each other. Neither one of us has seen anything good.