

ROGER THE DODGER

Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow, but tend and cherish it 'til it comes to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh.

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Among my mother's things, our progress reports. Midsixties, and so, in the spirit of progressive education even in the public schools of Chicago's suburbs, these records of our achievement and potential were renamed—not "report cards" (is this too Big Brotherly? Too Orwellian? Too McCarthy-esque?) but "progress reports." And here, some fifty years later, I can't help but note how little, really, progress we (my brothers, Allen, Donald, Roger, and I) have made. Donald is still "bright" and "organized." Allen demonstrates "both thoroughness and insight in his study." I am "well-behaved" and "a good reader and writer." And Roger, dead now for more than six years, was always "jolly."

Everybody loved Roger. Despite his weight (well over 500 pounds at his death), despite his propensity to borrow money and not repay, to always be in some sort of need. Like so many of us in our family, he was probably emotionally—let me say—*compromised*. I remember he

went for counseling when he was an adolescent, but I don't remember why. He had begun running away. He hitchhiked to the next state and joined a carnival when he was fourteen, the cops brought him home. He was food dependent, pleasure dependent, then and always. He spent more money on gadgets and services than he could afford, more than his real expenses (a home, clothing, his taxi lease) would allow. A man who never fully evolved into grown-up responsibilities and self-care. Roger the Dodger. But man, did he know how to enjoy himself.

No one, no one found as much joy in Chicago—this city that was hard on him, hard for him—as he did. The pretty city women in their summer dresses passing the nose of his cab. He was one of those guys, the kind who would whistle at women, who would yell out his window *Looking good, Lady!* He was not a predator, he was not a threat, not dangerous, not even a little. He was vociferously moved by beauty. He was joyful. Appreciative, especially of this city and all its offerings. As a teenager he knew his way around on the subway, on the El. When he learned to drive, he explored every neighborhood. He knew all the shortcuts to get around traffic on the Kennedy, on the Tri-State, on Michigan Avenue. As an adult, he would park his cab near the lakefront and watch the blue sky and glittering waves in his windshield until he dozed. (This was when he didn't have a real home, when he spent some nights—if he could afford it—in transient hotels, when he carried everything he owned, a jumble of papers and electronics and cords and mostly clean underwear and packages of cheap cotton socks stirring around in a couple of Hefty bags in the trunk of his cab.) He would program alerts on his phone to let him know the score of Cubs games; he would

cheer loudly when they won. (How he would have loved the World Series win.) He would take photo after photo every year of the enormous Christmas tree and its lights in Daley Plaza. Those pictures, like the Christmas trees themselves, all looked the same to me.

Roger drove the Santa Cab. Was this his idea? He had been a cab driver since he was a teenager in the suburbs, plus, he was always rotund. He loved Christmas, his birthday came just two days following it. So during the holidays, he would put on a Santa hat and a fake white beard, and drive his taxi around. He would *Ho, ho, ho*, anyone who got inside his cab. *Merry Christmas*, he would say, pitching his voice low like the Santas of cartoons. This is how it started. A red hat and a white beard and a standard line.

Years into his work driving cab, the company he drove for caught on. They helped him pay for a full Santa suit (he was close to 400 pounds by then) and for decorations. Colored lights strung over the ceiling and around the windows of his cab. A sound system blared holiday music out into the streets from a speaker on the taxi roof. If you were lucky enough to catch the Santa Cab, your ride was free. This wasn't his idea (he usually was broke, remember, so free wasn't something he would have proposed) but it got great publicity. He was in the local newspapers and on *The Today Show*, and during those days, he had the time of his life. Happy customers, generous gratuities, national celebrity. *Ho, ho, ho!*

Boy, he loved driving. Even as a little kid, Roger was a driving guy. Hours and hours on the floor of our den with Matchbook cars, making those spitting engine noises that kids do. He studied to be a truck driver, and passed

his licensing tests, but he had no way of investing in that career. When I moved to Iowa for a short while in my early adulthood, Roger followed me. (We were always very close. When we were little kids, five and seven, I cut my hair short as a boy's and pretended we were twins.) In Iowa, he drove a school bus.

And he stripped.

Do you remember the male stripper craze of the seventies, the eighties? Chippendales, that sort of thing? We had our own local troupe of male dancers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Guys who loved to dance and were good at it. Guys with good enough bodies. They invited Roger to join them, all 300-plus pounds of him then, and gave him a pair of triple-XL boxer shorts with red hearts. They called him Buffy, short for Buffalo in the Buff. He danced (not very well, but with great enthusiasm and delight) and took off his clothes and people laughed and sometimes, and these are the good times, he got laid, just like the other male strippers did. He loved stripping. Almost as much as he loved driving.

It—the stripping, not the driving—embarrassed me.

Roger loved loving. “This Guy’s in Love With You” by Herb Alpert was his favorite song. He had a handful of women friends when he moved back to Chicago and started driving a cab again. Needful women, most of them, living close to crisis (Kim, whose boyfriend beat her often enough to finally land in jail for it; Tiffany who was evicted from this apartment, then that one; women he met online and in the back of his cab who couldn’t pay for their phone bills, for groceries, for the rides he had just given them), and he called them each his wife. His phone

would ring (the latest of many gadgets he bought, always the newest, the best, the bells-and-whistle-iest that took whatever money he made so he couldn't pay his own rent, couldn't pay his parking tickets, was always late on his cab lease) and he would say to whomever was in his backseat, "That's my wife calling." In name only. I don't think he ever even made out with any of these needful, emergency-prone women. They certainly never conjugated their relationship. But he was an easy touch, and whether he could afford the time or the money or not, he would try to help. He wanted to be a savior. *You see this guy*, his favorite song goes. Roger—this by now 500-pound man who most people looked away from—wanted at the very least, to be seen.

Roger was fifty-three years old when he died. A summer night. Chicago hot. I woke up in the middle of that night with a pain so sharp and expanding in my gut, I was afraid I might explode. But I didn't, and I fell back to sleep, in the bedroom with the door closed because we had the window air conditioner on. I woke up a couple of hours later, a little achy, in need of the bathroom. When I opened the door, I heard an odd mechanical voice coming from the answering machine. "He may die." That is all I heard.

I have regrets.

I regret that when we were children on a plane flying with our family from Spain to Portugal, while he slept I took the postcard Roger had written to our grandparents from the seat pocket in front of him and erased what he had written. He was a lefty and dyslexic (although we didn't know that then) and the card was messy.

Misspellings and sloppy handwriting and extra letters at the ends of words X-ed over. I erased it and rewrote it. In my pretty, little-girl cursive. Even as I did it, I felt sort of squirmy. Why did I think that what he had to offer was not good enough?

Before I even replayed the message on the answering machine, I knew it was about Roger. My oldest brother Allen was texting from the hospital, and the message was played into my machine as a voicemail. It was city dark in the apartment, shadows and light coming in the windows. The light on the machine blinked yellow. Caution. Caution. Caution. There were three or four other messages. Allen had been calling regularly for a couple of hours. I began screaming. "He's dying! He's dying! He's dying!" Philip jumped out of bed, ran to me. "What? What?" (Later he would tell me that he thought I was yelling about one of our cats.) I couldn't stop shaking.

Roger was an easy crier. Like our mom, like one of our nephews. A mush, we used to say. He cried when he sang with his favorite song: *you see this guy...* He cried at *Miracle on 34th Street*, at *It's a Wonderful Life*. He cried once when he was particularly broke and working night and day driving his cab and so not getting enough sleep and hit the front bumper of a van when he tried to parallel park.

I cried when people made fun of him. When we were kids. When we were adults. I cried when his "wives" took advantage of him. When anyone did.

And they did.

One of the Hefty bags of Roger's things I picked up from the nursing home where he lived his last month was full

of his few pieces of enormous clothing. I left that bag behind, told the nurses to throw it away. The other bag was full of his gadgets: a half-dozen cellphones, working and not; a laptop; hand-held electronic games; a couple books (Harry Potter series); ID cards and papers; expired cash cards and cancelled checks. Some he'd written returned for nonpayment, and one dated around the same time—just a couple of weeks before he checked himself into the nursing home—to him for 2,000 dollars, also marked “Insufficient Funds.” The payer on the check, some bogus tech company. And I could imagine what happened. My brother had fallen for a scam promising to send him money for something—a survey maybe, or trial use of a phony product—and he'd written checks on outstanding debts believing that the check for a couple grand was good.

Was that why he'd checked himself in to assisted living? A means of escape, perhaps?

The weeks before he died, I was traveling. I spoke to him every couple of days by phone. The nursing home he was in was paid for by federal and state safety nets, and he was hungry but excited because they had him on a low-calorie diet. He imagined his life in just a few months when he would be skinnier, healthier, able to return to an existence more traditional than the marginal one he had survived so far.

I visited him before I left. The place was less than a mile from my apartment, in an Uptown neighborhood. It stunk of boiled vegetables and soiled bedding and pine cleaner. Roger spent most of his day in bed, watching television, fiddling on his computer, flirting with the nurses. He was not bored. He was not unhappy.

When I was in Cooperstown, New York, researching

a travel article and walking around the Baseball Hall of Fame without much interest, Roger got sick. An infection in his gut. They took him to the hospital. He spoke to me from there. He cried over the phone to me because they wouldn't tell him when he could leave. He was afraid he would lose his bed in the substandard facility where he probably got sick in the first place. When, a day later, they released him and sent him back to that place, he left a message on my voicemail, I heard it on the road. He was laughing, relieved, homebound.

I called him for two days as we drove back home. He didn't answer my calls. I left messages. I got pissed, like a sister will, because he didn't call me back. When we arrived home, I called again. After thousands of miles and days away, I had returned. We were close. I was just a mile from him. I could have walked over there. I thought I should. But I didn't.

As I said, I have regrets.

Roger died in an expensive hospital near Chicago's lakeshore. Whenever I run or walk along that stretch of lakefront path, I have to look away, stare out over the water, blink back the tears. He died of the same infection he already had, gone to sepsis, untended by the people at the nursing facility.

We were there. My brothers Allen, Don, and I. The critical care nurses who took care of Roger in his last hours were young and beautiful. They leaned over him as he struggled to breathe, in a coma, as his belly swelled even more hugely. They wiped the spittle from the corners of his mouth with cool towels; their hair pulled back in loose ponytails swung over their shoulders; their smiles were kind; their touch was gentle. They spoke to

him in quiet voices. Like lovers.

You see this guy?

Oh, how he would have loved that part.

When Roger the Dodger moved back to Chicago from Iowa, he left behind significant debt; the memory of his pet dog who died because (he told me) he could not afford to feed him; friendships that had grown cold because people were weary of supporting him; garbage and gadgets in the motel room where he'd been living for the last few of his Iowa months. Back in Chicago then he was homeless, mostly. Sometimes he stayed with friends, sometimes at SROs, sometimes with our mother, sometimes with me. We would go out together sometimes, to a dance club on Division Street where I worked as a bartender, a waitress, an office manager, depending on the day. We were young, Roger and I, so we drank young, stupid drinks. Long Island Iced Teas, Tequila Sunrises. We would get drunk, and Roger would get loud, singing off-key, banging on the bar, dancing like he did when he was a stripper, and I would get embarrassed.

I cannot smother my sorrow. I regret deeply, many things: I did not walk over to the nursing facility when Roger did not answer his phone. I did not, when I could have, help him live.

But mostly this: at the bar on Division Street when we were both drunk, I told Roger to shut up, to quit making so much noise, to settle down, to keep still. He looked at me chastised, hurt. His eyes filled. "I'm just trying to have a good time," he said. "Just trying to have some fun."

And I regret deeply, with great sorrow, that I tried to stop him from that.