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What He Needed to Say

by James Calvin Schaap

Wednesday--bacon, lettuce, and tomato.

Soon enough, he'd have to throw the tomatoes away if he didn't use them. Thursday—pot pies; the kids loved them, even though he always felt guilty because they were so easy. That left Friday, the weekend—take the girls out for pizza. Nick would be gone to soccer or something with the guys. Ben looked down at the list and told himself he hadn't done a half-bad job being mom.

In South Africa, where Lynda was on sabbatical, it was late winter, even though back here in the States only a few days of summer were left before the kids would head out to school. The advantage of her studying South African literature was that she could spend her summers in Pretoria, when it was winter down there, the schools in full swing until Christmas. Afrikaans fiction was a species of literature she had in her genes she said, being Dutch Calvinist herself, like the Afrikaners.

Right now she'd be sitting at some desk in an apartment he'd only pictured from Lynda's careful e-mail descriptions. She'd have a sweater thrown over her shoulders, her reading glasses on her nose, her face slightly upturned. He remembered how, some mornings in bed, she'd wrap her shoulders in her bathrobe to keep away a chill. Odd, he thought, how images like that could come to him at the strangest times. In the middle of some patient's recitation of this or that ailment, his mind would suddenly flash to their bedroom, where he'd watch her twist her shoulders while reaching behind her to fasten her bra. Some nights he'd dream about her walking into the bedroom as if she'd never left.

He put down the grocery list and picked up his father's new book—memories of the Nazi occupation in the Netherlands, of the starving winter when cats were passed off as rabbits to hungry people, a whole collection of stories he'd heard from his father in snippets throughout his childhood. He hadn't brought himself to read it through, because even browsing would force him to sympathy. His father was a tough man, tougher on his son, Ben thought, than he should have been--the war this, the war that. He let the book fall open. "My sister was released from the camp at Vught after her boyfriend was killed because the SS thought women wouldn't work for the Resistance if their husbands hadn't put them up to it. The SS didn't know my sister."

To believe Tante Aantje could ever have fought Nazis was impossible. She still lived in Holland, where she spent most of her time keeping up the garden around her modest home. Sweet Tante Antje fighting Nazis.

He raised the shade to see Nick coming up the sidewalk from his car. Eleven o'clock, right on time for a Sunday night. He never knew whether to judge his son's almost perfect behavior as a measure of their success as parents, or their failure. Nick loved being at home so much that sometimes they had to shoo him out.

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He put his father's book down, pulled the empty ice cream saucer from the cat's covetous eyes, and sat up as the screen door shrieked and the back steps moaned beneath his son's footfalls.

"How's it going?" he asked as Nick came up the stairs.

Nick stood there as if in a daze, the long pipes of the doorbell chimes in front of him. Lynda had been gone only six weeks, but already she wouldn't recognize him, their son having grown a foot, it seemed.

"There's some of that ice cream you like—"Death by Chocolate," he told him, snickering, but Nick barely shrugged his shoulders. "Something the matter?" Ben said.

With the kind of jerking motion that had become obsessive with him since he'd parted his hair down the middle, he shook both ends back behind his ears, but never moved his eyes from the chimes, didn't move an inch.

"Nick," he said, "something happen or what?"

At that the kid turned slowly, as he were feeling guilty about the smears over his cheeks, the tracks of tears.

"What is it?" he said.

"Quinn's girl, Shannon," he said, grabbing one of the long pipes as if he could rip it from the wall. "You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"What happened."

"No," Ben said.

Nick brought a fist to his face as if to cover a cough. "She's dead," he said. "Got killed tonight—"

"Killed?" Ben said.

"A train. On Farrows Road." He pointed over his shoulder as if the intersection were right behind him. "You know that railroad crossing?"

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Just now?"

Nick raised the heels of his hands to his eyes. "Around seven." He made a spitting noise, as if trying to expel the hurt. "She must have been driving into the sun because there was no way you could miss it coming," he said, "the train I mean. How could you miss a train?—tell me that, Dad--how could somebody miss seeing a train?"

However many tears had already been shed were not enough to cover the hurt. He looked as if he could lose it again any time.

"How's Quinn?" he said.

Nick kicked off his moccasins and slumped to the rug, kept an elbow up to support his head, legs splayed beneath him. He took a burdened breath. "A mess," he said. "He's like, torn up completely. He's a wreck." And then he cried, not audibly, not even visibly. Into his forearm. Just covered his eyes and turned away, shoulders throbbing.

Ben didn't know this Shannon, knew only that Quinn, like Nick, hadn't had much success with girls, hadn't tried either, both of them loners and proud of it.

The girlfriend business had come up only in the last few weeks, after Lynda had left. Sometimes Nick laughed about his buddy, as if the thought of Quinn in a car alone with a girl was a scream.

"It's like he's not even Quinn," Nick said, rubbing his eyes. "I've never yet been to a funeral," he said. "I never thought anything could hurt somebody so bad." And then he cried again, in sobs he battled to hold back.

Ben pulled himself up from the chair but stayed on his knees and waded across the room. "I'm sorry," he said, then sat with his folded legs beneath him. He squared his back against the couch, and grabbed Nick's knee like a gear shift, just to let him know he was there. They were not the touching type, never had been. Sometimes seeing other fathers hugging their boys made him angry at his own father for passing along this iron like reserve. He reached for Nick's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said, "for you—and for Quinn—and for her family," he said. "That's just awful." Nothing sounded real.

Nick tried yawning his face out of distortion. "It's all I been doing is bawling," he said. "I got to quit." He shook his head as if to loosen something. "How long does it take before you stop losing it? I mean, when something like this happens, how long before you can shut off the water?"

"Why stop?" he said.

"I'm sick of it," Nick snapped. "It's like having the flu—you can't do anything about it, huh? Doesn't even pay to try."

"You been over there?"

Nick shook his head yes.

"All night?"

"Quinn should have been with her," he said. "She was going to meet him in town—taking the car," he said. "He's a mess too because he says it's all his fault—that he didn't pick her up. He says it wouldn't have happened if he wasn't playing Nintendo."

"It isn't his fault—"

"You can't tell him nothing," Nick growled. "All he does is fall apart." He pulled his knees up beneath him. "What do you say?" he said. "Everything sounds like commercials—everything."

"Just let him be," Ben said. "You got to just let him be."

"Quinn's crazy, Dad," he'd told his father six weeks ago. "Quinn's got this girl on his mind, like all the time. It's nuts."

"Who is this Shannon?" he said, taking hold of his son's knee. "I mean, what's her last name?"

"Timmons," he said. "She lives down there—on Fallows Road. Her parents have this place on the lake. She's a sophomore" and then, reluctantly, "was." He dragged his shirt sleeve across his eyes, clearing the tangles. "I wish Mom was here."

"So do I," he said. In the silence, he steered away from the cold questions, the factual stuff. This wasn't just anyone's death, after all. This was something horrible, something he remembered himself now, in the sheen of his son's own tears. He tried to come up with something sincere for Nick, something to say,

something adult, but he remembered very well that there wasn't anything. He remembering being Quinn. He looked at his watch. It was after eleven, but what did curfew mean? What difference did anything make? "Whyn't you just go back, Nick?" he said. "You hear me?—you're not going to sleep anyway. Believe me. Neither is Quinn."

"It's all darkness," Nick said. "I mean, I don't see nothing in front of me—I really don't. There's this wall and it goes all the way up to heaven," he said. "I can't imagine life without Shannon—and what about Quinn, Dad?" he asked. "How bad would it be then?"

Three days and school starts, Ben thought.

"It's like nothing that ever happened to me," Nick said. "I look at Quinn and I don't know what to tell him." He raised his hands. "We just sat on his bed and bawled—"

"We"?—"

"Freddy and Sam were there—three of us." With his thumb and fingers, Nick pinched at his forehead as if he could squeeze out the headache. "He says he loved her, Dad." His eyes lifted to the window on the other side of the room. "He keeps saying all the time how much he loved her." He pumped a fist against his leg. "Shoot, he just started going with her, a couple months—not even." He shook back his hair, stared at the ceiling. "You think he's just saying that? You really think he loved her?"

"Maybe he did," Ben said, "in his own way."

"Real love," he said, "like you and Mom?"

"That's probably what he thinks, I'm sure," Ben told him. "Especially now."

"But is it?" he said. "Is it really love?"

"Doesn't pay to try to tell him different," Ben said.

"Then what's he got left, Dad?—I mean it," Nick said, and he pulled himself to his knees. "Then what's Quinn got to look forward to in his life with her gone—if he really loved her?" Both hands came up to pull back his hair. "What's the sense?"

So much should be said, but couldn't, Ben thought. Nick was right. Everything that came to mind was like commercials, so much tripe. "He's got a lot, really," Ben told him. "He's got a lifetime ahead of him, Nick—believe me." Flimsy words.

He'd never told Nick about Sally, his high school girl, the whole horrible story— never thought about telling, never considered it—a death that had happened so long ago it was hard to believe he was the same human being. Thirty years ago already, his girl in a plane crash. Sally was killed.

"How can you say to him that there's still life ahead of him?" Nick said, pulling one leg beneath him and sitting again. "He thinks everything is done. He thinks his whole life is shot. The girl he loved is dead. What's the use?"

"Lots of life ahead of him," Ben said.

Nick pulled his fingers in and out, making a fist. "There's got to be something to tell him," he said. "There's got to be more. Shoot, Dad, you're a doctor. You deal with this stuff every day." He looked at him earnestly. "We're

Christians, aren't we?"

He jerked on his son's knee, brought it down against his thigh. "Listen to this," he said. "This is what Job says, 'The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

"I can't tell him that—"

"I know," Ben said.

"He'd blow up," Nick said, "he would."

"I know he would—"

"Then why should I say it?"

"You don't have to say anything, Nick," Ben said. "You just have to be there." He squeezed his son's knee tightly. "It takes time to believe, to hear real words." What he remembered were ditties that came out of people's mouths like thin shards of glass.

"You want me to believe, don't you?" Nick said.

"I want you to believe it because it's true," he said. "But right now isn't the time to figure anything out. Quinn's got all he can do to just stand up—so do you." He remembered the hunger of his emptiness, a terror so alive it clawed at his soul. In love?- of course it was love. What possible good could it be to tell a kid he wasn't in love?

"Maybe I'm not making sense, Nick," he said. "I'm sorry. I should be better at this, but what I'm saying is that right now crying is okay," he said. "Take it from the doctor. I know it is."

Nick stared into his open palms.

"I know it because I lived through it myself."

Nick looked up him, wiped his eyes with the back of his hands.

"I lost this girl," he said, "just like Quinn."

"True?" he said.

"Swear to God."

"You loved her?"

"I loved her," he said, with no hesitation. "I'm sure I loved her."

The cat pranced out of the kitchen and walked beneath Nick's leg, leaving her tail up against his skin.

"You lost a girl you loved—she died like Shannon?" he said. "Got killed? — before there was Mom?"

"Before Mom," he said, and he got to his feet, then reached down and pulled the ends of his son's long hair around his ears like Lynda might have. Sometimes Nick would come up to her and hug her for no particular reason, just hold her. Sometimes he'd lie on the couch with his head in her lap while they watched the news, Lynda taking his hair in her fingers and showing him playfully where she thought it ought to be trimmed. He reached down and slipped his hand beneath Nick's collar and held him at the base of his neck just for a moment, then pulled away and walked into the kitchen, to the freezer, the ice cream.

"You never told me that," Nick said. "You're not making this up?"

"I'm not making it up," he said.

He'd bought the ice cream for Nick, a "limited time only" flavor. Right now it would be a taste of something else, something cold, something good.

It had happened so long before the kids, before Lynda, before so much of his life that it was hard to believe the five people most precious to him today—their little girls up in bed sleeping, his son Nick, and Lynda—that all of them and all of their world came so long after Sally, after tears he once thought would never stop.

He pulled two bowls out of the cupboard and watched Nick's head turn toward him. Then he unfolded the top of the carton and searched through the drawer for the scoop. There was something unfeeling about telling another story right now, as if one upping him. Nick had every right to his own horror. He flicked the ice cream from the spoon with his finger. Yet, maybe it was the right time now, a moment only God Almighty could plan. Not that he knew what to say. But he had a story.

"This girl I dated," he said, "she died when we were your age. Got killed. In a plane. She was killed in a plane crash in Colorado. That was years ago." He shoveled three long smooth crescents of dark chocolate into a saucer bigger than an ordinary cereal bowl, then filled another for himself. It was the kind of eating together the two of them needed. "Did you go to her house?—" he asked, "Shannon's?"

Nick was still rubbing his eyes. "Quinn's folks wouldn't let him go. He wanted to," he said, "but they told him, "later." That time would come. He was ticked—"

"Because he couldn't go?"

"Yeah."

"They were right. It's one thing if you're married--"

"But he loved her," Nick said. "You said it yourself."

"Sure he did," Ben said. "I'm sure he loved her." He carted the bowls into the family room, stood over his son, and held out the one with the extra scoop, made him reach for it. "Here, eat it—good for you."

Nick took the bowl. "I almost get to feeling bad about how I feel," he said. "Sometimes I think I'm hurting for Quinn more than for Shannon—I mean, Shannon's the dead one." He shrugged his shoulders. "It's not that I don't feel sorry for her—I mean, for her parents. And it's not that I don't miss her, Dad, I mean, already. I didn't know her that well, really, but I look at Quinn and it just seems like everything in him is dead—"

"It is—"

"I feel like if I'd tip him over, he'd be like that Christmas scene-thing Mom always puts on the buffet--everything's falling." He shook his head again. "Nothing you say comes out right," he said. "Your mind doesn't work. It does crazy things. You say weird things." He shook his head. "The bed was wet, Dad," he said. "Quinn's bed was wet from all the crying—shit," he said, "a bunch of guys."

"That's all right," Ben said.

And then he looked up. "You're not lying, really?—you had a girlfriend that was killed?" he said. "In a plane crash? She got killed in a plane crash?"

It hurt—the way he said it—killed. "Long ago," he told him, "coming home from a church project, from New Mexico. Teaching in a Bible school in a little Navajo church—"

"You were my age?" Nick said.

Ben nodded, his mouth purposely full.

"How come I never knew?"

"I never told you," he said. "Maybe I should have."

Nick half-turned and squinted at him. "You loved her—this girl?" Nick said. "She was some high school sweetheart?"

Ben shook his head yes.

Nick turned away. "My old man in love with somebody else," he said, stunned. "How come you never told me?—I mean, it had it to be a huge thing."

Ben could see the story grow in his son's imagination, Nick's eyes narrowing. "Coming home from some church thing?" he said. "The truth?"

He nodded.

"Something that big?" he said. "How could you not tell me? I mean, you'd think you'd talk about it all the time—"

"I'm telling you now," Ben said, pointing his spoon. "It wasn't important until now maybe."

"Wasn't important?" Nick asked.

He shook his head. "What was I supposed to do?—one night after soccer take you out on the deck and tell you the story like I did the facts of life?"

"Sure," he said.

"Maybe I screwed up."

Nick sat with both legs beneath him, looking away against the wall—more imagined scenes coursing through his mind. He lifted the saucer closer to his mouth, elbows perched on his knees, and ate thoughtlessly. "Mom know this?" he asked.

"In a kind of outline."

"What do you mean?"

"Doesn't know every detail. I never told her I cried like you did. I never said that exactly. But she knows. She's old enough to color in details." He put the empty dish beside him on the rug. "There's things you don't need to tell people you love," he said. "Maybe they just know because they know you," he said. "You'll understand sometime."

Nick scraped the edges of his bowl and ate what remained, then left the spoon upside down inside in his mouth. "What was her name?" he said.

"Sally—her name was Sally."

"Killed?" he said, "really?"

"You want to know the truth, Nick?" Ben said. "I cried—I swear it—I cried every night for six months maybe. That was long before Mom."

Nick pulled the spoon from his mouth, but kept it in the air in front of his face, then turned toward his father and jabbed, as if some idea had appeared in his head. He raised his finger slowly up off the handle of the spoon as if calling for quiet, thinking some ideas barely discernable in his mind, this single finger like the

lit candle of the Sunday School ditty; but it wasn't praise, it was something else. For a moment he sat there, staring at his erect finger and the spoon, as if verifying himself, like babies do, as if his own flesh was a miracle. He turned that hand inward, pointing at the very center of his chest, his whole hand drawn to his heart like a divining rod. "And I'm here—right, Dad?" he said. He looked up at his father. "After this Sally—your girlfriend going down in a plane and all of that crying and a whole year or six months or whatever—I'm still here, right?"

"You're very much here," Ben said.

"If this Sally hadn't been killed, there'd be no Mom."

"There'd be no Mom," Ben said.

He pulled at his T-shirt to remind himself it was real. "That says something," he said. "I mean, I say something, don't I?—me. I'm proof. You lost big time, Dad—but you still got me." He had to smile. "I don't mean it that way—"

"I know," he said, and he kissed the top of Nick's head. "You're here, Nick," he said. He put the spoon back in the saucer, and the cat wandered between them, eyeing the empty bowls.

"Sometime, Dad," Nick said slowly, "I want to hear that whole story. I mean, every detail—not now." He seemed to shiver. "But sometime, you know, before this is over, and before Mom comes back. When it's just you and me and the girls in bed like this or something." He raised that finger again, like a preacher. "I want to know who she was—this Sally was. Is that okay?"

Ben nodded.

"You really loved her?" he said again.

Of course, he told himself. "That night," he said, "I didn't see a thing in front of me but some huge black wall all the way to heaven." For the first time in a long time, he thought the father in him had got something right.

"You think I ought to go back to Quinn's?" Nick asked.

Ben tapped the face of his watch. "What does eleven o'clock mean?—midnight? Time doesn't mean a thing. Nobody's going to sleep." He tipped his head toward the back hall. "Come home anytime—doesn't matter when."

The two of them got up together and took a step into the first hug he'd given his son in far too long, a hug Lynda would have given him a long time ago on this night of death, and a hug that would have made Ben cry had he not held it back because there were already enough tears. "I don't care if you stay overnight," Ben told him. "Quinn needs you just as much as he does his mom and dad right now."

"He was really mad," Nick said. "You should have heard him—"

"People aren't responsible for everything they say at times like this. Keep a big heart, here, okay?" He put his hands on his son's shoulders. "Let stuff go right by."

The two of them walked down the back steps and out the door, down the angling sidewalk toward Nick's car. A bit of a wind jostled the stillness, and streetlights at the corner seemed a blessing, holding back the darkness.

Nick climbed into his car, started the engine, then rolled down the window in order to say one more thing. "He'll be happy to see me," he said. "I know he will."

But sometime I want to hear that story." Then he reached for the gear shift. "Can I tell him?—Quinn, I mean," he said. "It's okay if I say about the girl—the one you loved?"

"You tell him what he ought to hear," Ben said.

He nodded and pulled the car into reverse, backed out slowly, the gravel in the alley cracking beneath the tires, then stopped at the street like an old man scrupulously looking both ways, even though there wasn't a soul around.

Upstairs the girls were far into their dreams. Ben walked up the sidewalk to the door, but instead of going upstairs headed for the basement office. In the third drawer of a file cabinet he kept all sorts of things he never looked at. He fanned through the folders until he came to the one he knew held the only letter from a shoe box he'd long ago thrown away, the one letter he couldn't bring himself to destroy.

Church stationary—"Grace Church, Standing Rock, New Mexico." He found it quickly. It was one of those things you don't forget. He opened the envelope and slid out the letter, three pages, both sides, little circles for dots atop the i's.

He read it over quickly. He was in love, because love was all there was in that letter, really: how anxious she was to come home, how she'd missed him, how the kids were so good, and how great an experience she was having, how uplifting for her faith, how she missed him so much and wished she could talk to him every night after long, hot days in that little church that wasn't air-conditioned. "It's so quiet at night here in the desert," she wrote. "You wouldn't believe how quiet it gets, how dark. It's beautiful. It really is. Skies full of stars. Actually coyotes. I'm not kidding." Then, finally, "Lots of love, Sally."

And then, what she always wrote, at the end of every letter: "P. S. I miss you tons!!" Two exclamation points.

Even after thirty years, the letter felt like a part of himself; but he tucked the it back in the envelope and wondered if maybe now, after what had happened, he should throw it away—not for Lynda, nor Nick, and not for the little girls, who might never know at all, but maybe for the Lord of earth and heaven, the great magician, who somehow, even in pain brought all things together for good. Something had come full circle, pain become blessing for this single anguished night.

He looked up at the bookshelves, Lynda's lit texts, her novels, a shelf full of his journals, a couple hundred his books full of learning and healing; and on the top shelf beside a golf trophy and a box full of tapes from years ago, a Bible, the little Dutch Bible his father told him he'd toted through the war and read from, night after night, in the middle of all the Nazi treachery. And what did he really know about his father?

He left the drawer open, put the letter on top of the files, and walked to the computer, swung out the desk chair, and hit the switch. He looked at the clock. In South Africa it wasn't yet seven. Lynda might want him to call—she would if she knew what had happened, if she had seen her son cry. But one of the blessings

about her going to South Africa was something he knew she'd felt, something he'd brought up himself: by being alone, she could concentrate, not be worried about meal schedules.

She didn't need this sadness, he thought—an accident that killed a girl she'd never known. She could do nothing tonight anymore, after all—nothing but feel guilty about being way over there and not being home. Later, he could write it all.

The computer Nick had picked out was on-line with the Lynda's network at the University. They'd kept it hooked up so they could e-mail each other to their hearts' content. So he logged in and pulled up her address quickly from the file.

"Dear Lynda," he wrote, the letters' magic appearance still fascinating to him. "We just had a kind of crisis. Quinn's girlfriend—her name is Shannon Timmons—was killed tonight. I didn't really know her. There were lots of tears. . ."

He let the cursor flash and weighed a dozen ways to describe Nick's grief, each of them painful to recount. He typed in a period.

What was there to say?—so much that would hurt her. His fingers curled over the keys like a pianist's. And then he typed, "I think he'll make it." Then deleted "I think"—sounded too tentative, as if there were moments when he worried Nick might not. Then deleted "he'll make it." Tried something else: "He's starting to hold his head up." Let it sit. Tried to imagine how she'd read those words. Deleted "starting to hold," and typed in "holding." Sounded stronger. "He's a good kid," he wrote. Hit enter.

What to say. How to describe what happened, without destroying her?

The dehumidifier whirred at the door to the bathroom. Nothing but darkness in the little basement window above the bookshelf, the desk awash with CD-ROMs Nick had a habit of not putting away.

What to say. How to tell her.

"We're working through it," he typed. "Some tears, more than a few, but morning's on the way." He liked that. It was enough. "Hope all goes well," he wrote, then return, and then his initials.

Something's still missing, he thought—something he needed to say.

He brought his fingers back to the keys: "I miss you tons," he wrote, stuck in three exclamation points, looked over what he'd done with a kind of thanks, then spanked the right keys and the message was gone.