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## PTL

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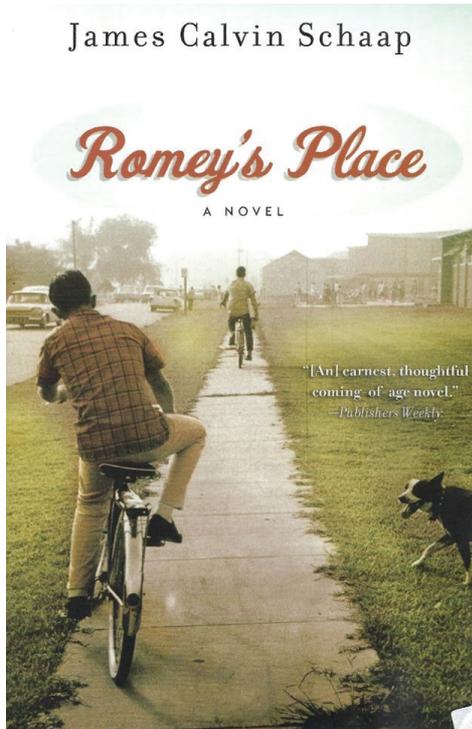
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James Calvin Schaap



Years ago, when I was revising *Romey's Place*, I didn't know how the plot would end. What I knew when I'd started the revision was that I was moving in a whole new direction this time, writing a different story. I'd been reading Phillip Yancey and Kathleen Norris when I came to realize that the story of the novel had far more to do with grace than I'd ever imagined.

The manuscript was ten years old, had made the rounds to publishers. In the early drafts, the kid's father had died while away in Europe, making it impossible for the two of them to talk about sharp differences the narrator couldn't help but feel. But in this revision, I knew I wanted the two of them to have the talk they didn't have. I didn't know where that talk would take place, nor why or how it would turn out, only that something needed to be said. Somehow, the protagonist and his father were going to talk to each other in a way they never had.

Right about then, my parents came out to

Iowa to visit. One Sunday morning we went to church. That morning's liturgy included the old hymn "Blessed Assurance." There I stood, beside my father, watching him—and hearing him—pour his heart out, as he always did in song.

I knew right then how the novel would end. The character who is a kind of *me*, now a father himself, in a moment understands that his pent-up antagonism doesn't have to be spilled, doesn't have to soil his father's love. So, he doesn't tell his father the story he'd always wanted to, doesn't say it because he's learned something abiding about grace from a tough kid he hung around with in those turbulent years when they grew up together, and his father's righteousness seemed so far beyond anything he could or would ever reach.

That Sunday morning, my father gave me the denouement of *Romey's Place* at the moment we stood there singing "Blessed Assurance." That moment informs the final scene of the novel.

Just as he was for so many others, my father—bless his soul—was forever a peacemaker. Throughout my life, in a hundred varied ways, my father showed me the paths of truly selfless righteousness. He's almost twenty years gone now, but I still thank him for offering me a witness of what is good, what is holy, and what is true.

But going back as deeply as I had to create a story that ended in death of my friend's father, I've come to believe that Romey's "place" in my life has become more consequential in the decades that passed than that "place" may have seemed at the time. What my own foolish soul has come to understand is that while my father taught me goodness, it was Romey, that friend, who taught me grace.

That's why the narrator, the *me* of that novel, didn't need to tell his aging father the long story he couldn't bring himself to tell him. There's no need to explain whatever role his father played the night I lost that friend, no need to remind him of what, for years, the narrator and I might have called my sin. All I need to say is that no matter what, he is my father. That's what Romey taught me.

When Dad died, I remembered that moment

clearly and couldn't help but wish we could sing again "Blessed Assurance." But I didn't push that wish on anyone because I couldn't help feeling that some witches' brew of motivations was at work: life and art and ego subtly and fearfully mixed. Had I told my sisters I wanted to sing the old hymn, I would have felt idolatrous after a fashion, as if my story of my father's story was more significant than his story, his life—or, for that matter, their view of his place in their lives.

I had no part in planning his funeral. My sisters did it while our family was on our way to Wisconsin. Once we arrived, they told me what they were planning, and one of the hymns they'd determined to sing, they said, was "Blessed Assurance."

My sister claimed Mom had said her husband's deep faith was something she'd always admired, even envied. Dad had never really doubted God's love, and she'd marveled at that, or so she told my sisters, because, at times, she did. My mother chose that old hymn for reasons all her own.

"That's okay with you?" my sisters asked me.

"Sure," I said. Of course it was.

So, at Dad's funeral, we sang "Blessed Assurance." I told myself then that I would never again sing that hymn without thinking of him. Years have passed. It's true.

And there it is on his gravestone—Mom made sure it was there.

Part of my inheritance includes that same assurance. Like him, I don't doubt my Father's love. Never have—hopefully, never will.

Dad never took me hunting, never took me to ball games, never did a whole lot with me really. He was busy. By today's standards, he didn't work at building a relationship—just as his own father probably hadn't. His dad was a preacher with ten kids.

But Dad did teach me a great deal about this life and the next by his own humbling blessed assurance.

That's his story—and mine. And it's at least one chapter of our Father's story too, or at least it seems to me.

