

FROM

Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?

BY BROCK CLARKE



1.

My mother, Nola Bledsoe, was a minister, and she named me Calvin after her favorite theologian, John Calvin. She was very serious about John Calvin, had written a famous book about him—his enduring relevance, his misunderstood legacy. My mother was highly thought of by a lot of people who thought a lot about John Calvin.

2.

My father, on the other hand, was a high school coach—football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring. In the summer he ran clinics for athletes who would be playing their respective sports during the regular school year. His name was Roger Bledsoe. My father has left this life, and he is also about to leave this story, so before he does, let me tell you a few things about him. He was seventy-seven years old when he died. He was bald on top and was always neatly dressed: pressed chinos, tucked-in oxford shirts—even his boat shoes were polished. His eyebrows were the only unkempt things about him: they curled and hung over his eyes like awnings.

So I remember what he looked like. I also remember his sayings. “You bet your sweet bippie,” he liked to say, and also, when he needed to go to the bathroom, “I’m going out for a short beer.” But mostly he liked to say, “This isn’t my first rodeo, you know.” Most of his pregame pep talks included that phrase. Most of his conversations did also. Several months before he died, I told my father that my wife and I were separating. This was after one of my

father's baseball games. I was forty-seven years old, and I still went to all my father's games, went to all my mother's services, too. I have no memory of whether his team had won or lost that particular game, but I do remember that the wind was up, that my father's eyebrows were waving at me like cilia. "So, you're getting a divorce," he said.

I insisted that wasn't necessarily so. "Lots of people who get separated don't end up getting divorced," I said, and he squinted at me skeptically and said, "This isn't my first rodeo, you know."

3.

And then he died of a heart attack. Three days later my mother and I were in the cemetery, standing over his grave, next to the pile of dirt. The rest of the mourners had left. The hole was still open. The cemetery workers were waiting there with their shovels, their backhoe idling and rattling loudly behind them. This was in Maine. It was November. The air was filled with snow and with the feeling of last things. I wondered if the workers sensed this, too. This was probably the last hole they would be able to dig before the ground froze.

"That was a beautiful eulogy," I told my mother. In truth, the eulogy had surprised me. I'd expected it to be more, I don't know, *personal*. I'd heard her give nearly identical ones at the funerals of friends, members of her church, even relative strangers. Those eulogies, like my father's, had been filled with inspiring lessons about this life and the next as taught to us by the theologian . . . well, you know which one. It was strange: my mother and her book and her sermons always insisted that while Calvinists were reputed to be severe and full of judgment, John Calvin himself had been forgiving and full of love. But she always wrote and said this in a way that seemed severe and full of judgment.

"You must have always wondered why your father and I stayed together for as long as we did," my mother said—to me, I guessed, although she was looking at the hole. This surprised me even more than the eulogy. In fact, I had not wondered this at all. I had not ever even considered my parents' not staying together a possibility. I had not ever even considered my wife

and me not staying together a possibility either until it actually happened. But I didn't say this to my mother. I wanted there to be peace between the living and the dead and also between the living and the living. "Why does anyone stay together for as long as they do?" I asked—rhetorically, I thought, although my mother answered anyway.

"God," she said, "family, fear, loyalty, sex, security, compassion, companionship, complacency, children, guilt, money, real estate, health insurance, not wanting to eat alone, not wanting to go on vacation alone, not wanting to watch television alone, not wanting to drink alone, not wanting to go on cruises alone, not wanting to go on cruises at all, not wanting to leave one person and find another person who then wants to go on cruises, not wanting to leave a person and not find another person at all, not wanting to find another person, not knowing what you want, not knowing what your problem is, love."

I had never heard my mother say anything remotely like this—it definitely didn't seem like a lesson she could have learned from John Calvin—but before I could say that, or anything else, my mother nodded in the direction of the cemetery workers, and they advanced on my father's grave with their shovels and their backhoe, and a few minutes later he was truly buried, and only then did it feel like he was truly gone.

4.

If you live, as I did then, in a small town in central Maine, there is no more visible a job than that of a high school coach or a minister. Is it any surprise that I chose a somewhat less visible job? I became a blogger for the pellet stove industry. You may not know that there is a pellet stove industry, or that it has a blogger, but there is, and in fact it has two. I am the blogger who extols the virtues of the pellet stove: its cost and energy efficiency; the way it's good for the environment and the economy; the way it sits on the crest of the wave of the home-heating future. The other blogger is named Dawn, and Dawn's job is to spew vitriol at the makers and the sellers of the "conventional woodstove." This is what she calls it in her blog, always in scare quotes: the "conventional woodstove." All Dawn's Monday blog posts

begin with a story of someone she's met at a "weekend party" who has asked her what's so wrong with the "conventional woodstove." If you're ever at a "weekend party" with Dawn, please don't ask her what's so wrong with the "conventional woodstove." Because she will say, "Oh, don't get me started." And if Dawn says that, it means she's already gotten started.

5.

Anyway, not six months later, my mother died, too, at the age of seventy-nine. Her car had apparently gotten stuck, or stalled, on the railroad tracks just outside of town and was hit by a northbound train carrying propane tanks destined for Quebec. The train struck the car directly in its gas tank. Which exploded. As did the propane tanks. The propane-and-gasoline-fueled fire was so intense that even my mother's bones, even her teeth, had been burned into nothing. There was nothing left of her at all. The volunteer firemen said they'd never seen anything like it.

6.

There was nothing of my mother left to bury. But nevertheless, I buried her next to my father. It was May. The ground was once again unfrozen. My father's funeral had been attended by his athletes and his fellow coaches; my mother's, by her churchgoers and also by the many fans of her work on John Calvin, including some of her fellow ministers who were also writers. This group was particularly gloomy: they frowned at me from behind their horn-rimmed glasses; they were like thistles among the just-blooming forsythia. They made me nervous, understandably. I was expected to give the eulogy, and I knew it was expected that the eulogy would contain some words of wisdom and comfort from John Calvin. But what if I chose the wrong quote? For instance: "I consider looseness with words no less of a defect than looseness of the bowels." This was one of my mother's very favorite quotes from John Calvin. She often applied it to me when as a child, and even as an adult, I was taking too long reaching my point or if she suspected I didn't have one. But I didn't think it was exactly right for a eulogy, and I wondered

how severely my mother's fellow writers and Calvinists would judge me if I used the word "bowels" to celebrate, or mourn, her passage from this life to the next. God, they were a cold bunch. I bet not one of them had ever felt the warmth of a pellet stove.

I don't know how long I stood there waiting for the right words to come to me, but just when I began to suspect that they never would, a voice called out, "You must submit to supreme suffering in order to discover the completion of joy!" I could not see who in the crowd had spoken, but I didn't recognize the voice: it was bright and warbly, a sweet voice that sounded like it came out of a big body. Anyway, the crowd murmured approvingly—the quote was, of course, from John Calvin, and apparently the concept of supreme suffering was just the thing to bring them joy—and so all I said was, "Yes, exactly," and then, probably gratuitously, I added, "I love you, Mom." No one murmured approvingly at this. In fact, I had the definite feeling that later on I would be getting written critiques from my mother's fellow Calvinists, disapproving of the sentimentality and obviousness of my eulogy. But for now, they scattered. I nodded to the cemetery workers, and they moved forward and began to fill in the hole.

As they did, I noticed a woman walking toward me. She was tall and rangy, like one of my father's basketball players, and was wearing the kind of wraparound sunglasses that old people wear even when there's no sun (there was no sun), but her hair was a young woman's hair: it looked coarse and shiny, like horses' hair, and swept dramatically across her forehead, and was black—jet black, I'd say, although I've never actually seen a jet that color. Her face was dark brown and deeply weathered by the sun. She wore bright red pants that stopped just above her ankles, which were bare, and a green-and-red argyle sweater with a green turtleneck underneath, and old-fashioned bright white canvas tennis sneakers. Over the sweater hung a necklace, a silver clipper ship on a silver chain. The necklace was chipped and tarnished and faded as though the ship really had survived some sort of storm. The woman definitely did not look like she was dressed for a funeral. I judged her to be about my mother's age, and in fact she walked like my mother—like a stateswoman, like someone used to approaching and departing a podium—but in other ways she didn't look like my mother at all. Like most

ministers, my mother had looked as if she were made in the winter, for the winter. Her clothes—heavy sweaters, loose skirts and dresses—were always gray, and even if they weren't, even if they were other colors, the colors were muted, as though the gray had somehow overpowered them. Perhaps the color came from inside her, because my mother's face had been gray, too. Of course, so had her hair, which she'd refused to dye, and when my father once had made the mistake of wondering why, my mother had glared at him and quoted fiercely, "There is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice."

"Okay. Jeez, *sorry*," my father had said. He'd seemed surprised at my mother's fierceness, and I remember thinking, *Really?*, and I remember also thinking that, you know, maybe this really was my father's first rodeo, no matter what his favorite saying said.

You might be wondering why I'm comparing this stranger to my mother. I wasn't at the time; I am now, in memory, because of what the stranger said to me next.

"Pulverized by a train!" the woman said, and I recognized the bright voice that earlier had called out about suffering and joy. "A wonderful way to die. Although poor Nola probably didn't think so." She paused as though she expected me to respond. But what was I supposed to tell her? The truth, I suppose, which would have been "Probably not." "Tell me," the woman continued, "was she as cold a mother as she was a sister?"

I didn't say anything to that, not right away. I could see myself in her glasses. There was one of me in each lens. Both of me looked confused. "Sister?" I said. Because as far as I knew, my mother didn't have one.

"But what's wrong with that?" my aunt continued. "After all, the cold can teach us many things."

By the way, I soon learned that this was how my aunt spoke: she would say something, and then you would respond directly to what she had said, and then she would not respond directly to your direct response but instead would continue on with her original thought. Only when you consented to follow her thought would she then return to yours.

"What *can* the cold teach us?" I asked, and she smiled. When she smiled her upper lip peeled back and you could see plenty of gum, and I also noticed

that she was missing a tooth. It was her left canine. But the missing tooth didn't seem to make her self-conscious. She smiled, happily showing gum and her missing tooth and her remaining teeth, which were as white as her sneakers.

“Twin,” my aunt said, letting me know the kind of sister she was.

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