

Truth Without Judgment

I was extremely anxious about my upcoming meeting with Aunt Laverne. I'd never met her before. She was the sister of my father, Roger Buell—a man long dead whom I'd never met, as well.

What should I expect from her? A barrage of questions about my background, my accomplishments and expectations in life? Or just hugs and a “welcome to the family”? So I invited along my sister, Renee—my safety blanket—just in case.

In early February 1991, we began the drive south to Hot Springs, South Dakota. There were three of us in the car: Renee, the quiet passenger; me, the apprehensive driver; and my nagging self-doubts, the incessant rattle in the back seat.

Along the way, Renee didn't work hard to explicitly reassure me. Instead, she respected me too much to do that. While I drove, she asked about my wife, Teri, and about each of my two kids—subtly reminding me that I already had a family in case this new one somehow didn't work out. I listened, trying hard to quiet my troubling thoughts and vivid imagination.

Finally, I glanced at her. “Let's not say anything about Mom, about our childhood. I don't want Laverne feeling sorry for us, okay?”

In a low and deliberate voice, she replied, “Oh, God no. I won't say anything. Not to her, not to anyone. Ever.” As she turned back to look out her window, she added, “Besides. No one would ever believe it.” Then we each slid back into our own private abyss, mired in our thoughts and feelings.

After several miles, I glanced at her again. She looked smaller, more vulnerable. I remembered her telling me that Mom would make her sleep at the foot of Mom's bed, then kick her to get her some food. If she didn't get up right away, Mom would kick her again, yelling, “You piece of shit. Get up!”

As the miles rolled by, I remembered the time when I looked out the window from the classroom and saw Mom staggering down the street in her nightgown. We lived across the street from the schoolhouse and kids in the playground were gathering to stare at her. Some were pointing and laughing. I ignored the teacher and rushed out of the classroom to get her back into the house. I was twelve then, but still blamed myself for not putting another brick in front of the door so she couldn't get out.

I turned to Renee and said, “I'm sorry I brought up Mom. I should've known better.”

She glanced back. “Oh, no. That's fine.” That was Renee, smoothing out everyone's feelings.

We pulled into the spot for rendezvous that Laverne had suggested in our recent phone call. It was a large vacant parking lot where it'd be easy to find each other. She told me to look for a tiny blue car. We had arrived at the right time and place because there, in the corner of the lot, was her car. I parked about ten spaces away, as if to provide some distance from this surreal situation. I turned off the ignition and immediately noticed a tiny, fair-haired lady already on her way over to us. She was walking in an excited march—arms and legs swinging in unison. She wore a wide smile on her tiny face.

As she got closer, I could see that she was about five feet tall with short, curly, blonde hair over a small, round and wrinkly face. Her eyes, nose and mouth were gathered together in a small cluster of delicate features. Where had I seen that look before? Then I realized: I saw them every time I looked in the mirror.

I got out of the car and before I could introduce Renee, Laverne spread her arms to me as if to catch a giant basketball. We clung there, already in a satisfying embrace like long-lost, best friends. She stood back and looked me over, then leaned in more closely to examine my face. She stood back and proclaimed in a tiny, but decisive voice, “You’re not a Buell.” My heart dropped. “You’re a Veeder.”

Then I remembered that Ella Veeder was Roger Buell’s mother, so Ella was my grandmother. I welcomed the news that I still looked like part of her family.

I turned to introduce Renee. “This is my older sister, Renee. She raised me.” That truth deserved to be told, despite the questions it might bring from Laverne.

She hugged Renee and then invited us to follow her home. As Renee and I walked back to our car, she whispered, “She’s so excited. She’s so cute.” She shook her head and added, “You two look so alike.”

Laverne parked her car next to her blue mobile home and we pulled up behind her. Then she led us through her door, took our coats and sat us down. It was clear that she’d been very busy preparing for our arrival. There were pictures of all sizes and shapes on her coffee table, end tables and kitchen counter. She rubbed her hands together in excitement.

“I’ve got so much to show you, so much to tell you about. I don’t know where to start. I need to take a deep breath and calm myself.” She laughed self-consciously.

We spent the next several hours looking at pictures, sharing stories, posing questions and offering answers.

Finally, I could wait no longer. “What did you mean that I looked like a Veeder?”

“Oh, I’ll show you a picture and you’ll think you’re looking in the mirror. Come here.” She abruptly stood up and marched us back through a narrow hallway. There were numerous pictures hung on both sides. Suddenly she stopped and pointed a tiny finger to one of them. “That’s Sid Veeder, your great uncle. That’s an old picture, but just look at that.” We both leaned closer to the picture and squinted. Renee said, almost to herself, “Carter, that’s eerie ...” She trailed off and stood there, shaking her head at the similarity.

On our way back to the living room, Laverne said, “Renee, Carter said you helped to raise him. He must have been such a cute child.” My heart started to race, hoping Renee would not reveal anything about our distant past.

“Oh, he was. He was always asking questions. He was outside the house more than inside.” That was for sure. I hid out at the local creek.

We all sat back down. “Carter, in our phone call in December, you mentioned Robert McNamara was your legal father and that he died when you were young. Your mother must have had her hands full with four children.” I sensed Laverne was wondering why Renee had raised me instead of my mother.

“Mom had a . . . disability. That’s why Renee helped me so much.” I didn’t want to lie to her. Besides, she might somehow know about Mom’s situation. She had often visited Ella who lived only a few blocks away when I was a kid. Had Ella or Laverne ever seen Mom on one of her binges outside our home?

Like Christ breaking bread for the masses, Laverne kept pulling out more pictures to show us. “This is one of Roger with his buddies.” Then she paused and looked at each of us. “Roger was a drinker.” She emphasized his name, like she was adding it to an unwritten list— a list that included our Mom? I stole a quick glance at Renee. Had she noticed? Was Laverne discretely reassuring us? Renee nodded back.

Laverne looked down at one of his pictures. “Roger and I were very close. We were so sad when he died in the car wreck. He might have been drinking.” She shook her head and looked at me. “He died in January and you were born that September.” She turned back to his picture. “Alcohol is a poison, you know.”

As if affirming what Laverne might already know, Renee replied, “Yes, it is, Laverne.” Then she looked at me and nodded again.

After some silence, Laverne looked up at us. “I am an alcoholic, too.” In a modest, but still proud voice, she said, “I’ve been sober for decades now.” She chuckled and looked back down at the pile of pictures.

I wondered if Renee noticed the contrast between Laverne and our mother. Mom had denied her addiction. Laverne had attacked it.

She picked up a picture of her three children—two boys, Chuck and Todd, and her daughter, Patricia. “It was so tough for my children with my drinking. I try to make it up to them somehow, you know.” She kept looking at the picture. I felt like we were traveling too fast and in a direction I didn’t ever want to go.

I said, “You know I first spoke to Chuck on the phone before he said I could call you. He was so thoughtful and sensitive about a delicate situation. Anyway, I think he should be a social worker or a diplomat.” We all laughed.

Laverne said, “Roger was in the Army in Italy near the end of the war. Did you know that? I have all of his letters he sent back home.” She handed me a thick packet of papers bound in a rubber band. “Here, I made copies for you. I’d like you to have these pictures for your family. I know we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other over the coming years.”

She reached out to hand them to me and I took them. The gesture felt like we’d affirmed a bond—a bond of family.

A small clock on her kitchen counter buzzed a loud, intrusive and irritating sound. She hurried to turn it off. “Oh my. I must leave and give my friend a ride now.” Suddenly, the situation changed like someone had turned the channel on the TV.

After we’d gathered ourselves and exchanged hugs, I just had to ask. I stopped and turned to her. “Laverne, what makes you believe I’m really Roger’s son?”

She stepped closer, took my hands, looked up at me and said, “I just know you are.”

As Renee and I drove away, I looked in the rear view mirror and said, “We’re two blocks away and she’s still standing there in the road waving at us.”

“So, Carter. How do you feel about having a new family?”

I glanced at her and back to the road. “You know how, when you lose something important—whether it’s your car keys or a precious picture—you think you’ll never find it? Then, when you do, it’s such a surprise, that it feels like a gift from the universe? Well, that’s how this feels.”

“That’s a good description.” She paused. “I really like Laverne. Good for you.”

I said, “You know, when your parent doesn’t treat you like a human being, doesn’t even look at you, then you grow up feeling like an empty jar—closed tight, small and vacant. You work so hard to appear normal, to appear human to others. It’s as if you’re desperately pasting pictures on your tiny jar hoping others will see you as being normal. But the problem is, nothing ever gets inside. You’re still empty. Well, meeting Laverne was like taking off the lid and putting something beautiful in there for a while.”

The Black Hills were far off to our left, running parallel to our road—like dark shadows reminding me of shadows still there in my life.

“There were times back there when I felt like I was having some sort of psychological whiplash. I mean I desperately wanted more information, but still I felt overwhelmed by it. I wanted to tell her more, but not to have her ever feeling sorry for me. I felt jealous of their family, but proud of who I am now. I wanted to meet more of her family, but still I wanted my little nest—my little den that I have now. Overall, it was like I was clinging to a giant pendulum back there, just swinging back and forth.”

We both chuckled.

She said, “It might take a while to let all of this sink in.”

“You’re right.”

For me—the lone wolf—my pack is growing bigger.