

COLD TURKEY

By

Martin Dodd

At times, my mother said to Pop, “Let’s quit drinking, right now, *cold turkey*.” Early on I thought “cold turkey” was an oath like “so help me God.” But, like those that pave the road to hell, it was only a good intention. They never quit for more than a week, and day-to-day life bounced between a shipwreck and a circus—such as the day I arrived.

When the doctor congratulated Pop for being the father of a seven-pound, six-ounce *girl*, he left for Smiley’s Pub and got drunk with his best friends, who bought him a bulldog as consolation. To put the best face on disappointment, Pop smuggled the puppy into the hospital, creating a huge fuss. To note the chaos, my mother instantly dubbed our pet “Hubbub” and christened me “Sophia,” proclaiming, “This baby’s already a damn sight wiser than her father.”

Fourteen months later, she continued the theme, naming my sister “Minerva.” Over time, this got shortened to “Nervy,” because she did edgy things like eating a box of crayons to see if her poop would be colored.

Pop was a carpenter who taught me guy things. He gave me a little tool-belt on my fourth birthday. By six, I had learned you don’t cry, no matter what. At eight, I skinned a rabbit. Barely ten, I helped him replace the head gaskets in his 1950 Studebaker. I idolized Pop and tried hard to be the son he never had. I kept my hair short, wore jeans to school, and won my share of playground fights.

A good-time drunk, Pop hung out in Smiley’s Pub with Moose, Gooch, and Borchervink, whom he collectively called, “The Posse.” He said they shook dice or played darts for drinks and told war stories and fishing lies. If Pop drank too much, Moose would drive him home and deposit him on the living room couch.

My mother usually drank alone and was terminally pissed-off; booze either dulled or sharpened her mood. She ground through one day in a smothering silence and slashed through the next as a storm goddess raining curses and insults on family or passersby. She wasn't complete without a drink in one hand and a work of classic literature in the other. After I started noticing boys instead of wanting to be one, I asked her to describe her honeymoon. She answered, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

Through the years, I guess to offset Pop's tomboy influence, Muddy, my maternal grandmother, gave me books like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Muddy was pink-cheeked, plump, and cushy. When she came for a visit, I snuggled in her lap while she read stories of damsels in distress and their Prince Charmings. Muddy always ended with, "They lived happily ever after." I kept those books on my nightstand,

and in scary times when my parents drank themselves into a fight or a stupor, I fell asleep hugging them to my chest.

I think my mother's anger stemmed from the fact that, although she was smarter than her brothers, only the boys were sent to college. Her father told her to go business school or to find a husband. She did both.

My mother met her "tall, dark, and handsome" sailorman when he was stationed at Alameda in 1942. She was 5'7" with red hair, blue-green eyes and, according to Pop, "had all the right curves." He told her, "A thousand sailors are after you," to which she replied, "Then call me Helen." He did, and "Helen" stuck. Everyone except Muddy, but including Nervy and I, called her that. We tried "mommy," but she said, "Let's keep it Helen. I don't want to take up knitting."

Pop told the tale of their meeting this way: "Two weeks after I first sighted Helen, we drank ourselves three sheets to the wind, sailed to Reno, and tied up."

During the war, Helen clerked at the naval base and learned bookkeeping in night school. Pop's discharge came in September 1945. He said, "We cruised back to Reno where we were launched and dropped anchor." I was born a year later.

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I got Pop's coloring, and Nervy got Helen's hair and eyes. But Nervy and I were as close in size as in age, and we shared growing up with Hubbub. He waddled beside us in his bow-legged way and slobbered my face when I tried to wipe mud off his paws. And Hub served as baby sitter when we played outside. He barked if one of us strayed into a neighbor's yard or, worse yet, got near the street. Helen would hear the yelps and come to see what was up. If we didn't get back before she came, we got a switching, but she gave us a treat afterwards which lessened the pain and confused the lesson. I tried shushing Hubbub, and called him a tattletale, but it didn't stop him from

protecting Nervy and me, and he was always there to greet us when we came home from school. Hub didn't have much of a tail to wag, so he about threw himself out of joint wagging his hind end. And if he chomped down on one end of a rag-bone with you holding the other, prepare to spend all afternoon. Hubbub was a tugger.

When I entered the first grade and Nervy started kindergarten, Helen landed a job as an auditor in one of the casinos. She stowed half her earnings in "a college fund for *my* girls." In August 1958, a month before I turned twelve, Pop finagled access to that money and bought a much-weathered Victorian on Lake Street, an area of deteriorating houses and vacant lots where the worst had been demolished. When Pop broke the news to Helen, she exploded. He argued the neighborhood was coming back; that it was a good investment. She called it robbery.

Pop said, "It's against the law to keep money from your husband."

Helen glared at him. “So now I’m living with Stanley Kowalski?”

Pop, unfamiliar with Tennessee Williams’ plays, may have thought she was referring to a security guard at the casino. He blinked a couple of times then said, “You—you can’t cook Polish.”

She threw her drink at him.

The following Monday, afloat on gin, Helen steamed into a bank board meeting with Nervy and me in tow. The place smelled of leather and cigars. Helen shook her fist at the startled old men who sat around a big table. “You sons of bitches stole money from these little girls! You helped my husband take it just because he pees with the lid up like the rest of you pud-suckers.” Astonishment gave way to outrage as each old man tried to out-yell the others. Thank God, the bank guards entered the melee and hauled us out.

On the way back, we stopped on the Virginia Street Bridge. A light rain fell, which accented the day’s

awfulness. It almost never rains in Reno in August, but Helen didn't notice it. She leaned over the bridge rail, sobbing, and cursed at the Truckee River. Other pedestrians stepped into the street to go around us. She wiped her eyes and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Sophie, promise me you'll *never* marry a sailor. No matter how good he looks in a uniform." She turned and said, "You too, Nervy." At the end of the bridge, Helen threw her head back and hollered, "Fucking men!" I came close to jumping into the river.

Pop began renovating the house by enlisting the Posse. While Moose did the plumbing and Gooch the electrical, Pop handled the structural work. Borchervink acted as gofer, mostly for beer. They labored nights and weekends, adjourning to Smiley's Pub afterwards. Pop came home whiskey-happy to find Helen fuming mad. As the loyal "son," I sided with Pop. Nervy dismissed them both with: "I hope we're adopted."

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, Pop and the Posse moved us in. Even if the house sagged here and there, it was enchanting. Nervy and I each had our own room. Also, it had a front porch and, on the corner, a turret that reminded me of fairytale castles. Helen stayed in the car, drinking, all afternoon. At dusk, amid unpacked boxes, Pop put “In the Mood” on the record player and cranked up the volume. When he started dancing with Gooch on the porch, Helen left the car saying, “I’ll come in. I don’t want neighbors thinking I live with a queer.”

That night, from the hall, Nervy and I watched Pop and Helen dance in the living room. They swayed, her head on his shoulder, slow and dreamy while Andy Williams sang: “...*So rare, this is a heaven on earth we share. Caring the way we care, ours is a love so rare...*” I put my arm around Nervy and held her close. Despite all else, I never doubted that Helen and Pop loved each other.

Later we overheard them fussing and cussing in their bedroom.

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Thanksgiving Day I awakened to three inches of glistening snow, a covering of white made whiter by contrast with the heavy black clouds that promised more. I took Hubhub from his shelter under the back steps, where I had put his bed and favorite toys. Nervy and I ran up and down the street, throwing snowballs at each other and Hub. He barked and chased us. I saw neighbors peeking through their drapes watching us, the noisy newcomers. We built a pathetic snowman that reminded us of Borchervink then we made snow angels. In our back yard, we built a low snow wall in front of Hubhub's place, pretending it was his castle. We left a gap for him to go in and out, but he knocked down most of the wall wagging his hind end.

The cold numbed our hands and gave us runny noses. Nervy wiped hers on the sleeve of her corduroy jacket then said, “I’m happy, Sophie. Why can’t it stay this way?”

I hugged her. “My toes are frozen. Let’s go in.”

We climbed the stairs, and entered the kitchen through the back door. Helen was preparing dinner for what would be a full house: our family; the Posse; Pop’s younger brother, Pug; his wife, Aunt Poopsie; and, their five-year-old twins, Bob and Bob. On the way, Pug would pick up Muddy at the airport. The more, the crazier. It seemed to be shaping up as a three-ring circus.

Nervy and I watched as Helen mixed her brandy stuffing. She poured “two fingers for the bird” and, half-filling her glass, “three for the cook.” She gulped her drink, and then focused on us. “What are you two gawking at? Get busy and mop up that mess you tracked in. *And* go make your beds. Then come back and help me.”

Upstairs, Nervy came into my room and said, “Helen’s getting fired up, maybe we ought to do something.” I shrugged. What could we do? Once Helen got underway, she hit ramming speed.

When we returned, she had cinnamon toast and milk for us. She said, “I’m not mad at the two of you. Things are... well, things just are.”

We ate while we strung and snapped green beans. Helen shoved the roasting pan with the turkey into the oven and grumbled about using an electric stove.

The Posse arrived, and Pop, carrying his car jack, paraded through the kitchen with them. Moose carried a toolbox and a saw. Gooch toted a long four-by-four, and Borchervink lugged a case of beer. Pop opened the cellar door.

Helen said, “What are you and the three stooges doing?”

“We’re going to level the floor you’re standing on.”

“Today?”

As he descended the stairs, Pop said, “They’re here. Might as well make use of ‘em.”

The Posse followed. Over his shoulder, Borchervink called, “No work, no food.”

Helen muttered, “Shit,” poured some brandy and drank half of it. She walked across the room and kicked the cellar door shut. Her shoulders shook in sobs or anger.

I asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She sniffed hard. “I’m just thinking about nailing up this door.”

Nervy said, “What was your family like?”

Helen turned. “What?”

“I mean, when you were a kid, were you happy?”

Her lips tightened. “We were different. Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Creaking and groaning interrupted us. The floor vibrated and shifted. Helen stamped her foot. “I’m cooking up here!” Another creak, a sudden jolt, and a cabinet door swung open. Helen grabbed the brandy bottle and walked into the dining room. “I married a vacuum tube.”

The cellar door banged open and Pop charged through with a long level in his hand. He dropped to his knees, placed the level on the floor, peered at it, then yelled, “Give her another crank, Moose!” Another groan and grinding creak. A glass fell from the cupboard and crashed in the sink. Pop called, “That’s it. That’s it.” He jumped up and disappeared into the cellar.

Nervy went up to her room. Helen sipped brandy on the front porch. I cleaned up the glass in the sink, and then went downstairs to watch Pop and the Posse. They drank beer, clowned around, hammered, laughed, and drank more beer as they finished bracing the kitchen floor.

About twelve-thirty, I heard Helen hollering for Nervy and me. As we entered the kitchen, she added fatback to the green beans and said, “Set the table. The adults’ll eat in the dining room. When dinner’s ready, put up the card table in the living room for you girls and the Bobs.”

Nervy asked, “Can I put the marshmallows on the sweet potatoes?”

“We’re not having sweet potatoes.”

I said, “But that’s Pop’s favorite.”

“Set the table.”

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At one, Pug drove up with his family and Muddy. Pop gave a tour of the house describing each stop: “This is the hall; this is the hall closet; this is the bathroom,” and so forth. Afterward, Pop handed Pug a beer and took him to see the day’s work. Borchervink tagged along with a six-pack. Everyone else gathered in the living room. Muddy

asked Helen, “Are the girls safe in this neighborhood?”
Helen complained about cooking in a construction zone.
Then she went to “check the food.” Gooch put Glenn
Miller on the phonograph and danced with Aunt Poopsie.
One of the Bobs picked his nose and chewed on the results.
Moose slept on the sofa until he woke himself with a snort.
Nervy put salt in the sugar bowl and sugar in the shakers.
All that was missing was a trapeze act. After a while, I
went out back and talked to Hubbub.

Later, Helen’s screaming startled me. Hub ducked
into his place. I scrambled up the steps and in the back
door as Pop and Pug barreled out of the cellar. Nervy and
Muddy squeezed through the dining room doorway. Aunt
Poopsie stopped there with Gooch looking over her
shoulder. One of the Bobs crawled between her legs to see
what had happened.

Helen shook the roasting pan lid at Pop. “Damn, damn, damn it! This bird’s not cooking. To *hell* with Betty Furness and her ‘lectric-kitchen shit!”

Pop weaved toward her. “Heat’s heat, woman, ‘lectric or gas.”

“Not so! This bird’s tan on top and raw on the bottom.”

“Didja have the stove on?”

Helen slammed Pop’s shoulder with the lid.

He raised his arm in defense. “God a’ mighty, woman, lemme look.”

Pop set the pan and turkey on top the stove and peered into the oven. “Bottom heating rod’s loose. Musta popped out when we raised the floor.”

“*Popped out?* This bird just *popped out* ready to fly. Just like this house *popped out* of the girls’ bank account!”

“Aw, hush.” Pop fixed the heating rod. “It’ll cook now.”

“Whaddaya mean *it’ll* cook? Fucking stoves don’t cook, *women* do.”

Pop rose and they faced off. Helen growled. He grinned. “Be nice. Finish dinner. The rest of us can play cards or somethin’ while we’re waitin’.” Pop poked the turkey. “Anyway, this bird’s too fat to fly.”

“*Oh yeah?*” Helen grabbed the roasting pan and lurched past me onto the landing of the back steps. She swung back, barely missing my head, and then launched the pan with the turkey into the air. Hubbub emerged from under the steps. As our dinner arched in his direction, he scampered to one side. When the turkey landed in the snow, Hubbub sniffed toward it.

With Nervy on my heels, I bounded down the stairs. “No, Hub, no!”

Hubbub beat us to the bird and clamped onto its tail. Nervy and I each grabbed a wing and leg and pulled back.

Pop arrived and joined the tussle. He tugged at Hubbub's collar, but that only jerked the bird away from us.

Pop seized the turkey with his other hand. Hub growled and dug in his front paws. Pop laughed and cussed as if he were play-wrestling. He released the collar, snatched up the roasting pan, and hit Hub on the back with it.

I yelled, "Don't hurt him, Pop!"

He banged Hubbub several times on the head. I winced with each blow. Hubbub shook his head and growled more. Pop laughed and cussed louder. He dropped the pan, grabbed the turkey with both hands and kicked Hubbub's stomach. Hub yelped and let go. Pop flopped on his butt with the turkey in his lap. I doubled over, feeling sick. Hubbub whined and scuttled under the steps.

Grinning as he stumbled to his feet, Pop held up the turkey like a trophy. At the top of the stairs, the Posse

cheered and clapped. Pop climbed the steps swaggering from beer and pride. Borchervink threw his arms up, fists clenched, in a victory salute. “A toast! Let’s have a toast!”

Nervy and I knelt by Hubbub’s place. He lay on his side, panting hard. I caressed his head. Hub began shivering. His tongue hung out touching the dirt and his eyes were sad. Nervy left to get a blanket, but she seemed to move in slow motion. The crazy thought struck me that I should get a leash in case Hub wanted to take a walk. A lot of noise came from the house, and a radio from next door played, “*Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow...*”

When Nervy returned, she told me Helen had locked herself in her room and Pop was banging on the door, yelling he’d saved the bird so she had to cook it. That seemed far away, somewhere else, some other people. Hubbub still shivered. Muddy came, took a look, and then got Moose to carry Hub to my room. I carried his bed.

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Nervy and I sat with Hub, speaking softly to him. Pop wobbled in, holding a beer. “Hey, we’re havin’ Thanksgiving in our new home. Poopsie’s cookin’ the bird. She cut off what Hubbub chewed.” I said I wasn’t hungry. Pop hesitated a moment before leaving. “Don’ worry, Sophie, bulldogs got hard heads. He’s jus’ poutin’. It was jus’ a little fracas; a little fracas, that’s all.”

After sunset, Muddy brought us plates of food, and I tried to feed Hubbub some turkey. I coaxed him. “Yum, Hub. Turkey, yum.” He licked my hand but wouldn’t eat. Nervy looked scared and said, “He’ll be okay. Won’t he?” Laughter came from downstairs, and I thought it was wrong. I heard Borchervink calling Pop a “Gen-u-wine hero!” Through the evening and into night, the clatter and chatter of dinner dwindled to clinking glasses and murmurs then silence.

Later, Muddy tiptoed into the room and looked down at Hubbub. She patted my head and said, “Everyone’s

gone. Your mother and father have gone to bed. I'll read to you." She sat on my bed and selected a book. With one arm hugging my knees to my chest, I remained next to Hub, stroking him.

Muddy read, "*The Beauty and the Beast*. There was once a very rich merchant, who had six children, three sons and three daughters; being a man of sense, he spared no cost for their education—"

"Don't read those fuckin' books! They're fulla crap!" We all jumped. Helen leaned against the doorjamb clutching a bottle.

Muddy stiffened. "They were good enough for you."

"Yeah..." Helen waved her bottle. "Welcome to my castle."

Muddy and Helen stared at each other during a long, silent moment. I looked at Nervy. She was trembling and asked, "Is there any pie?"

Helen turned her half-lidded stare to Nervy and appeared to sag, seeming smaller, tired. “You girls go to bed.” She left, bumping against the wall on her way down the hall.

Muddy kissed us goodnight, mumbling that she didn’t mean to cause any trouble. Nervy crawled into my bed. I got a pillow and a blanket, and my books off the nightstand. I lay down beside Hubbub, holding my books close. I whispered to him most of the night, but sometime near morning I dozed off. While I slept, Hubbub died.

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Around noon, in a drizzling rain, with a mattock and spade Pop dug a pit in the backyard and laid Hubbub in it. Hub looked stiff, unnatural, his lips pulled back, showing his teeth. I didn’t want to remember him like that.

Nervy had her eyes squeezed shut, holding back tears. I held her close. Muddy sheltered us with an umbrella.

Across the grave, hatless and coatless despite the rain,
Helen shook in withdrawal.

Pop, wearing a yellow hooded-slicker, stood at the head of the pit. He cleared his throat. “I guess we ought to say a prayer.” He bowed his head. “Lord, take care of Hubbub. He was a good dog. Thanks for lending him to us.”

Nervy opened her eyes. “That’s a stupid prayer. You ought to ask God to forgive you for killing him.”

Helen looked up at the dark gray sky. Her face was wet, and I had the flickering thought that she was crying. My mother’s lips quivered, but her eyes flashed as she faced Pop. “Unless you want to live alone, sell this godforsaken place and give the money back to the girls.”

He looked down and nodded.

After a few seconds of silence, I placed *Beauty and the Beast* and the other books next to Hubbub, then picked up a handful of dirt and tossed it on him. “Goodbye, Hub.”

Pop began filling the grave. The others went into the house, but I stayed to watch, holding the umbrella Muddy had left. Pop finished covering Hub and used the spade to scrape clay from his shoes. “The dog was old, he...”

I shook my head. My chest hurt. I tried to fight back tears, but they spilled out and ran down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Sophie.”

“Me too.”

I left Pop there, beside Hubbub’s grave. He placed a marker he’d made at the head of the mound, and then went to Smiley’s. He didn’t come back until after we’d gone to bed.

