

Fateful Reunion

by [Buddfred Levi](#) (January 2025)



The Funeral (Edouard Manet, 1867)

We had just cleaned up from breakfast when the doorbell rang. Joey answered it, then yelled back to the kitchen, “Dad, it’s for you.” When I went to the door, I thought, “What the fuck?”

“What the fuck!” I said. “Phil, what are you doing here?”

He grinned. “I wasn’t sure you’d recognize me!”

It wasn’t hard. I remembered both the motorcycle in the

driveway and the green eyes. I said, "What do you want, Phil?"

"I wanted to talk with you."

"You've been off my call list for years."

"Can I come in?"

"I don't think so."

"It's important."

"You must be kidding me."

"Please. I'm begging. Really. I'm desperate."

Something seemed different in Phil's attitude. He didn't seem as arrogant as I remembered. Almost apologetic. This was not going to be the stress-free Saturday I'd anticipated. "I guess."

I opened the door, and we settled at the kitchen table.

"Any plans today?" he asked. "I thought maybe we could take a ride together, catch up on the old days."

"Not possible. This is my weekend with my son. We're going to hang out and then get some pizza."

"He can come along. We could ride by some of our old hangouts."

"I don't think it's in the cards, Phil. The old days are just that. The old days. Besides, I don't ride with Joey, not yet. Now get to the point—what's so important?"

"Can I get a drink first?"

"Coffee? Water?"

"Something stronger, if you have it. I'm sort of hungover."

"Bloody Mary? I have vodka and spicy V-8."

"Sounds great but Iight on the juice."

Phil looked ragged. His brown hair was mixed with grey and all over the place, probably from the ride over. His jeans were wrinkled and stained, like he had napped on the road somewhere. He looked older than his 36 years. He had a dank smell.

"Here you go," I said, handing him the drink.

"Won't you join me?"

"I don't drink on custody weekends."

"Well, bottoms up," he said, emptying the glass.

I was getting edgy.

"Why now?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It's been fourteen years, Phil. And I really didn't expect or want to see you again. How did you find out where I lived?"

"Kent gave me your address last night."

His brother was a freshman when we were seniors. Phil and I were wrapping up English degrees. Phil was headed to the Iowa graduate writing program with a scholarship. I had a job waiting for me to write technical specifications at the aircraft plant. Kent relocated back to Wichita after graduating law school.

"Are you staying at his house?"

"He's not at home. He's in rehab with a broken hip. I came down to see how he was progressing."

Phil and Kent's parents had died in a fiery auto accident when

they were young. The insurance settlement was substantial. They were trust fund babies.

"His wife doesn't like me. She doesn't want me in the house unless Kent is around. I'm the black sheep in that family."

"Probably with good reason," I thought.

He handed me his glass. "How about a refill?"

Kent had told me of his brother's drinking problem, and some violence. We both knew from experience he was a philanderer. His favorite targets were his friends' partners. Former friends.

When I gave him his refill, I said, "I haven't seen Kent for a couple of months. Maybe Joey and I will visit him later and then go out for our Saturday pizza."

"Sounds like a deal."

"I didn't invite you."

I called toward the bedrooms, "Joey, I want you to meet an old college roommate. We're at the kitchen table."

"Hi," Joey said from the doorway.

"We graduated Wichita State together fifteen years ago," I said. "He's Kent's brother."

"Is that your bike in the drive?" Joey asked.

"Sure is. A classic Harley. It's been all over the country, and then some."

"Sweet!"

"I'll take you for a ride later if you want."

"That would be great. Dad never rides his bike anymore. At least not when I'm here." He shoots me a look.

My bike was covered and stored in the garage. I uncover it for a couple of long rides in the spring.

When Joey went back to his room, Phil went to the kitchen and poured himself a drink. "Any chance I can take a shower?"

"No problem ... But don't plan on taking Joey for a bike ride or your ass is grass," I warned.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I told you not to. You don't like limits."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you fucked your best friend's wife."

There. It was out in the open.

"I messed up. I was high. I'm an asshole. I'm sorry. That's why I wanted to come by today. Your friendship pulled me through some tough times. If I could push a reset button, I would. I want our friendship back. I've screwed up all my relationships. I'm lonely."

"Your betrayal pushed me into some tough times. Like I just get to visit with my son weekends instead of living with him."

"You blame me?"

"I do."

"I wasn't the only person involved."

"You were my best man!"

"We haven't talked for thirteen years! Isn't that punishment enough?"

"You know," I said, "Jennifer always said it was my fault for coming home in the middle of the afternoon. Like I needed permission."

"She probably blames me for coming by when you weren't home. Everyone's fault but hers. That's her game."

"I was broken. I climbed into my car and drove around for hours. Then back to the house. Jennifer was asleep. I looked in on Joey and left. I slept in my parents' driveway. There was no place to turn."

"Why didn't you storm into Kent's apartment? You knew I was staying with him. You could have punched me up one side and down the other until you gave up. I wouldn't have fought back."

"Seriously?"

"I was waiting for you. With no excuses."

"I took two weeks medical leave," I said. In therapy, I had discovered that I took life at face value. That I needed to be more suspect of motivations. Like now. What was really going on? "I'm still on Prozac."

Phil stopped for a minute. "I was mad at you from the moment you asked me to be your best man. I felt like when my parents left me. One minute I was a ten-year-old boy who went camping on weekends with his dad, and the next I was living on a farm with an aunt and uncle who were too old to farm."

"I shared my whole life—my writing, my thoughts, my past..."

"But not your future," Phil said.

"What do you mean?"

"I expected us to be bike-riding buddies forever. I didn't know you were thinking about getting married until you asked me to be your best man ... one week before the wedding."

"Jennifer had just learned she was pregnant."

"You could have come and talked to me and asked my advice. It

certainly wouldn't have been marriage. Don't forget, I dated Jennifer on and off for months before you shackled up with her. You and me had sort of drifted apart while you were living together."

"What are you implying?"

"That she had already told me she was pregnant and wondered if the baby might be mine. I said, 'No way!' I knew that wasn't true."

"This is too much. My head is spinning."

"I've been having a reoccurring dream," Phil went on. "It's you and me on our last ride up to Yellowstone. But at a rest stop on the way, while you're taking care of business, I disable your ignition. 'See you later, partner,' I say as I take off back on the highway. I ride slowly for miles, waiting for you to fix your bike and catch up. But you never do, and I wake up in a sweat."

There was silence, "Go ahead and take your shower. The towels are in the cabinet."

We left for the rehab in my Honda about eleven. Phil came with us. Only two visitors at a time so Joey and I left Phil in the reception area.

Kent was sitting up in bed, half-smiling, reading a book.

"Joey!" Kent said, turning away from me. "I haven't seen you for months. You've really grown up. How tall are you now?"

I let them chat for awhile. I was busy remembering the last time I had seen Phil. I came home from work early and was surprised to find his bike in the driveway next to my wife's car. I knew Joey was away in day care. I went inside. Phil was naked. I told him to get the hell out. It was the start of the divorce. And the last time I saw Phil before today.

When Joey and Kent fell silent, I told Joey to keep Phil company in the reception area, that I had some private business with Kent.

Once he left: "What were you thinking, Kent, giving Phil my address?"

"He slept in that chair over there last night. He was pitiful. He said he wanted to repair with you before going home."

"Well, he's already half-loaded."

"He creeps my wife out," Kent said.

"He's creeping me out. I thought I was done with him."

"He comes down when he needs money. This time he wanted two thousand. He gambles up in Kansas City. Poker. I told him I was broke."

"What about his trust fund?"

"He cashed that out last year. He's a mess. Calls me all the time to cry about how he's screwed up his life."

"I figured there was a reason he rode down, besides making sure you were okay."

He added, "You know he's nuts,"

"We did a lot of crazy things."

"No, I mean certified. After our parents were buried, he was hospitalized after a round of suicide attempts."

"He never told me that. Just that you had an aunt and uncle that took you in."

"You didn't wonder why he was so manic?"

"I just thought he was energetic."

I told Phil in the reception area that Kent needed to rest so we left and went to the Pizza Hut closest to the apartment for a late lunch.

Phil started talking about the old days, how he and I met at the frat house and ended up sharing a room. How we'd spend a lot of free time reading his poems and my stories. How we'd take his bike out at night and ride around just for fresh air. About the parties and the good times.

All the positive memories we'd shared. I began to get some comfortable with his visit.

A couple of pizzas, a couple of beers for Phil, and we headed home. I headed for the shower. As I toweled dry, I heard Phil's bike rev up and take off. Probably off for a couple of nightcaps on his way home, I thought. I settled down in the den with the TV. After a while, I went to the back to ask Joey if he'd had an okay day.

He wasn't in his room. I checked the basement, but he was gone.

I figured right away that Phil was taking him for a bike ride. Goddamn him!

I was ready to dial 911 when a call came from Joey's phone.

"Are you all right?" I answered. First things first.

"Of course he's all right," Phil said. "What kind of a bum do you think me?"

"What the hell's going on, Phil? Where are you?"

"I'll tell you. But I want you to pick him up with your bike. It's time you took him out for a spin. Or, I guess, I can just drop him off at your place, leave and go back home "

It was like blackmail. "You're drunk."

“And you’re sober. So, make a choice ... deal?”

I decided to agree. He told me where they were—one of the bars we crashed back in the day. I hung up and dialed 911. I reported a kidnapping and gave the bar address. I wheeled out my bike, packed the extra helmet for Joey and headed for the bar.

Phil’s bike wasn’t in the parking lot, just two police cars. A sergeant told me my son was okay but that the motorcycle guy had already left when their squad cars showed up. They’d put out a bulletin to take him into custody if he was spotted. I thanked them and went inside.

Joey was nursing a Coke in a booth.

He was crying. “I’m sorry, Dad. It sounded like a fun idea at the time.”

I told him not to worry, that Phil had talked me into doing a lot of things I shouldn’t have done when we were in school. I handed him the helmet. “I bought this for you a while back. Guess it’s time to put it to use.”

“Dad—wow! I’ve wanted to ride with you a long time.”

We left. Instead of heading home, I took him on a long ride through the city and made a couple of stops to tell him what I had done there. We passed a bar where fake IDs bought beer. We stopped at the fraternity house and I pointed out the window in the room Phil and I shared. It opened to the roof over the porch. We used the to sit on the roof and drink and talk and watch the cars drive by below. I told him how we would skateboard for hours at night on the Wichita State concrete. I had turned on the headlight by the time we got home.

We had had a great first ride. Phil’s bike wasn’t in the driveway when we got home.

Kent called me the next morning to tell me Phil had crashed

straight into an overpass abutment on his way back to Lawrence. "He was trying to outrun some cops."

I rode to the rehab and told him about the 911 call. He didn't blame me although he had a hard time with the way it had ended. "He should never have taken Joey in his condition," Kent agreed. We worked out the funeral arrangements together.

The body was released by the coroner after a week. Two days later, the limo picked up Kent's family for the interment. Joey and I rode on my bike to the gravesite.

The coffin was in position and we stood through a short funeral service before it was lowered. There was no one else there to mourn him.

[Table of Contents](#)

Buddfred Levi is an octogenarian living in Wichita, KS. He is in the graduate program at Wichita State University and has had several stories published in *Mikrokosmos*, the WSU literary annual.

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