

## CARDIFF, WALES – 1995

Like a siren, the Raleigh calls my name.

I need her, and she understands my needs. Swinging my right leg over the racer's frame, I relish the simple challenge of clipping my bike shoes to the pedals without either foot touching the ground. Winning the balance test today, I push off and build speed, moving through the village side streets as I merge onto the main road to Cardiff. The bike's a loaner, and I'm a loner. We're both free, and it's a great day.

As a cool wind snakes its way through my jacket, I think about the Welsh National Opera's production of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and our upcoming final two performances. I'm thirty-two, healthy, and my career has as much momentum as the bike beneath me. I perform Pinkerton—the lead tenor—to standing ovations. The possibilities—and the potential—power my adrenaline. I press down on the pedals, and a satisfying burst of speed rewards me. This is my time.

I exit a traffic circle. A “roundabout,” the locals call it. “Scary” is a better word, what with everyone driving the wrong way. I head in the general direction of England and my goal, the city of Penzance in Cornwall, 140 miles distant. I see a bridge with metal guardrails coming up. A white car appears in the distance. Back and forth, it gently weaves across the two-lane road, like the weight in a grandfather clock.

Wow, this guy must've started early this morning, or never stopped drinking from last night. My heart rate quickens, as does my pace. Stop now?

Fly across the bridge? I'm too slow to make a decision, the wheels bump over the metal edge, and I'm on the bridge. I hate going backward in anything I do, so the escape route is the end of the bridge, about a hundred yards away. My athleticism moves the bike into "full speed ahead" mode. I'll beat this drunk, maneuver the bike off to the side, watch him go by, and offer a few choice words.

My heart pounds, but I control my breath. The car, a sedan, is closer. How fast is he going? It shudders and straightens back into its own lane. Is he in control now? The end of the bridge is only fifty yards away. I exhale all the air in my lungs and push again, but with much less angst. I'm going to make it.

I clear the bridge with about twenty yards to spare. Leaning back on the Raleigh, I take a deep breath and look to the side for a good spot to stop. Too steep here. Little bit further? There. The grade's not so sharp. Whoa, is that a buried pipe? Watch the pipe! Where's the car? I snap a look and see it swerve again over the faded, white, broken center line. He's coming directly toward me. On instinct, I turn the front wheel, curse, and brace for the head-on hit.

Seconds before impact, the driver's eyes widen. Hasn't he seen me this whole time? His arms turn the wheel. It's something—enough to save my life?—as his side of the car and my bicycle meet in a grossly unfair battle.

I keep thinking the show must go on, and then I close my eyes.

Show's over.

## **ACT ONE ~ A MUSICAL TRAGEDY**

# 1

Care to join me on another bike ride?

I'm fourteen, a bicycle nut who loves his ten-speed Schwinn and how it eats up the dozen miles between home and downtown Boerne, our small town northwest of San Antonio. I haven't seen my buddy, Julie, much this summer, so when I spot her mom's new Cadillac Deville—*cool, they bought it*—I peddle as fast as I can. One of our town's few traffic lights takes pity, and I freewheel up to the car. The Deville's powerful engine sounds awesome, as if it's growling at the red signal.

As hoped, Julie's in the back. She's had knee surgery. *Cool*. Well, it's not cool that she had surgery, but I'm happy to see her. It's been a while. I pull level with the rear passenger window and smile, and my heart jumps when I see the happy surprise register on her face.

"Hi, Mrs. Clayburne," I say, waving through the closed window. Her mom says something—no idea what—but I nod, flash a high-wattage smile, and give her a thumbs-up. I glance, and the light is still red. Leaning one hand on the roof of the car, I see a huge white bandage covering Julie's knee, but that's not what grabs my attention. It's the girl wrapped around the repair work that catches my breath. Julie's never worn makeup, she doesn't need it. With fair skin, sandy-brown hair, and eyes that remind me of milk chocolate drops, she's beautiful already. Not that I'd ever tell her. We're friends.

She rolls down the window, the glare from the sun disappears, and I stare at a butterfly that's left its cocoon. For the first time (that *I've* noticed) Julie's

got some makeup on, and her open smile leaves me speechless. *Never mind a butterfly, she's a fox!* Whatever romantic filter I'd placed between us shatters. For the first time, at this truly unromantic spot, my eyes open to her true loveliness.



Julie, 17, Modeling picture (1982)

We start dating when we're fifteen, and through the miracle of young love, we survive the rest of high school, a year of me at junior college, and—with Julie's blessing and Dad's bankroll—a year of me away in New York.

My father, Donald Sr., like my mom, the former Jane House, was once a Broadway performer. Dad is happy to fund my frivolity, in part because he wants me to see the world without Julie in it. My girlfriend, on the other hand, knows I want to be an actor, and the best place to learn the business is New York.

## REVIVAL

Even when I tell her the catch—that Dad won't pay my way if she comes, too—Julie shakes her head.

“Baby, we'll be fine. I'll visit,” she says, holding my hand and my heart. “This, it's too great of an opportunity for you not to go. New York's something I *know* you have to do, if only to say you tried.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiles at the excitement—and relief—in my voice.

“I'll be there as often as I can, and if New York works out, we'll decide what's next, and what's best for us, together, right?”

We share a tight hug before Julie swats at my arm as I pretend to ward off evil spirits when she wiggles the ringless fingers of her left hand.



Dad arranges a small apartment on 57th Street, surrounded by the lights and action of Manhattan I often study formal acting and cinema, take a few dance classes, and even arrange lessons with my first official voice teacher. Unbeknownst to my father, Julie—as promised—visits as often as she can. Oh, the scandal of young love. Becoming an actor remains my main goal, but singing is a huge part of my artistic repertoire. Keeping all options open makes sense, and I'm working hard to define the right career path. Then, everything changes.

For the first time in twenty years, the Texas construction industry experiences a severe downturn. Dad runs a construction company, so when the business suffers, my private carousel slows, the music splutters, and the cash cow falls down dead. Dad tries, but he can't keep paying for the apartment. I don't have money to live on my own, so 57th Street and all the other cool places in New York become memories as I fade to gray and move back to Texas.

The stress of the failing business spirals into my parents' relationship. By the time I wander home, a thespian version of the prodigal son, there's chaos in all parts of the crumbling, burning kingdom of Braswell.

After the usual hugs and greetings, I manage to sit and speak with my siblings. I'm the “baby” in the family and always count on my brother,

Claiborne, and sisters, Dorcas and Adrienne, to have the solution. We talk about our parents and various other issues affecting us. By the time I throw my suitcase on the bed in my room—which is way smaller than I remember—I understand how grim things are, and that more change is coming. I know that Mom and Dad—like many couples—have serious arguments sometimes, but I never thought they'd split.

That is, however, exactly what happens once the family business implodes. The commercial disaster leads to our parents' eventual divorce. By then, I appreciate how Dad supported me in New York when he knew the company was *already* in financial trouble. I feel guilty, but also very grateful, because Dad gave me a taste of the Big Apple—at his and Mom's sacrifice—and a hunger was born within me.

Piece by piece, Dad sells off the company to cover losses, wages owed, and general debt. The family estate, where we grew up, is hawked to help bail out some immediate and major financial crises within the business. Until now, we Braswell siblings lived somewhat privileged lives, so it's a tough transition. The business is bankrupt, the easy ride's over, but at least one thing remains positive: Julie's happy to have me back. It's time to make an honest woman of her.

On May twenty-fifth, 1985, Julie and I marry at our family church, First Presbyterian, in downtown San Antonio. We're young, in love, excited about the future, and deep in the middle of many nights, we wonder how fun life would be with several little Donalds or Julies running around.

After a few idyllic weeks, life with little responsibility becomes harder as the muddied waters of our future wash over us. At first, it's fine that I'm working in a local restaurant—my nickname is “the Singing Waiter”—but Julie suggests that I'm losing my long-term dreams to lousy daily tips.

“I get the passion you have for performing and how much you miss the excitement of New York,” says my astute bride with an intense urgency as we walk through an Albertsons parking lot one day. Our hands full of grocery bags—my fault, I didn't think we needed a cart—Julie stops and locks her eyes on mine. I glance around to make sure some errant car won't mow us down.

“If we do nothing, we'll get nowhere, right? This is our future, isn't it Donald?”

## REVIVAL

“Yeah, of course, and I can see you’ve thought about this, honey, but where would you like us to go?”

“Not me. You.”

Her stare now more intense, I pull her between two old pickups, where it should be safe, unless someone starts the engine of either F-150.

“Ever considered auditioning for Juilliard, sweetheart?”

I’m glad the carton of eggs is in one of her bags.

“*Juilliard?* As in the *Juilliard School?* The one in New York?”

Julie nods.

“Me? Are you *kidding?* Are you feeling okay? Let me find a cart.”

Again, the nod.

I scan the parking lot, wondering if I’ll ever again speak in sentences that don’t sound like bullet points. Rolling back with a cart, we pile the bags in the center, making sure the bread and eggs are in that kid seat thing. Don’t need that for a while. I return to staring at Julie as if she’s mad.

“I’m from the Texas Hill Country, y’all. Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Leontyne Price, *they’re* the ones who go to, and graduate from, Juilliard.”

I maneuver the cart. Of course, I picked the one with the psycho wheels that turn independently of one another, just like my brain cells as I try to think of ways to shoot down Julie’s wild plan.

“Okay, I might be a little talented, but my singing voice is undeveloped, you know that,” I say, popping the trunk. “And there’s another part of the equation. I’m not sure I want to go there.”

Wow, I sound like I’m six again. My bride wants to laugh, but she’s good to me and holds her tongue. Julie knows Juilliard is something my parents always wished for me. One of Dad’s biggest dreams was to attend the prestigious conservatory, but he never had the opportunity. I’ve been hearing about Juilliard for years, probably since before I turned six.

“Let’s try, Donald, please?” Julie says, clicking her seatbelt. “You have tons of talent and ability. I *know* you do.”

My right foot on the brake, and the gearshift in “R,” I sit, car and driver frozen. I stare at my wife for several moments.

“You are nuts, but that means I’m crazy, too, ‘cause I married you.”



Braswell & Koopmans

I look through the clean, rainbow-shaped section of the windshield. It's small, but I can generally see, for the most part.

"Let's do it. But don't get your hopes up. I'm sure Juilliard won't even entertain the idea."

"Oh, this is going to be fun!"

I back out and head for home, but not before Julie leans in to kiss me on the cheek.

"I love you, Donald Braswell."

"Love you too, babe, but what are you getting me into?"



Wedding Day (1985)