

Signs

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Every day we drove by the big black sign on the way home. “Welcome to Huber Heights,” it said, in average-sized plain letters. Then, in giant letters below it added the flourish “The Largest Community of Brick Homes.” Charles Huber was proud of his city. If I wanted to see the last two words, I would have to strain against the seat belt to see the bottom of the sign out of the car window. Yet each time we passed it, I had to read the whole sign. I wanted to feel the same pride that the sign displayed.

“Why are brick houses better than regular ones, Mom?” I asked her once.

“They’re better because you don’t have to paint them every year,” was the only answer I received.

Why are Grandma and Grandpa taking us trick-or-treating? They never have before. I know I’m not too little to go past the end of our block, but Jon is. We’re three blocks away now. And why was Dad yelling at Mom? They should be out with us, walking us just to each house, not all the way to the door like Grandma and Grandpa do. I don’t even want candy right now, either. I just want to go home. I’m scared...

We used to go for “walks” every weekend. My mom and dad would have to coerce my brother and me into going. I remember one time that she conned us into going to Taco Bell, then took us to a park to eat it.

“As long as we’re here...” she said, “we may as well go for a walk.” We tried holding out, but we knew that it would be ten times as bad just sitting and waiting by the car for them to

get back. But it wasn't the actual walks that were bad. They were empty somehow. I couldn't understand it then.

"Welcome to Carriage Hill Reserve," the sign read. There were no big letters that said "The largest park of beautiful trees," even though it was true. But parks are things to be shared, so I had the same feeling when I read that sign every Saturday afternoon as I did when we passed the big black one on the way home.

"Mom, what's wrong with Father? Why did he throw his TV and his video camera and his VCR in our trash can? Those things are expensive aren't they? Why didn't he just sell them to somebody if he didn't want them?"

"Your father's very sick, boys."

"Can't they make him better? I want to see him again!"

"You might not see him again, for a long time. He's very, very sick..."

We visited my father in the hospital once. He couldn't get to sleep for four days straight. I remember that it felt more like a hotel than a hospital. There was a chandelier in the front entrance, elegant carpeting, and a reception desk, like a Hilton I have stayed in. They even had a pool table near his room. I was really frustrated and almost broke the cue stick out of anger because I was so bad at it, but as soon as we left, I wanted to go back and play it some more. I remember the first time I felt guilty about not loving my father was in that hospital because after we left I didn't want to go see him again, I just wanted to play pool.

The sign outside the door read Dartmouth Center for Mental Health. I imagine it also claimed to be "The Largest Mental Health Center with Pool Tables and Chandeliers."

"You're a idiot, Jamey. Why do you call your daddy 'Father'?"

“Just ‘cause, Chad. Besides, I’m much smarter than you because my dad is smart and I inherent it from him.”

I have always called my dad father. I know I didn’t pick it up from watching British television shows because I was never allowed to watch TV when I was a kid. It’s probably because my mom always refers to him as “your father”, not “Dad”, or “your Dad”. His title wasn’t really important, though. He could have had a sign on him that said. “Dad, “The Best Friend that I Know.” He is.

I remember the last time I saw the big black Huber Heights sign. I was watching for it out the back of the car that was taking our last load of boxes from our old brick house to our new one. By then, my father had a brick apartment of his own in another part of town. When I finally saw the sign go by, I realized why I never felt proud to live in the largest community of brick homes.

I didn’t like Dartmouth hospital even with it’s pool tables and chandeliers, because to my friends it meant my father was crazy. I didn’t like going on walks with my family in the beautiful pine forests on Carriage Hill because they were walks with my family, and I never felt that I could share walks with them. And as the giant red letters shrank to nothing, I knew why the big letters were so empty. That was not my home. I didn’t have any interest in the suburban dream of Charles Huber. I only lived there so my parents didn’t have to paint the house every year.