

## Fiction by Adam Braver

### *A death in the family*

At the moment that young Ronnie Kennealy was struck and killed on Route 111 in a hit-and-run accident, Lupe Hernandez was hiding in one of the dozens of old bathtubs littering the sloping field that dead-ended into the roadway called Route 246. Her father worked for Mr. Kennealy, hauling the old bathtubs from condemned houses, helping Mr. Kennealy refinish them, and then delivering them to new owners. As Mr. Kennealy's sole employee, Lupe's father worked long hours but never complained, glad to have work that respectfully placed food on his table for his baby boy, his wife, and his seven-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Lupe. Dave Kennealy had taken him on a year ago, and while it would

be wrong to say that he treated Renaldo Hernandez as a member of his family, he did do what was becoming a rare sight these days between laborers and employers: he treated him with respect. Dave Kennealy didn't mind the days when Renaldo had to bring Lupe along with him. "She can play all she wants," he said, "so long as she doesn't stop you from working. And that you make sure that she plays safe."

On the afternoon that Ronnie Kennealy was struck and killed on Route 111, Lupe Hernandez was busy planning for her first communion. It had been on the forefront of her mind a few months after turning seven. She had already decided on a communion outfit, a hybrid of one seen in a storefront window in Carver and one from a magazine that her mother had been keeping for several months. Lupe could picture herself in the embroidered organza dress, with the bolero buttoned just below her neck. She was still deciding whether to wear a veil, but she had concluded with certainty that the crown, along with her lace gloves and matching bag, would also be trimmed in organza. Driving with her father to Kennealy's Antique Tubs, Lupe had tried to engage her father about which style of shoe she should wear, contemplating material and toe

---

*Adam Braver is the author of "Mr. Lincoln's Wars: A Novel in Thirteen Stories" (2003) and "Divine Sarah" (2004). His work has been selected for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program, the Border's Original Voices program, the Book Sense 76 list, as well as many other year-end lists. He lives in Rhode Island, where he is on the faculty of the Creative Writing department at Roger Williams University. His newest novel, "Crows Over the Wheatfield," will be published in June 2006.*

---

© 2006 by Adam Braver

exposure. He told her that he was thinking about how to keep enough money to last them to the end of the month and wondering why a seven-year-old should opine on such things. Then he looked over and tried to raise a smile as an act of contrition, saying that she should save that question for her mother – she was better at those things.

From inside the dirty old tub, Lupe heard her father calling her name; her breathing spooked and echoed against the stained porcelain walls. His voice became louder and louder, but his presence did not seem closer. He called her name over and over with the cadence of trampling feet, his words trotting faster, until the rhythm took on the urgency of a desperate run. Finally she popped her head up with a grin. She waved as though the victor in a backyard game. Renaldo was running fast toward her through the obstacle course of tubs, with Mr. Kennealy a slow stride behind. “O mi padre en el cielo,” he said. “Mi padre.” He told her he thought she was dead, while modulating his anger to a calm voice. Renaldo hugged her both in thankfulness and irritation. Dave Kennealy stood behind, shaking his head. Slightly disgusted at what some parents will allow.

Dave Kennealy wouldn't hear of his son's death for several hours. Renaldo had left with his little girl shortly after finding her in the tub, wanting to get home a bit early because he feared that the early nightfall might frighten his wife. Dave decided to stay at the shop for another hour or so, hoping to get this one Mott clawfoot ready for a contractor who was pushing Dave, as his client was pushing him.

Business had been going through the roof these days. The recent homebuying craze spurred on a remodeling craze, and

it seemed like everybody wanted to strip the seventies remodels from their new homes and replace them with fixtures that showed off the vintage era, even if they were not as reliable as modern fixtures. And so it seemed as though everybody's spare bathroom needed a vintage tub. It wasn't that long ago that he had been contemplating taking his supply of baths to the dump to make room for objects that actually moved from the salvage shop. But now demand was out of this world. In fact, he recently had changed his business plan to exclusively sell old tubs. It was fairly simple now. People knew where to take them. And people knew where to find them.

It wasn't quite what a kid growing up on the east side of Providence might have expected out of his life. As a fourth-generation New Englander, his father had spent most of his years as an attorney for a downtown business that no longer existed, before taking an appointment at City Hall to protect the business dealings of those who ran the city. Dave had received a high-priced and coveted secondary prep school education at Moses Brown, where after graduating with honors, he headed up the street to Brown University after rejecting Yale and Dartmouth. But he didn't last too long, too seduced by the freedom to get off the track on his own and, as with the times, eschew the values and expectations of the social class that had embraced him. He moved out to Carver where he met his wife MaryAnn, and they lived as nouveau hippies, until they realized that they didn't really like hippies. A series of earthen jobs honed his craft skills. By chance landing he ended up in the salvage business, where he found crassness and strength to be the defining characteristics for success. His previous erudition and free-living lifestyle now metamorphosed into the hard-

*A death in the family*

ened New Englander, an edge that made him almost indistinguishable to anybody he had grown up with (although true to his heritage, he was running one of the most lucrative small businesses in the region). Dave's mother accused him of playing working class, forever telling him that one day he would find the need for his graces and education, and on that day he would be thankful for being born who he was.

Dave had really wanted to get the tub finished tonight. It was a five-foot French double-ended clawfoot that, along with the refinishing, was going to net him about three thousand dollars. Renaldo had already acid-etched the interior and sandblasted the exterior. It just needed to be primed and painted. If MaryAnn could keep things down at home tonight, then Dave would have the time to let the primer dry and begin the initial painting. He applied the primer in short, smooth brush strokes, imagining that he were the original craftsman of this tub, trying to instill the pride of workmanship into each stroke. A week later he would curse that dedication for not allowing him to pick up the phone, even when it rang three times in a row, seven rings for each try. By the time he saw his son Ronnie, the boy had been dead for nearly three hours. If Dave had just stopped his work to pick up the phone, he would have been able to tell his son a final I love you while the boy's brain was still living enough to hear. Instead he would say it to a zipped plastic bag in a chilled room, with his arms hugged slightly to his chest and his wife's fingers clawed into his shoulder. Then he would go back to his shop and sandblast the shit out of that tub, removing every inch of primer.

The police officer had told Dave Kennealy that it was an accident that took

his son. The officer apologized, said it was a shame, that eight years seemed barely enough to get your footing on this earth. But one thing Dave knew was that there were no such things as accidents. Even being born to privilege is no accident.

Hopelessness is when the anger is truly unleashed. When the known world is just out of reach. When you wake from dreams to find they were only dreams. When you replay every minute of the preceding day and realize that one step in any other direction likely would have put you in some place better today. And you don't want to think about it. Don't want to feel it. And it won't be for another month before Dave commands his attorney to go out after the driver who killed his son, and another three months before he cashes in all his family chits by calling on everyone his father knows to make this lawsuit the biggest story that has hit Rhode Island in years. Only after he makes sure that it is all over the TV news and a regular feature of the *Providence Journal*, that the world knows that this is no accident, will he start to ease his sense of helplessness. But until then, all Dave Kennealy wants to do is stab his hand into the center of the earth, and grab the axis and yank it out until the world stops turning.