

"DUSK COMES EARLY TO THE VALLEY"

By Rob Biesenbach

Characters

FATHER - 60s, a realist

ALLIE - 30s, his daughter, focused, driven, an avoider

(FATHER and ALLIE, on a front porch,  
him sitting, her standing and fiddling  
with a cell phone.)

FATHER

My God, it gets dark so damned early!

ALLIE

That's what happens when you build a house at the bottom of a gully,  
Dad.

FATHER

It's a valley, not a gully.

ALLIE

It's a ravine at best.

FATHER

Up there on the ridge they've got another hour of daylight.

ALLIE

Up there on the ridge I bet they've got a decent signal. One bar!  
Christ!

(She puts phone away)

FATHER

You know, there's a phone right inside there. I know it's attached to  
the wall, but it still makes calls just like yours.

ALLIE

Yeah? Do I dial or just pick it up and ask Sarah to get me a line out  
to Mt. Pilot?

FATHER

(Indecipherable grunt)

(She gets out a cigarette.)

FATHER

I wish you wouldn't.

ALLIE

Dad, if I don't have this cigarette I can't be held responsible for my  
actions.

FATHER

Alright, just ... try to stay downwind, okay? (Pause) What that land must cost up there ...

ALLIE

Back when you built? Probably 10 cents an acre.

FATHER

It wasn't *that* cheap ...

ALLIE

Plus a chicken.

FATHER

Cut it out. Your Mom liked it down here, closer to town. And I never heard you kids complain.

ALLIE

I wasn't aware we had a vote. (Pause) We were kids. It was home. (Pause) Besides, I spent most of my childhood down at the creek.

FATHER

Doing your best to wipe out the local frog population.

ALLIE

They had it comin'.

FATHER

How did we raise such a tomboy?

ALLIE

Well, Dad, when you name your girl Alex, it's kinda preordained. All my life I get, "Alex. Is that short for Alexandra? No, just Alex." Face it, Dad, I'm the son you never had.

FATHER

Very funny. The son I've got is just fine.

ALLIE

Sean? Hell, he's the half the man I am.

FATHER

I wouldn't brag about that ...

(Pause)

The dusk comes early, the dawn comes late ... what I wouldn't give to get some of those hours of daylight back ...

ALLIE

Forty years, Dad. Forty years of early sunsets and late sunrises. I would have thought you'd be used to it by now.

(Pause)

FATHER

You know, Allie, I've been meaning to tell you. I've been having ... problems lately ... with my memory.

ALLIE

(Gently) I know, Dad. You told me.

FATHER

I did? Shit.

(Pause)

Listen, Allie ... I think -

(Allie moves forward to railing)

ALLIE

Your railing needs to be painted. It's flaking and peeling.

FATHER

Don't worry about it.

ALLIE

Why isn't Sean taking care of this?

FATHER

He can't be here every weekend.

ALLIE

Yeah, and it would ruin his manicure. I'll pick up some paint in the morning.

FATHER

You're not going to spend your visit painting.

ALLIE

It'll give me something to do.

FATHER

It doesn't matter.

ALLIE

Of course it does. If we don't fix it before winter, the wood's going to rot -

FATHER

I'm moving out of the house.

(Long pause. She puts out cigarette.)

ALLIE

What are you talking about?

FATHER

I can't live here anymore ... it's not safe for me to be alone here.

ALLIE

What? Because of this ... memory thing? Dad, I hate to break it to you, but you're just getting old. These things happen.

FATHER

No, that's what I thought at first, but it's more than that. A while back, the neighbors were complaining about my mowing the lawn.

ALLIE

The Crawfords are always bitching about something.

FATHER

Right, they are, but this time they had a point. Turns out I'd been mowing the lawn every morning ... for a week!

ALLIE

Oh, come on!

FATHER

Seriously. I couldn't figure out why the bag was always empty.

ALLIE

That's a little strange, I give you that ...

FATHER

It's all the time now. Just this morning I wanted to read the paper. I turned the house upside down looking for my glasses. Still haven't found them.

ALLIE

They're ... um ... (Points to her own forehead)

FATHER

(Reaches up, finds them on his forehead) Oh, Christ!

ALLIE

We'll get you a chain for your glasses. Not the end of the world.

FATHER

Oh, yeah? Last week it was hotter than hell in here. I couldn't figure it out. I had all the windows open, I checked the thermostat. It was 70 degrees outside and I was sweating bullets. I finally realized I'd left the oven on!

ALLIE

We've all done that. I came home from work the other day and the coffee maker was -

FATHER

For three days? Did you leave it on for three days? Christ, I could have burned the house down. That was the last straw.

ALLIE

We'll get you a new oven, one with an automatic shut-off - that thing's older than you are.

FATHER

I don't need a new oven -

ALLIE

(Trying to lighten things) One that works on electricity instead of firewood -

FATHER

So, I've been talking with Sean.

ALLIE

Oh, this should be good.

FATHER

He's concerned. He's been very helpful with this whole process.

ALLIE

Well it's easy to be ... wait, what "process?"

FATHER

We've been looking at places ... a place where I can live.

ALLIE

What KIND of place?

FATHER

A facility.

ALLIE

Oh, my God!

FATHER

A place where I can live and not have to worry about hurting myself or someone else!

ALLIE

This is crazy. Sean just needs to come out here more often.

FATHER

He has a family of his own. What's your excuse?

ALLIE

Hey, I've got ... I took two planes and a car to get here.

FATHER

And I appreciate it! The point is, Sean is around, and you're not. He sees what's going on, day-to-day. You don't.

ALLIE

Dad, you're going to be fine. We'll work it out. It'll be -

FATHER

Allie, I'm sick! (Pause) I'm sick and I'm not going to get better.

(Long pause)

Today - right now - is the best I'm going to ever be. This is it. And tomorrow -

ALLIE

Is that the one?

FATHER

What?

ALLIE

(Points) The tree. Over there, next to the gate.

(Pause)

FATHER

Yeah. Yeah it is.

ALLIE

And the branch ... must have been ... that one? (Points high up)

FATHER

No, it was the first one, right there.

ALLIE

Oh come on, I fell further than 8 feet!

FATHER

That's the one.

ALLIE

But, after all these years? The branch should be way up there by now.

FATHER

Common misconception. A tree grows from the tips of its branches, not from the trunk.

ALLIE

(Surprised) Thank you, Mr. Science.

FATHER

What difference does it make? It was high enough to break your arm. (Pause) Can't believe you went three days without telling anyone. When I was in the Army, we had this lieutenant? He broke his arm on an obstacle course and cried like a 5-year-old girl. (Pause) Well, anybody else's 5-year-old-girl.

ALLIE

Oh, I cried when Sean punched me there.

FATHER

Well, thank God for that - we might never have found out. Damn, your mother was pissed. "Our baby is maimed!"

ALLIE

(Chuckles) Maimed.

FATHER

You would have been if we'd waited any longer. It was bad enough as it was, with the bones already starting to knit. When the doctor had to re-break it before setting it?

ALLIE

Now *that* hurt.

FATHER

That was awful. I hope to God you never have to feel pain like that again.

ALLIE

Me, too. (Pause) It only hurts sometimes now. Like when it's cold.

FATHER

And you can't straighten it all the way.

ALLIE

Well, I was never going to pitch in the big leagues anyway.

FATHER

Actually, the way the Cubs are pitching right now, you'd fit in pretty well.

ALLIE

The Cubs? I thought you gave up on them in '84.

FATHER

I still catch a game or two ... '84! They should have won the pennant.

ALLIE

The game we saw was good - a shutout.

FATHER

No, the shutout was the first game. We were at the second game.

ALLIE

Are you sure?

FATHER

Yup. Cubs won, 4-2.

ALLIE

And they lost the series in 7 games.

FATHER

Five. The NCLS was only 5 games back then.

ALLIE

(Pause.) What section were we sitting in?

FATHER

Section?

ALLIE

Yeah, for the game, what section were we in?

FATHER

How am I supp -

ALLIE

Come on, Dad. The section? The row?

FATHER

You're being ridiculous.

ALLIE

What were our seat numbers? Was it sunny or cloudy? What was the temperature?

FATHER

Stop it!

ALLIE

The humidity level? The barometric pressure? Come on, Dad! Tell me!

FATHER

What the hell is this all about?

ALLIE

I want you to remember! You remember all this shit! You can recite the batting averages of every member of the '69 Cubs but you can't find your glasses on your own goddamned forehead! What's up with that?

FATHER

I don't know!

ALLIE

Oh, come on! What is this "disease?" What's it called?

FATHER

It doesn't have a name! I don't get a telethon or a 10-mile run/walk! The long-term memories are still there, but the short term is -

ALLIE

Bullshit!

FATHER

What, do you think I'm faking this or something?

ALLIE

You're just not trying! You've got to try harder! You've got to focus!!

FATHER

I can't, okay??

ALLIE

You're giving up! You're just giving up!!

FATHER

I'm accepting it. You need to accept it, too!

ALLIE

NO! I WON'T. AND YOU SHOULDN'T EITHER. YOU'VE GOT TO FIGHT, DAMNIT! YOU'VE GOT TO FIGHT AGAINST THE DYING LIGHT. DIDN'T YOU EVER READ DYLAN THOMAS?

FATHER

I DON'T REMEMBER!

(She stifles a chuckle, and they both share a quiet, exasperated laugh.)

When the hell did you ever read Dylan Thomas?

ALLIE

I didn't. It was an answer on Final Jeopardy.

(Pause)

ALLIE

It'll work out, Dad. It'll work itself out.

FATHER

Yeah? How's your arm feel?

(She feels a twinge in the arm. Long  
silence as they gaze out at the  
sunset.)

God, it gets dark so damned early.

(She nods, they continue to gaze out.)