The Dark Part

Most people wanted to talk about my mother, who had killed herself, and I had to sing this song. There was money involved. A thousand-dollar savings bond and a small part in the Flagstaff Summer Opera. At the time, Flagstaff was three hours north, in the mountains, and I’d never been there by myself.

It was the year I stopped going to confession and worked at Safeway bagging groceries. Usually I slept in my father’s truck, an old Jeep with off-road lights and orange carpet squares in back. I kept my tools in a wooden chest I’d made in Shop—an ax, waterproof matches, jumper cables. I called it my Survival Chest and would think about the day the Communists invaded Los Angeles, and then Phoenix, and I’d be safe hiding out in the mountains. On the lid carved into the wood were my initials (WM, for Walker Miller), and after Karen Kalko discovered my initials were the same forwards (WM) and upside-down (WM) she convinced me to join Honor Choir. Karen had been my girlfriend for three weeks, and even if it wasn’t quite right, she wanted us to have a lot in common.

“You should feel privileged,” she said. “Most girls never make it. They want to be in Honor Choir.”

We were sitting on the lawn in front of the gym. I was still sweating, because the rule saying we had to shower hadn’t been made yet, and I had only played volleyball in Ms. Williams’s class Sports for Life. Ms. Williams taught History
and PE, and I liked to take her class. Also she looked a little like my mother, when my mother was still in college, with short hair and glasses.

And on the lawn Karen Kalko was sort of pretty—earrings and hair, pink button-down shirt, but she didn’t look like anyone I really knew. I kept leafing through my Shop book, a chapter on cabinet making to remind myself of the parts I really understood, when Karen said, “Well anyway, try it.”

She gave me a flier with pictures of the last seven Honor Choirs, most of which looked the same.

“Try it,” she said, standing.

When I watched her walk away, I didn’t worry about the way I smelled. Instead I looked at the flier and thought I’d never seen so many lonely-looking girls in all my life.

If I knew about girls now what I didn’t know then, it probably wouldn’t matter. Karen Kalko was going to go to the university in Flagstaff for either Pre-Law, Pre-Med, or Anthropology. I was supposed to work at Safeway and save money, while she made more plans, and then I got fired.

My father had been a captain in the Navy, and when you are seventeen, you are still young enough to have a best friend, though usually it’s not your father. Mine was Howie Bently, who was on the wrestling team and broke a lot of rules and never, never had a girlfriend. The night after I was fired, the night before my big audition, Howie sprayed open a beer and became philosophical. We were in the back of my father’s truck, under the carport with the radio blasting. It was the kind of thing that usually bothered the neighbors.

“Face it,” Howie said. “You and your old lady might as well be married. You’re whooped.”

“I’m unemployed,” I said.

“She’s got you by the balls. Hard, fast, and doomed. And Newborn,” he said, laughing, handing me a beer. “Newborn!”
Doomed was another Howie word, like old lady, and Mr. Newborn was nice enough, but he wasn’t very healthy. He was tall and pale and seemed to attract flies. There we’d be, our mouths all agape, going ooh right on up the scales, or Oklahoma!, my favorite, and these flies would come in through the door and land on his head, or nose, even his ears. And then he’d try and brush them away, without messing up our instructions, but in general the Honor Choir never paid much attention to his instructions, anyway. After all, this wasn’t the Navy, and Mr. Newborn would stop, laugh, shifting his feet, which were huge, and never get mad at the flies. When he’d tell us to stand up straight, he’d tell us to stand up straight like God’s children—on the legs God gave us. Whenever he wanted to start talking, the piano player, Iva Polanski, would stop playing and we’d all stand still and polite until we got bored. Meanwhile, Karen stood behind me in the third row and, singing, I’d listen for her voice, but what I liked most about the singing was the way the piano always sounded so nice no matter what the Honor Choir ever did.

A grocery store in Arizona is always cold. Outside it can be a hundred and fifty-seven degrees, dogs are getting brain damage in cars, ice cream is safe for maybe three, six minutes, but inside it’s always cold. For the three months I worked at Safeway, I wore the same green tie I had borrowed from my father’s closet and practiced being punctual. I never did learn to make it look right. Mr. Dean, the Day Manager, said I was a doornail and never showed up on time. He said that to me just before he fired me, too. He said, “Face it, Wally. You’re a doornail.” Basically, said Mr. Dean, I just didn’t have what it took to be in the grocery supply industry. He was referring to all the grapefruit I had thrown at the customers. He was referring to the fact that he thought I was turning crazy, which I probably was, though of course
I didn’t know that then. When you think you are going crazy, you basically feel the way you always do; you just start acting a little differently, like my mom, before she killed herself. Or like the Captain, sitting all alone in his car, reading old love letters all by himself.

“I know you’ve got family problems,” Mr. Dean said, shaking my hand. “Good luck to you.”

Iva Polanski didn’t have a family. She was two years older than me and going to go to college in Berlin where she was born. She had short black hair, really short, like a flattop, and she lived with her aunt in Phoenix. She had skin like a baby. I mean like a cherub, or angel—that kind of skin. Next to all those lonely girls in Honor Choir with feathered hair and blue eye shadow, Iva Polanski was exotic.

In the afternoons she’d practice with me for my audition. She’d play out her part of “Oklahoma!” —the song that best showed off my range, Mr. Newborn had said—and I’d watch Iva’s hands, standing behind her near the shaved parts of her neck; or beside her, and when she’d lean over the keys you could see down the hollow of her shirt. It wasn’t a very steep hollow, just smooth brown skin. The skin poured over the big bone in the center of her chest. She wore t-shirts with her gypsy skirts, and sometimes, especially when it was hot, the t-shirts stayed close, and she’d play along, stop, look up at me and smile. She even had exotic teeth, straight and unevenly white. I can honestly say now that I have always been in love with Iva Polanski, even before I ever met her; it was that kind of feeling you just happen to know is real, and true, and maybe lonely, she was that beautiful. For example, sometimes, playing along on the piano, she’d stop and stretch. Once she said she missed her boyfriend, who climbed up mountains in Utah and Idaho, but God knew where he was. Mr. Newborn had told us a choir was a room full of happy angels, happy and singing to God, and some-
times I’d picture my mother up there, singing, but I knew if you believed in God, and you killed yourself, you didn’t get to hang around Him. My mother, I guess, was like most people; she wanted to be popular and famous.

After practicing, I’d meet Karen in her pink shirt and hair, at the Burger King, and we’d eat fries, and then I’d drive her home, because she wanted me to be her boyfriend. Most nights, we’d talk on the phone. On Wednesdays, she had to be home by eleven o’clock; midnight on Fridays; Saturday was Family Night; and she had told me last week, on Tuesday, that she liked me an awful lot.

“I like you an awful lot, Walker,” she had whispered on the phone. “I don’t care what happened.”

The phone was making my ear sweat, and I was thinking an awful lot about Iva, and later I realized it was kind of like being married. It was like being told to believe in something. It was like, as Howie had put it, being had by the balls.

Of course no one had ever touched my balls—especially Karen; it was just an expression, and I was beginning to get depressed. With Howie, sitting in back of my father’s truck, under the carport and thinking too much. Karen was home watching HBO with her sisters. My father was out with the Recently Single Catholic Men’s Club. Howie was on his fourth beer, and I decided that what I really wanted to do was practice Survival Driving Techniques.

“Look,” Howie said. “It was just a job.”

“Howie,” I said, “let’s practice.”

We loaded up the beer and climbed up front. We drove out past Pima Road, mostly desert, with Howie throwing beer cans at the signs. After a while we headed east, toward some gullies in the direction of New York, another place I’d never been, and then we started doing doughnuts and figure-eights, flying all over the ruts and stirring up the landscape. The dirt was dry and the dust flew everywhere in the
lights—bright yellow dust, just like day, and it was working fine, too, I was feeling better already, better than reading Shop, really, when the rear end slid hard into a saguaro.

A saguaro weighs about thirty thousand pounds. Everything stopped. Howie was in my lap, still holding his beer, and the dust was floating all around us in the light. Then there was this noise, this quiet noise while the engine ticked in the heat and the saguaro began to lean. You could hear it stretching and pulling at its roots, which according to Mr. Langousis are naturally shallow, as it leaned and broke in half right behind us.

“Wow,” Howie said, finishing off his beer. “Look what you’ve gone and done now, Walker.”

Tragedy is what happens when you don’t think anything will. Usually it happens once during a lifetime, sometimes a lot more, and sometimes when it happens bad enough you know it’s going to take you a while to get over it, no matter who’s to blame. For example, it takes a cactus a hundred years to even grow a foot.

I was in the produce section, hosing down the lettuce and squash, when I heard my name over the Muzak.


I went up front and found Jane, hustling. She was ringing up nine hundred dollars of groceries—pickles, yams, light bulbs; it’s amazing the things people like to eat. Behind the nine-hundred-dollar customer stood Ms. Williams.

“Hi, Ms. Williams,” I said. “What’cha doing?”

Ms. Williams smiled, her ice cream cradled in her arms, and said, “Hello, Howie.”

“No,” I said, pointing at my name tag. “I’m Walker.” Actually, the name tag said Wally, because that’s what Mr. Dean called me.

“You’re going to lose your ice cream,” I said. It was slipping between her elbow and six-pack of diet soda. She balanced herself and stood there patiently, looking over the
impulse items, her arms turning pink from all the air conditioning. I finished bagging the nine hundred dollars worth of groceries—juice in the bottom, bread on the top, just so. Then I loaded up three carts and pushed them out of the way. The lady began to write a check and she couldn’t find her Safeway card. She kept talking to Jane, and Jane kept making eyes at the lady’s kids. Ms. Williams stood behind waiting and shivered.

“Howie,” I said, waiting for something to happen. “He’s my friend.”

“Yes,” said Ms. Williams, smiling.

I wondered if she’d seen me in Shop, if that’s why she had me confused. I said, “I’m in your class. Sports for Life. I really like it.”

The lady was gone now, her kids pulling her carts like mules, and I was bagging Ms. Williams’s groceries. “Double Strength or Regular?” I asked, trying not to notice her tampons. They were the same kind still under the sink in my parents’ bathroom.

“What?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “We only use Double Strength. Even our Regular Strength is really Double.”

I set the two bags in a cart and began to wheel toward the door. We went through the double automatic doors into the bright sun. Outside it was warming up for summer, people in sandals and shorts, and we passed by the lady with her carts and all her kids.

“Howie,” Ms. Williams said, “he’s the boy whose mother . . .”

She let it trail off, the way most people do when they say something like that.

“Oh my God,” she said. “That’s you, too?” She brought her hand up to her mouth, as if it belonged there; it was the first time I ever really looked at a woman’s hand. Her hand was pretty and her arm was covered with bracelets from Mexico. She didn’t have any freckles.

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“Sometimes,” she said, “I don’t know. Sometimes I just don’t know where I am.”

I was about to say something, to make her feel better, when a car full of kids came slowly driving by. It was so slow I could watch everything going on, like on the TV, when things are going slow which means really the people doing things are going fast, which is the way real things go. Fast.

“Hey!” said the driver to Ms. Williams, a kid from Welding. “Nice tits!”

And then I said something I shouldn’t have. I mean if the kid from Welding had kept driving, maybe it would have blown over, but he stopped. A blue station wagon with hubcaps. Probably his mother’s.

“What you say, Miller?”

I took the cart and slammed it into his mother’s car. It bounced off and I picked it up, over my head, this time slamming it on the roof. The cart bounced off, groceries everywhere, and I picked it up again and I kept throwing the cart, screaming, and the kid from Welding was trying to do something and Ms. Williams was trying to hold me, and for a while, just for a little while, I couldn’t feel anything and everything was absolutely going to go my way.

I’m told I did other things. The dark part, I now know, is that place where you go when everything’s too bright: it’s the dangerous part that’s yours and all your own, and you could tell when my mother had gone away to visit—her eyes, the way she scraped her nails on the wallpaper and stopped singing with the radio. She’d stop cooking and sleep for days in the same nightgown. At night the Captain would prowl around the house looking for a place to read. He said this had been going on for years.

Actually, I got the announcement in Shop. I was on the lathe, turning the beginnings of a lamp I was going to give
my father, when I heard my name, Walker Miller, which was actually the name of my father, only I was the second. Everyone in Shop started clapping, because I wasn’t crazy yet, and I left for the principal’s office, thinking about the way that sounded—my name, coming over the loudspeaker.

Mrs. Knudson, the secretary, brushed a woodchip from my hair. She looked sad, as if she’d just realized she couldn’t get new carpet, and then she led me into the principal’s office. The office was full of green and blue furniture, and the principal, Mr. Buckner, seemed surprised to see me. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mr. Buckner wore aloha shirts to show he was normal.

“I’m Walker,” I said. “Walker Miller.”

He told me to sit down and asked Mrs. Knudson to leave the door ajar. He looked through a file. It had my name written in blue ink across the top; the ink was from a ballpoint pen and had smeared, and I knew that inside the file was a picture of me from junior high when I was still wearing braces. Then there was the time I snuck inside the girls’ locker room. Mr. Buckner closed the file, checked his watch and said, “Walker, there’s been an accident.”

“What kind of accident?”

“It says here you’re Catholic. Is that correct?”

“I guess.”

“Would you like me to call a priest?”

“What kind of accident?”

And then he told me. My father’s doctor had called from the hospital, where my father was now admitted to rest. Mr. Buckner left out the details—he didn’t know them—but they were still there. The razors and blood, the Jacuzzi in my parents’ bedroom. And my mother, under the skylight, a half-finished bottle of champagne and a piece of her stationery with nothing on it. The paper had fallen into the water and turned pink except for the embossed part with her initials.

Mr. Buckner came around his desk and took me by the
shoulder. I could see his shirt, all full of flowers tied up together, and then he said, “Honestly. Is there someone I can call?”

The story behind Ms. Williams was this: when she was in college, she posed almost completely nude for a magazine, something about Volleyball Girls and Southern California, and eventually I found out. Naturally, I promised myself in general to keep it secret. I kept the picture folded up safe in my wallet, and Iva said it made her really sad, the look on Ms. Williams’s face, standing on a beach in California like that.

“Yeah,” I said. “But she’s really pretty, don’t you think?”

“She’s sad,” Iva said. “That’s why she’s so pretty.”

By now we were practicing every day at Iva’s house. Her piano, a brown upright, stood in a corner of her bedroom, and we sat on the bench while we practiced. Her room was full of flowers and drapes and a picture of her boyfriend who climbed up mountains; he is standing in the middle of a canyon wearing sunglasses and jeans. Probably, he’s twenty.

Iva caught me looking at her boyfriend, who didn’t look sad at all.

“You know—” Iva said, turning to face me. She pulled her legs up and crossed them on the bench, smoothing her skirt and leaning. “You know, I’m not sure singing is really what’s best. I mean, there’s lots of other things you can do in college. You don’t have to sing.”

“I can’t take Shop.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. “But it’s not like you really have to sing, either.” She smiled and pulled at her toes. She sat there pulling on her brown toes and shook her head. She took my hands, studying my fingers. She looked at my fingers and said, “You could play piano, Walker. If you wanted.”

“No,” I said. “I tried once.”

“You know why you try something? You try it because
you think you can do it better than anybody else. You try it
because you think you can sing or play piano or climb
mountains better than anybody living. And you know the
sad part? The sad part is you can’t. You try real hard, but you
just can’t.”

She gave me back my hands and kissed me, quickly,
before we’d have time to think about it.

“And then what?” she said.

I mean Iva Polanski was mature, and beautiful; she dated a
guy who climbed up mountains and lived on his own. And
I know now that most things in life, especially the nice
things, like Iva Polanski, are a gift. Like talent, and what you
are supposed to do with it, even if you don’t have much.

While my father was in the hospital, resting, I stayed at
Howie’s. Mrs. Bently was nice and asked me what I liked to
eat. His dad who took a lot of medication let me park my
father’s truck in his backyard, though he only let me and
Howie drive it to practice for our driver’s license test: we
practiced parallel parking between garbage cans. At night
we slept in the same room with bunk beds, Howie on the
bottom, me on the top, and when Father Lawson came to
visit, I asked him to go away. Father Lawson had told me
about the Church Softball Team for Teens, and when I asked
him to go away, I asked politely. I didn’t want to hurt his
feelings.

Sometimes I’d still think about my mom. That night, the
night of the great cactus tragedy, Howie and I sat in the back
of the truck looking over the sky. The beer was turning
warm, the radio played, we were growing more and more
philosophical. All around us was desert and air, lit up like a
football game, just for us.

“Really,” Howie said. “What’s the old lady like?”

He meant Karen Kalko, who had reversible initials, and
was my girlfriend. “She’s Catholic,” I said.

“I knew it,” he said, laughing. “I just knew it.”
Later, while I was still thinking about what that meant, Catholic, I told Howie that sometimes I liked to pretend that I was the only one I knew who was still alive. I thought about the people singing on the radio, and the way sometimes songs seemed as if they were just for you and what you were thinking about, and then I decided maybe I’d someday be able to do that—to make millions of dollars, to wear earphones in an insulated recording studio, making records. I’d start out with opera, in Flagstaff, get some experience. According to Mr. Newborn, tenors were gold. Maybe I’d even change my name to Vic, though actually, I was just trying to keep from feeling I was doomed.

Howie said, “You know what, Walker?”

“What?”

“I really think we ought to join the Navy.”

Sometimes I felt that way a lot. If I had been an adult, I probably would have fallen in love with Ms. Williams. My father had been in the Navy—Captain, a sub tender in the Atlantic—but Howie wanted to be a SEAL. Lots of demolitions and girl spies in swimsuits, and the auditions for the Flagstaff Summer Opera were held at St. Peter’s High in downtown Phoenix. Normally I worked Sundays, and I woke up unemployed feeling dizzy—my first hangover. At first I didn’t know what to wear.

I picked up Iva at her aunt’s. She was wearing a purple skirt and black tank top and she had only one earring on. From her doorstep, you could see the dent in the truck from the night before, the cactus we’d made tragic, and you could see some of the places where the primer showed through.

“You look nice, Walker,” Iva said, pointing at my Safeway tie. I opened the door for her, to show I was mature, and we drove to St. Peter’s, which was surrounded by chain-link fence; the parking lot was full of station wagons and signs that said, No Smoking, Loitering, or Misbehavior. After we found the right building, we sat in a hallway and said mean
things about Mr. Newborn. The hallway smelled like old sneakers and vinegar, and when the door finally opened for my turn, a lady stepped out with a clipboard. From behind her rushed a girl, crying, her makeup smeared all over her face.

“Miller?” said the lady. “Walker Miller?”

Iva and I stood and walked into a room for gymnastics. A piano had been rolled in by the parallel bars, and there was white dust everywhere. A man with reading glasses sat in a wooden chair resting a tape recorder on his lap. I was the only one in the room wearing a tie. The woman smiled and asked who my companion was.

“Iva,” I said.

The man smiled and said, “Hello, Iva.”

“Hello,” Iva said. She sat at the piano bench, tucking herself in.

“And what are you two going to perform for us today?” asked the man with the tape recorder.

“Oklahoma!” I said. “By Rodgers and Hammerstein.”

The man nodded, taking notes, and said, almost smiling, “You may begin anytime, Mr. Walker.”

“Miller,” I said, wanting everything right. “Walker Miller.”

“Yes, Mr. Miller. Anytime.”

At first I was afraid I’d offended him, and then I thought, this guy doesn’t know who the hell I am. Iva started playing, giving me the cue just like we’d planned. She started playing and I went into the song, trying hard to use my diaphragm, concentrating, remembering to use my hands and smile. It was a big gymnasium, even for gymnastics, and I was just going into the third page when I heard the sound of the tape recorder being shut off. I looked up and saw the man, then the woman, and stood still.

“Thank you, Wally,” said the woman, loudly.

“Thank you, Iva,” said the man. “That was very nice.”

“We’re all done,” I said, looking at Iva. She gathered her
music and looked back at me, really nicely, and I knew I should be feeling nervous, or embarrassed, or sad. But instead I felt only this feeling that something long and not very important was finally over with—like Christmas, if you’ve ever had to spend it by yourself. You just want to get it over with.

That night, that night I was starting to feel doomed all over again, after all, I dropped Howie off at his house. All the lights were out; like normal people, his parents had been asleep for hours. He stood there in the street, the door open and leaning on the edge, making it sway, and said, “It’s not just a job. It’s an adventure!”

“Night, Howie.”

“Maybe she thought it’d be better,” Howie said. “You know, somewhere else. Maybe she thought it’d be better somewhere else. Like Indiana.”

I’d never been to Indiana, either. Just Europe and the Mediterranean. Before he retired, my father had been stationed in lots of interesting places. I drove home thinking about Indiana, and other interesting places, and saw my father’s car in the carport. He was inside his car with the light on, the radio blasting trumpet music. He was reading a letter.

“Hi,” I said, coming around from behind the truck.

“Hi,” he said. He turned down the radio, folded up the letter. Beside him on the car seat was a pile of letters and a loose, red hockey lace. In college my father had played hockey. He kept his skates in the bottom drawer of the desk in his den with my mother’s letters. I’d read all of them long before she ever killed herself.

“Been drinking?”

“Just a couple. Over at Howie’s. We drove into a cactus.”

He shrugged and said, “I’ve been reading.” He lit a cigarette and looked at the letters. “It’s amazing, things she used
to say. Your mother. You know she wanted to be like Joni Mitchell? She loved that kind of stuff. Just like you.”

“I have a big day tomorrow. My opera audition.”

“Father Jim asked about you. He says whenever you’re ready, to give him a call. He says Dr. Ryan understands this kind of thing better than us. Dr. Ryan deals with it every day. It’s his job and doesn’t mean you’re crazy.”

“Okay.”

“How’s Karen?”

“Fine.”

“That’s good. She’s a nice girl. A looker, you know? Karen. She’s the marrying kind, that girl. She’s the kind of girl you bring home to meet the Admiral.”

“Okay.”

And then my father started laughing. He hit his hands on top of the steering wheel and started laughing really hard. It was loud and filled the carport. He kept laughing and then he stopped and wiped his eyes. He reached through the car window and punched me softly in the arm.

Later, after I was put into the psycho ward, Dr. Ryan asked me lots of questions. He asked me, for example, “So why do you think your mother killed herself?”

At first I used to think maybe it was because of me. Then I thought it wasn’t because of me, which made more sense, but was really a whole lot worse, and then one night I realized my father thought the same things—the strange parts in a song, the ones you keep coming back to over and over again because you’ve been taught to know them so well. I realized things weren’t going to be all right, after all, and that probably, even if I had made the opera, I’d still have to explain things to people I’d never known. It made me feel better, kind of, knowing I was going to go talk to people who’d never even heard my name. It meant I could tell them anything. It meant I could change my name and start all over
again and nobody, nobody would have to know I’d freaked out in the grocery store and decided to try and join the opera. Maybe I could still really be a rock star. I could really grow my hair long and learn to play guitar.

But after the audition, Iva and I went to her house. My head was feeling empty and I was trying hard not to think too much. We sat outside under the porch drinking lemonade with honey. Iva said it was good for a hangover; even drinking lemonade, she was mature and beautiful. “It replenishes the fluids,” she said, and we sat beneath the porch, watching the sky, and always before, always before I’d thought when the time came, I’d know it. It would be something clearly understood and instinctual. For example, every time I looked at Karen Kalko, I knew she saw my mother, and every time I saw my mother, I saw someone who looked like a woman, but still it wasn’t Karen. Instead I saw something dark and probably unexpected, and now here was Iva, breathing, truly alive, complicated as Biology.

When I followed Iva into the kitchen, she turned to me. She set down the pitcher of lemonade and put her hands on my waist. Behind her was a note tacked up on the fridge, a reminder to feed the pets, and she took my hand and placed it on her breast. And I remember thinking. I remember thinking this had never happened to me before.

“What?” she said, reaching for my tie.

I could feel a pulse, and I wasn’t sure if it was hers or mine. But I wanted her to tell me. I mean I wanted her to be convincing.

Catholic, I think. I wanted her to say, I’m Catholic. I wanted her to say, This is my body, which I give to you.