

An Excerpt from The Astounding Misadventures of Rory Collins

By Brian Kiley

Chapter One

I always believed my mother loved me although I had little evidence to support my theory. When she died, I had just finished a sociology mid-term and found my roommate Todd waiting for me with a strange look on his face. I went right to the station and hopped the first train home.

I grew up in a small town in the part of Pennsylvania where people mind their own business. My first memories of her were when I was little and I would run around the house or honk the horn of my toy car and she would yell, “Quiet!” The whole time I knew her she would demand silence from my father and me. She had a habit of sitting and staring straight ahead. Two or three times a week, she would sit in the faded red chair in the living room, focus on a spot on the wall and become lost in thought. This might last anywhere from just a few minutes to most of the afternoon.

During these periods, my father and I learned to tiptoe and whisper and we made sure not to cross her field of vision. When the phone rang in these instances, she would scream, “They ruined it”, head to her bedroom and slam the door while my father or I dealt with whoever was on the phone.

When it came time for kindergarten, my mother just kept me home. It wasn’t exactly “home schooling” since no such trend existed at that time and she didn’t teach me anything. In fact, we barely interacted at all unless she was knitting a large garment and needed me to model it for her.

The following year, my mother would have had me stay home again but my father gently mentioned during one of our many silent

meals that it was time to sign the boy up for school. She did so reluctantly and drove me the three short blocks every morning.

After a few weeks, he told her that this was unnecessary and that the boy could use some exercise. They often called me “the boy” instead of “Rory” and spoke in front of me as though I were a puppy or an inanimate object incapable of comprehending human conversation.

I began walking to school on my own. However, my mother, for the rest of my grammar school career, would follow slowly behind in the car. If one of my classmates approached me or an older student made a move to pass me along the sidewalk, she would beep the horn long and loud until they scurried away.

Somehow, I still managed to make a few friends, but I was never allowed to accept invitations to what kids nowadays call, “playdates.” Thanks to my father’s gentle but persistent prodding, eventually some boys, one at a time of course were allowed to come to my house after school. My two closest friends Doug and Stevie even learned to tiptoe outside with me if one of my Mom’s thinking sessions broke out.

My mother hated when I had a friend over. She often ignored us almost pretending we weren’t there. At other times, she would become irritable and shoo us outside regardless of the weather. She behaved this way again and again in front of each of my friends until the day Derek came over. We were nine and Derek and his family had moved here from the south, Mississippi or Alabama, I can never remember which. When Derek came in the door, my mother instantly stopped what she was doing and introduced herself. This was unprecedented. She poured us milk and gave us cookies, handing Derek his like a priest handing out communion.

It rained that day so Derek and I stayed in and sat on the floor in my room playing a board game I had called “The Secret Agent.” My mother brought in a chair from her bedroom, placed it alongside Derek and gently stroked his hair while we played. He didn’t seem to mind or notice really. Girls were always fawning all over him.

For the next several weeks, when I asked if I could have Doug or Stevie or perhaps someone new over my mother would say, “Why would you want to play them when you could play with Derek?” Sometimes when the school day ended, I would find my mother outside waiting for us and she would invite Derek over. She had taken up baking for the first time and made tollhouse cookies for Derek until she discovered he preferred brownies.

Once outside the school, Derek’s Mom was there to pick him up and bring him to a dentist appointment. She and my Mom got into a loud argument when my Mom suggested that they reschedule Derek’s appointment for another day. “Derek doesn’t need to go to the dentist” my mother insisted, “He has beautiful teeth.”

At the end of the school year, Derek’s family moved back to Mississippi or Alabama. When I told my mother this during dinner that night she abruptly stopped eating. She put the fork down with half a meatball still impaled on it, went to her bedroom and closed the door. For two days, even through the night, loud, full-throated sobs came from behind that closed door and my father had to sleep on a cot in the sewing room.

When she finally emerged from her room we were forbidden to ever mention Derek’s name again and things went on as before. My life continued and to the outside world, things seemed normal enough in my house and because I didn’t know any better they seemed normal enough for me. The one large void in my life at that time, other than love and affection which I didn’t know I was missing, was birthday parties. I had never once been to one.

As you can imagine birthday parties are a frequent topic of conversation in the primary grades. I heard talk of bowling and swimming pools and piñatas. Sometimes a boy in my class would have a party and ask me why I wasn’t there. When I asked my mother about an invitation in the mail, she would shrug and say she didn’t know what I was talking about. Once or twice, the phone rang and I was sure it was Doug or Stevie’s Mom calling to see if I was coming. My mother would take the call in the other room and then afterwards say it was an old relative of hers calling to share some

family business and the birthday party would come and go without me.

When I was thirteen, a party invitation arrived on a Saturday and my father was there to discover it. It was a girl/boy party and my mother said, "Absolutely not." When I pleaded my father settled the dispute in my favor saying, "It would be good for the boy." The evening of the party, my mother drove me silently to the house. We parked out front and as she was giving me rendez-vous instructions, a girl from my class, Lisa Metcalf walked in front of our car. Lisa's hair was done up, she had a touch of make-up around her eyes and her small breasts were pushed up to their full height. My mother muttered, "She thinks she's so pretty" and I involuntarily blurted out, "She is." My mother slapped me hard across the face and I started crying not because I was injured but out of shame.

We went right home and when we walked in the door my father looked up from his book with a surprised expression. My mother said, "He decided he didn't want to go" and that was the end of that.

I don't know why these memories were in my head as the train pulled into Addison. I wondered how she died. She had just turned forty eight a few days earlier and as far as I knew she hadn't been sick. I must have been in shock because I hadn't cried a single tear. My father was there waiting for me and since he didn't drive, we walked together to the wake.

Chapter Two

When my father met me at the train station he seemed small to me. After three and a half semesters at college, I had become used to large people. My roommate Todd, who I slept in the same room with, was a starting lineman on our school's football team. One of my other roommates claimed repeatedly to have been a star basketball player in high school. Even my pedantic roommate Kevin was a flabby two hundred-pounder.

Now, looking at my father it occurred to me for the first time that I could take this guy in a fight. His back seemed slightly stooped, his movements slow and cautious and with his limited vision, the fight would probably be stopped in the second or third round.

When I asked what had happened, he quietly mumbled, "her heart stopped" before turning and shuffling the three blocks to the funeral home. I had no follow-up questions and together we walked silently often single file on sidewalks narrowed by mounds of graying snow.

My Dad was eighteen years older than my Mom. Even as a young child I was well aware that my father was older than my friends' fathers. In the first grade, we had to draw a picture of our Dad for Father's Day. Rachel Tompkins asked me, "Why is your Dad's hair gray?" I didn't know. All I knew was that I wished it were brown like her Dad's.

Whenever my father tried to carry in too much firewood my mother would say, "Go help your father before he has a heart attack. Don't be so selfish." Once my mother introduced this threat of a heart attack it became a rational fear that took up space in my mind next to my irrational ones. Rational fears are worse because those are the ones you never outgrow.

Whenever, my father overexerted himself, shoveling too much snow or climbing more than two flights of stairs his breath would become labored and my stomach would knot up and I'd think, "This is it." Even after he caught his breath, it would be hours or even days before I could relax again.

Since my Dad was so much older I had always assumed he would go first and I'm guessing he did too. The threat of his death being constant it never occurred to me that she might die. Now, suddenly, we both thrust into a situation we never envisioned and neither of us knew what to say or do.

It would be another five years before I would learn that my mother had taken her own life and longer than that before I learned it was my fault. Technically, her heart had stopped. Yours would too if you'd taken a shotgun and blown off the side of your head.

This was one of the many parts of the story he had left out. I was unused to my father lying. He had always been straight forward even with bad news in his quiet, gentle way. This was only the second time I can recall him lying to me my whole life and I can't say I blame him on either occasion.

When we reached the funeral home parking lot and we were able to walk two abreast once more, my father described how the wake had been. "It was a wonderful tribute, a wonderful tribute" he insisted. His former business partner had showed up with his wife. Three of my old teachers and Miss Gillen, my former guidance counselor had put in an appearance. Even Doug, my former grade school chum had come, in an altered state no doubt, to acknowledge a bond that was frayed but never entirely severed.

With perhaps one or two more attendees, the grand total must have reached eight or even nine. Not bad for a woman without friends and whose feuds with extended family were complete and unrelenting.

The funeral director, Mr. Haus was smaller than my father and nearly as old. "I could take him, too" (in the first round!) I thought as we shook hands and he offered me perfunctory condolences. "The funeral will be at Our Lady of Perpetual Help" Mr. Haus informed us and he had taken the liberty of asking the ladies of the St. Patrick Society to sing the hymns.

I eyed my father obliquely. Although our last name was Collins we were not Irish but Polish. My father's grandfather's name Collesnewicz had been Anglicized or in this case, Celticized at Ellis Island and people have assumed we were Irish ever since.

Eventually, I learned it was easier to wear green every St. Patrick's Day than to have to explain over and over the clerical procedures concerning Central European immigrants.

"The ladies of the St. Patrick Society..." my father said softly, "That would be lovely." I'll never know if the debacle that occurred the next morning was the fault of Mr. Haus or of the Collins, nee Collesnewicz.

I rose early the next morning after having fitful dreams about my newly dead mother. The suit I wore when I testified during her trial my junior year of high school still hung in the closet. I had grown an inch or two since then and when I put it on it didn't quite fit right.

In the kitchen, my father and I merely nodded at one another continuing a lifelong pattern of mostly non-verbal communication. We took our time having tea and toast. There were long periods of silence where we both thought some things should be said but never of us knew what those "things" were. When he got his coat, I got mine and we walked mostly single file to the church we never attended.

As we started up the church steps, the double doors swung open and eight or nine ladies of mature age, all clad in green, exited the church. The last one, with fading red hair and a back-up chin just in case, stopped suddenly upon seeing my father. While we were still several steps away she blurted out, "Where the hell were you?"

Chapter Three

Missing your mother's funeral is not like missing a flight or a TV show where you can catch the next one or wait and see the rerun. It's not like missing the Super Bowl or the Oscars where a year later you can see something quite similar. Your mother's funeral is a once in a lifetime event that provides the family with a sense of comfort and closure. Without it, there's a permanent sense of discomfort and whatever the opposite of closure is.

At the Irish woman's blunt, "Where the hell have you been?" my father and I stood immobilized a dozen or so steps from the church doors. Seconds or possibly minutes later, my father mumbled, "The service is at ten." This was met with a laugh and a "I've got news for you, Buster" as the Irish woman came straight at us. "The mass was at nine and you just missed it." She stopped at the step above my father. Her face resting comfortably on her chins seemed accusatory rather than sympathetic.

There was a brief stand-off. Then my father murmured, "Thank you" and he circled around her and headed up the steps. Her disdainful look then fell to me. She was acting as if we were her children and we had deliberately missed her funeral. Duly chastened, I put my head down and slipped past her.

I followed behind my father as he moved purposely through the empty church, knocking before entering the sacristy. Father Barrett was just removing his surplis.

Our family didn't go to church so I didn't know Father Barrett very well but I had seen him around town and ironically, once or twice, I watched him preside over a funeral. He wasn't one of those touchy-feely priests from the late sixties. He was one of those manly World War II priests, gruff and barrel-chested with a ruddy, capillary-strewn face. He couldn't have looked less like Jesus.

As we entered, Barrett turned sharply and looked at my father and then at me. "Oh, there you are" he said, "We tried to wait for you. We even started ten minutes late." "We thought it started at ten" my

father stammered. Like the Irish woman moments earlier, Barrett shook his massive head. “Our funeral masses are always at nine.”

“Could you do it again?” I said, jumping in trying to share in my father’s shame. “There are no do-overs” Barrett said gently but without compassion. Aside from being the pastor at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Barrett was also the principal of the parochial school. The term “do-over” was one he had probably heard many times on the playground but it sounded funny coming from him.

“I’m due to distribute communion at the nursing home and then I’m meeting the bishop for lunch. Thursdays are our busiest day.” “What about tomorrow?” I said, desperate to salvage something from the wreckage, “Could you do it again tomorrow?” “Tomorrow, I’m saying mass for the parochial school. First Friday, you know.” We didn’t know. We didn’t know a fucking thing.

Neither my father nor I had any more suggestions. Barrett softened a little, “I can give you my notes from the sermon if you like and show you the readings and the gospel.” “That would be lovely” my father said, “Could we sit in a pew and look them over and say some prayers.” Barrett hesitated. “Only for about ten minutes. I have to go and it’s not safe to leave the church unlocked. This town has vandals, you know.” Later, I wondered if this was a dig at my mother.

My Dad thanked Barrett and the two of us sat in the front pew, each with a prayer book reading the scripture to ourselves. We read how it was dust in which we began and dust into which we’d be returning. Barrett’s “notes” were not much of anything, a handful of partial sentences of the generic loving mother/devoted wife variety. He clearly missed entirely what this woman was really about.

Neither of us said much on the long walk home. The shock of her death was compounded by the guilt of missing her funeral. I wasn’t a psychology major, I was a history major but like any college student I was familiar with something called “a Freudian slip.” Two weeks earlier, Professor Jelinak had explained that forgetting something can be a version of a Freudian slip. He used the example of the man with the toothache who keeps forgetting to call and make

an appointment with the dentist. He forgets because his subconscious is afraid of the dentist and doesn't want to go.

Did I forget on purpose? Did Haus say the funeral was at nine and I blocked it out? During the last few years, my mother and my relationship had degenerated from love/hate to hate/hate. Did I do this? Did I cause my father to miss his wife's funeral?

When we got home, my father sat in the living room in my mother's faded red chair. It must have made him feel closer to her by sitting in her chair. I sat nearby on the couch. We sat in silence he with his grief and me with my guilt. I could feel his angst with each of his long staccato sighs, one of which was interrupted by Mary Ann calling to offer condolences and tell me she's pregnant.

