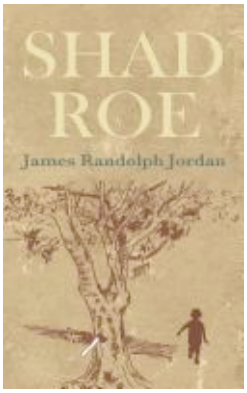
SHAD ROE

James Randolph Jordan



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Acknowledgements

I remember when I started writing the first short story that would eventually become the basis for this book. It was an August evening. I had set up a computer on a card table in our bedroom. Our five children were all quite young at the time so the bedroom was the safest place for anything that we did not want to get broken. After a few nights of typing that had gone well past midnight, I became concerned that the noise of my fingers banging on the keyboard was keeping my wife from getting to sleep.

"It's fine," Barb assured me. "I like hearing you type." If she meant it or was just being polite, I wasn't sure. Nevertheless, her words gave me the encouragement I needed to keep writing—that night and in the years that followed. Barb, I cannot thank you enough.

There are many others who also helped me throughout this project—a project that sometimes became all-consuming. My children, Anna, Josh, Mary, Martha, and Sarah—all now grown, each provided me with more support than they will likely ever realize. I would be remiss if I did not also recognize those friends who encouraged me in my work, notably Nancy Cimprich in New Jersey and Mary Kathryn McIvor in Virginia. I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues at Neumann University in Aston, Pennsylvania, who contributed so much, among them: Dr. Janelle Ketrick-Gillespie, director of

Neumann University's Writing Program (who firmly believed that this was a story worth telling—a story that everyone could relate to, but no one was willing to talk about); Katie Callahan, for the hours spent proofreading and for her valuable feedback; and Bob Duffy, who—in addition to his hours of proofing—helped me discover the value of a metaphor as a title.

Without a doubt, though, the person who continued to give me the critical push I needed—sometimes hour by hour—to complete this book was Brian Wraight. Brian, a graduate of Northeastern University and the University of Denver's Publishing Institute, is a truly gifted editor. What he may lack in age is more than made up for in literary instinct and skill. The world is a better place because of his presence.

To all of you, my most sincere and heartfelt thanks.

James Randolph Jordan
West Chester, Pennsylvania
August 10, 2014

To Barb

Part One

I was in South Dakota. I had been there before. Long, winding, dirt and gravel roads rolling gently over treeless hills. My occasional trips were like those of others who made their living crisscrossing the country. But they were also different. Instead of bustling, traffic-bogged, big cities, my destinations were mostly small towns in the middle of nowhere—often little more than crossroads in a rural part of the world known for its extreme weather or for the part it played in a war a century ago.

Rather than working for a company, I worked for myself and working for myself always meant being cheap whenever I traveled. The cheapest flight, no matter what time it arrived. The cheapest hotel, no matter how saggy the beds were, and the cheapest rental car, even if everything about it wasn't working.

This time it was the air conditioner—it had stopped working somewhere around Pine Ridge, so I rolled down all of the car windows. It was noisy, windy, and hot.

When my phone rang, I slowed down—not wanting to take the chance of losing the call. In the midst of such outlands, cell phone signals were sketchy at best. Phone calls could come to an abrupt end.

"Hey," the voice said.

"Hey," I answered. It was my brother, Carter, and it was the way we always greeted one another—both on the phone and in person.

"They took Daddy to th' hospital this mornin'," he said. "He had another heart attack. They are sayin' he's only got about a thirty percent chance a' makin' it through th' night." I pulled over to the side of the road, stopped the car and held the phone closer to my ear. "They say if he does make it," my brother continued, "his chances'll improve. We'll jus' hafta wait 'n see."

"Awright," I answered. "Let me know if there's any change."

"I will."

"You awright?" I asked.

"Yeah . . . tired," he responded.

"Thanks for bein' there," I said.

"No problem." And with that, our phone call ended just as suddenly as it had begun.

I turned the car off and got out. I was surprised how quiet everything had suddenly become. There

wasn't another car, building, or human being in sight—only a great expanse of barren hills and open fields. The vast stretches of wildflowers which had painted the landscape just a month earlier had now turned brown from the long summer sun. I took a deep breath and sighed, but before getting back into the car, I turned to take another look at the brown vastness that stretched to the horizon. I wished I could have seen the flowers.

Carter was my oldest brother. And even though our middle brother, Jack, and I had decided long ago that our lives would be better if we lived far away from Virginia—away from our parents and the pain of those relationships—Carter chose to live within half an hour's drive of our mother and father. With that decision, he became the responsible one—the one who would interact with our parents on birthdays, holidays, and special occasions, the one who would run the required errands and the one to tend to their needs as they aged.

When Mumma and Daddy were married in May, 1951, it wasn't exactly the wedding my grandmother had imagined for her daughter. Like all good Catholic mothers, Louise had prayed that her daughter—my mumma—would marry a man who would provide well, in fortune and in faith. Jackson, my father, did neither. The fact that Daddy had had his way with my mother prior to their wedding night—and that he had come to Highland Park by way of Church Hill—didn't sit well with my grandmother or any of Mumma's family. Most of my mother's brothers carried with

them a hatred for my father to their dying day. And so there was a bit of discomfort at the union of Agnes and Jackson—from both sides of the family—he, white trash from Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood, and she, a pregnant mackerel-snapper. Nevertheless, it was better for my parents to have each other and their illusions than for her to be pregnant and unmarried, regardless of her faith or class. And seven months after their wedding, my oldest brother Carter was born.

When my brother Jack was born in 1953, my parents left Richmond and moved to Mechanicsville. The town was about a forty minute drive northeast of Richmond and, in those days, it was the picture of rural life—a gathering of small houses, a feed store, drug store, five and dime, gas station and a bar. Yet while it was just a short drive from the city, it seemed a world away from concrete sidewalks, traffic, and relatives.

My parents had moved to get away from their families. Daddy never wanted to be like his father—and Mumma would go wherever and whenever Daddy spoke. Whatever other reason the two of them had for getting out of Richmond, I'm not really sure—and in reality, I don't think it mattered much anyway. Whether we lived in rural Mechanicsville or in one of the old neighborhoods on Richmond's north side, the cards had been dealt a long time ago.

After about year in Mechanicsville, I came along. A little more than a year after that, my mother was pregnant with her fourth child. Each pregnancy and

birth had been increasingly difficult for her. A distant relative had recently died during labor so the thought of dying during childbirth was not a far-fetched notion. When Jack was born, Mumma lost nearly half of her blood within a matter of a few minutes. In later years—whenever she spoke about those early years of our lives, she would remind whoever was around that Jack's delivery had almost killed her.

"I almost bled to death," Mumma would always say whenever she spoke about my middle brother. There seemed to be a thinly veiled indictment against my brother, as if she blamed him for all of the subsequent difficulties in her life. As she prepared for the birth of a fourth child, Mumma told Daddy that this was it. This was going to be the last pregnancy for her and after the baby had been delivered she would have her tubes tied. Daddy, a man of principle when he chose to be, vehemently opposed any kind of sterilization, finding such procedures not only unnatural, but also against the teachings of his somewhat-new-found Catholic faith. Nevertheless, Daddy agreed and—while my mother's womb was exposed during the Caesarean delivery, the doctor made sure my mother would never get pregnant again. As fate would have it, though, baby Rusty died within forty-eight hours and so for the remainder of his years—no matter how hard someone might have tried to convince him otherwise—Daddy firmly believed that a vengeful God took my younger brother. It was punishment for Daddy consenting to my mother's tubal ligation.

"God took that baby," my father would say matter-of-factly. It usually took about a half-bottle of Virginia Gentleman before he would bring it up. "It was ya mumma's goddamn fault. She shouldn'a signed those goddamn papers. I shouldn'a signed 'em either. Goddamn her!"

"No other reason for the baby to 've died—jus' no other reason," he would continue. "Don' make no sense. God did that. Shouldn'a signed those papers." Tears would be streaming down the old man's cheeks by the time those words would have come out. He would run his long sleeve across his nose. I learned early on not to say anything in response. It was better to just sit quiet.

"And then ya Big Mama," my father would continue, "she wanted to make sure I took the baby to Frank Bliley's new funeral home over on Grace Street—not Tom Bliley's. She kept saying that he was Catholic so I needed to support him. That he needed the business." Big Mama was my maternal grandmother.

"Damnedest thing for her to be thinkin' about somebody gettin' business while my baby was dead and ya mumma was still in th' hospital." In a lot of ways, for the rest of his life, whatever had caused my brother's death remained secondary to Daddy. After all, crib death—as it was called back then—wasn't that unusual. Instead, what haunted him most was not only the fact that he and my mother had done something to cause a vengeful God to rob them of

their child, but that the world, the family, and the life he had hoped for were gone.

My parents' marriage lasted for almost twenty years, at least on paper. The nearly two decades they were together and raising three boys were anything but happy or blissful. Both of our parents—"Mumma" and "Daddy" as most children we knew addressed their parents—were themselves children of alcoholic fathers . . . men who had abused their wives as well as the boys or girls they produced.

There are few words to describe my father's childhood other than miserably poor. Even though his family lived in the city, as late as 1948, they still only had cold running water. They also used an outhouse instead of an indoor toilet. My daddy's father, Big Papa, worked as a handy man and house painter and usually drank away what little take-home pay he earned. Childhood diseases ravaged poor and wealthy families alike in those days. My daddy and his siblings, though, got more than their share. In 1931, when my father was three, he and his older sister, Connie, who was five, both contracted polio. Neither of them came through it unscathed. As Daddy got older, his right leg became shorter than his left—causing him to develop a limp which got worse throughout his life. Connie spent her life with her legs supported by metal braces. My aunt Lois, Daddy's younger sister, caught a childhood infection which left her blind in one eye and my father's youngest sister, Ruth, came down with scarlet fever which left her

completely deaf. In the early 1940s, Tommy, Daddy's youngest brother, died from measles.

"Tommy died in the bedroom upstairs in our house on Twenty-Third Street," my father once explained when he had drunk more than he needed. "My daddy—ya Big Papa—wasn't home when it happened so ya Nanny told me to go find him . . . ta tell him that Tommy was dead. I walked around half 'a Church Hill lookin' fa that man. When I finally found him, he was with some woman. He was all dressed up, lookin' like he was on a date." Daddy stopped speaking, lost in his thoughts.

"When I found him, he was standing with this woman in front of a house. When he saw me comin' towards him, he said, 'Hey boy, whadya doin' here?'

"I told him, 'Mumma sent me. Tommy's dead.'

"He just looked at me and asked me if there was anything else. I shook my head. 'Awright,' he said. Jus' like that. Then he told me to go on back home."

The scars my father bore weren't limited to his mind or his shortened leg. In the center of Daddy's left cheek was a deep mark—about an inch long—that created the illusion of a hole in his face. On more than one occasion, Mumma explained how Daddy got his scars.

"Big Papa was a mean, spiteful man," my mother would begin with each telling of the story. "That man beat ya Nanny and ya father whenever and wherever he felt like it. He would'a beat me if I had stayed around their house long enough. Why ya Nanny ever stayed with him is beyond me."

Nanny was the affectionate name we had given to my daddy's mumma. She was a large woman, big-boned, handsome, almost as tall as our father, but kindness and gentleness were what I recall most about her. She had a gentle spirit that loved most of God's creatures and tolerated Catholics.

"One night—when ya daddy and I were still dating—ya grandfather came home drunk. Ya daddy was only about eighteen." At this point, my mother wandered for a moment, lost in the mist of reminiscence.

"Anyway," she continued, "ya grandfather started beatin' on ya Nanny—smacking her, hitting her, pulling her hair, calling her all kinds 'a names. Ya daddy got between Nanny and ya grandfather . . . holding Big Papa's arms down so he couldn't hit Nanny. Well, eventually, Big Papa got the upper hand and started beating Jackson." Retelling the story, my mother seemed to forget that it was my father she was speaking about—often referring to him by name. "Ya grandfather had this big ring he wore on his right hand and that ring punched a hole in ya daddy's cheek. I saw ya daddy the next day and he had about half a dozen stitches in his cheek from where he'd been hit."

"About a week or two later," Mumma continued, "Big Papa came home again—drunk—mean as a snake. He started beating on ya Nanny again. This time when ya daddy tried to stop him again, Big Papa punched Jackson over and over again in the face, aiming for the spot where he had been cut the first time. After a few punches, the old cut opened again,

worse than before. There was blood everywhere. Ya daddy went to the hospital, but his face was really torn up. That scar never really healed right."

When my parents met at George Bruce's horse farm near Cold Harbor, my father had already converted to Catholicism. A few years before, Daddy had fallen in love with another Richmond girl who was Catholic—which was a highly unimaginable thing since there was only about one Catholic for every five thousand Baptists. He had converted to Catholicism in the back room of a rectory so as to be able to marry the girl. For some reason, though, the relationship didn't last. Nevertheless, long after Mumma and Daddy were married, my father kept tucked in his wallet a tattered, yellowing photograph of a young woman standing beside a black Ford—a pretty girl with long, wavy, black hair, wearing a tight sweater and a flowing skirt.

A few years before he died, during one of my visits with my father at his house in Richmond, we had spent a couple of hours talking. It was more rambling than talking. Politics, the weather, whatever. As usual, though, our conversation always returned to the past.

"I went to the cemetery on my way over," I said. "I saw Connie's grave, then I started looking for Nanny's grave and ya daddy's . . . took a while, but I finally found them. She died when I was in college, but I don't really remember him much."

"I got a picture of him," Daddy said from the stuffed chair across the room. He reached for his

wallet, moving like the old man he had become. "That's him when I was a kid—around '36 or '37 . . . I think. It's written on the back somewhere." He handed me the small photo. "What's it say?"

"Yeah, Easter 1937."

"That was taken in Chimborazo Park. I remember that picture being taken. You can have that."

"Thanks, Daddy."

I noticed he had thumbed through a number of photos before offering me the one of his father. Curiosity was getting the best of me.

"What's that other picture you got?"

He sat for a moment, glancing at me, then back to the image in his hand, then back to me. Finally, after a few seconds, he stretched out his hand laying the old snap gently in mine.

"Pretty," I said. "Who is she?"

"Somebody I knew a long time ago," my father answered. "Before ya mumma."

I didn't ask him if he loved her, or if he had been intimate with her. That wasn't any of my business, nor would it have been proper for a son to ask such things of a parent. I knew my father had been with a lot of women throughout the years—before, during, and after his marriage to my mother. Along with the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and the Tooth Fairy, I had given up any illusions of my father's purity and fidelity a long time ago.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Wha' ya mean?"

"What happened to her?"

"It jus' didn't work out." As I continued staring at the picture, my father sat in silence. "I wanted to marry her," he continued after a moment. "That's when I became Catholic . . . in the rectory at St. Patrick's on Church Hill. But then it didn't happen. She broke my heart." My father had told me more than I ever could have imagined he would. Without a word, I handed the photo back to him. I didn't press any further.

By the late 1950s, Daddy had become that which he had sworn he never would be—a violent, raging alcoholic with an uncontrollable temper who often directed his vicious anger towards those he loved most. In too many ways, he had become his father. Accompanying the violence were the trysts that developed as a result of his insatiable appetite for illicit sex and a job that gave him the open road for an office. After only a few years of marriage, the combination was taking its toll on our family—and by 1965, our parents' marriage was quickly deteriorating.

Around the same time, one of my father's indiscretions—a teenage girl from the backwoods of Virginia—became pregnant. Without divorcing my mumma, Daddy set up a second household and started a second family in a small rural farming community just west of Fredericksburg. Just as his father had managed two wives and two sets of children in two distinct households back in the 1930s, Daddy decided to try doing the same. The trouble was, our father had a hard enough time managing one family, so two

wouldn't last very long. My parents' marriage came to an end.

It was a horrible time for all of us. Daddy had chosen his "other family" over ours. Some weekends we saw him. Others, we didn't. My brothers and I believed that the time would come when things would eventually get better—that our father would return to us and life would once again offer us some type of normalcy. But in midsummer of 1967, Daddy collected all of his belongings and moved out.

Divorce is never an easy, quick or simple thing. In my adult years, whenever I have spoken about my childhood with a therapist or some other mental health professional, they inevitably use the term "broken home." But "broken" always seemed like a term better saved for describing pieces of china scattered on a kitchen floor. Divorce, especially when children are involved, is a lot messier than that.

The thing most children hold dearest to them is their family. It is the child's source of who they are—their identity. When I was eight years old, if you asked me who I was, I would have told you my name, the names of my brothers, who my parents were and where my house was. For a child, those individual relationships form a single entity. That single thing is the source of security, the source of love and grace—the grace that gives a child the knowledge that there is a unique, blood-bond between these people.

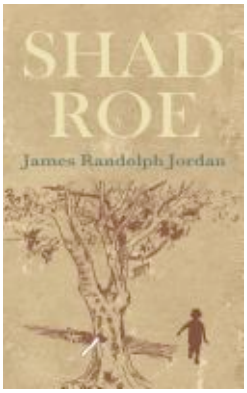
Now, imagine that the family is gone, I would explain. Unlike something that is broken, it cannot be mended or put back together again. As a child, you

have no idea what is going to happen to you. Your world—the world as you know it—is suddenly gone. Forever. Once divorce occurs, a person can no longer say, "I am going to stay with my family." They can only say I am going to stay with my brother or sister or mother or father. The family is gone.

As we grew older, my brothers and I each found our own way of grieving the passing of our family. Carter, who would always be seen as the most successful of the three of us, chose to immerse himself in his job, working fourteen and fifteen hour days, year after year. Those things most substantial in his life were nearly all associated with his career or the assortment of professional organizations and clubs to which he belonged. Jack, like our oldest brother, also found himself "immersed" in things throughout his life. His addictions, though, were much less acceptable in the public's eye. Jack dropped out of high school and joined the Navy when he was seventeen. During his late teens, he began to use cocaine. As he grew older, he also became an alcoholic. Sex became an addiction as well. And after three failed marriages, he struggled just to function.

For my part, I also have my share of addictions and issues. Instead of work, cocaine, drugs or alcohol, my drug of choice has been food. I eat to soothe whatever is gnawing at me. Like my oldest brother, I belong to my share of social clubs—usually with names like Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous and Jenny Craig. At some hours of the day, anything that is not nailed down is fair game for consumption.

Like any addiction, it has also wreaked havoc on my health and my relationships. It threatens to consume me every day. Unlike my brothers, though, for me God became as big a part of my life as food. After high school, I first attended a seminary, then a number of colleges and universities searching desperately for some way to make sense of all that we had endured. Eventually, I was appointed pastor of a church—believing that my interaction with the faithful would also serve as a source of enlightenment in my darkness. Throughout my life, though—even as I preached on Sundays—I often wondered where God was in those years so long ago. I wondered where his love and protection were every time my father flew into a rage. I wondered where God's peace was when my father terrified his children. I wondered where justice was when my father beat a helpless son or daughter. And when it came time for my father to die, I wondered where God would be on that day of reckoning. Would anyone know everything he had done? Would it be like it is written in the Bible—where everything secret is shouted from the rooftops? *Jesus, I hoped not.*



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