

*Scott Sandler*

## What Bob Knows

Irene puts the index cards into three piles: what Bob knows absolutely, what Bob knows kind of, and what Bob doesn't know. The middle pile, what Bob knows kind of, is the biggest one. He generally knows his stuff, and Irene tells him so. "You're almost there," she says, touching his shoulders reassuringly.

Bob picks at his chocolate-sprinkled maple donut, then stops. He centers it on a sheet of waxpaper and stares at it as if it were an art exhibit. He hums the chorus of "Love Me Do," and then drifts off to a polaroid of Irene and his father which is stuck beneath a refrigerator magnet. In the picture they are leaning against a porch railing. The ocean is blurry behind them. Bob's father's got a look on his face like he's just been kissed all over.

His father's smile is so big that it almost seems as if he knew that this would wind up on the fridge and Bob would wind up looking at it. Irene slams her hand down on the table and says, "C'mon, let's go. You think this is fun for me." Bob slides his chair away from the table.

Bob doesn't tell Irene, but he is grateful for the middle pile. If it weren't for the middle pile, more than two-thirds of the cards would go back into 'Bob doesn't know.' Irene wouldn't need a middle pile, Bob thinks, and feels stupid.

"Who said, 'Give me liberty or give me death?'" Irene says, rolling her R's in Liberty, making it sound like a foreign word.

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Roll your R’s like that. You’re not Spanish.”

“You don’t have to be. It’s just something you’re born with. Either you can do it or you can’t.”

Bob goes off into tangents when he doesn’t have an answer and Irene knows that. She repeats the question and says, “CONCENTRATE!”

“Oh, I know this, I know this. It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“First initial P.”

“Oh, I know this.” He slams his fist on the table for dramatic effect and waits for her to give him the second initial. Irene tells him and then he curses and slams some more.

“Of course, Patrick Henry, of course, fuck!” he says. “It was on the tip of my tongue, fuck!”

And just like that he would make it to the middle pile. Just by saying ‘it was on the tip of my tongue.’ Just by saying ‘fuck.’

“You would have come up with it eventually,” Irene says.

Bob’s mom once told this joke in which a cat dies, but in order to cushion the death part, you say it’s on the roof, and this is what Bob thinks about, this joke, when his mom calls and says that Harlan was looking at the cat, and the cat he says might be very sick. Felt around the neck and the nodes, he said, feel very swollen. It might be lympho-...lympho-...” She puts her hand over the receiver and yells to him, “What is it, lympho- what,” as if she were doing a crossword puzzle. “That’s it,” she says, back on the phone again, “lymphocarcoma. You know what that is, Bob, it’s a kind of cancer and your cat could have it. It’s more common than you think.”

“Tell your boyfriends not to touch the cat.”

“He’s a doctor.”

“Tell him not to touch my cat. He’s not a vet.”

“Okay, listen, don’t get uptight. I’m real exhausted, tired, beat. I’ll see you soon.”

When Bob hangs up, he’s not thinking of the cat. He’s thinking—exhausted, tired, beat—Why can’t she just settle on one?

While he bubbles in his last name on the test, Bob pictures Irene's word, CONCENTRATE, in big-block letters across a movie screen. He pictures a huge middle pile growing bigger and bigger, bigger than him. What Bob knows kind of, he thinks, and soon that is all he thinks about.

He remembers the initials P.H., but can't remember what they stand for. He thinks of pickled herring, pubic hair, pot holders, and Pert hair shampoo. And as he's busy thinking, ten minutes pass and Rebecca Math shakes out her fingers because they have cramped up on her.

Fifteen minutes into the test, Bob is panicking, because no one's there to give him clues. He thinks, "Fuck." He thinks, "It's on the tip of my tongue," but it doesn't help. He fills in the whole thing ABAB and turns his sheet over.

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*How are you like him?*

In the way that you stand in the back row at dance try-outs and don't look in the mirror. In the way that you feel light-headed looking at the women in their navy blue, white, plum-colored leotards, stretching, warming up. In the way your heart races when the instructor cues up "The Dark Town Strutter's Ball." In the way you walk out before your number is called and afterwards throw your taps into the dumpster and curse. In the way you don't know what to say when asked, "How'd it go?" In the way you need to rest. In the way you can't fall asleep. In the way you sit through kung-fu movies, one o'clock in the morning, with the volume turned all the way down. In the way you don't know what to say when asked, "What are you doing up?" In the way you don't know what to say when one night, he rolls over in bed and says, "I'm leaving." In the way you'd like to believe him when he says, "It's not you." In the way you think you've put it all behind you.

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Bob heads on over to the store where Irene works—"Monkey See, Monkey Do." It's a pink stucco building and it's full of stuffed toy monkeys: chimps, orangutans, gorillas, and everything. It's got Planet of the Apes coloring books and a row of chocolate-covered Barrel of Monkeys sets. All of the employees wear

"Monkey See, Monkey Do" t-shirts. But it's got more than just monkeys. It's got butter knives with silver elephant tips, greeting cards with fish that say, "I decided to send you this just for the halibut," posters of dogs and cats, stuffed frogs who lean their chins over red hearts that say "Kiss the Prince," pencils with dolphin erasers (if you have a tough math problem, you rub off the whole back fin), and tins filled with cinnamon animal crackers.

Bob went there once with his mother, before they officially knew Irene. His mother showed him a poster of a cat digging its claws into a tree, holding on for dear life. In yellow block letters, written across the bark, it said, "Hang In There Baby." Bob thought it was cute, but his mom said that it was rather sad. That's exactly how she said it, too. "That's rather sad," as if it were something she saw on the news, a piece about Africa, which she really wasn't too concerned about. But that's just the way she talks. In the car, she brought it up again. "Can't you just picture the photographer snapping away at that cat. When he doesn't get the shot just right, he sends his kid up the tree to throw it back down. He says, "Do it again! Do it again! Do it again!"

Today Bob follows a red-headed kid with Bermuda shorts into the store. The kid walks up to the man who sits behind a counter and asks him if he's got an album with whale songs on it. The man, who is smoking, says no. Bob thinks he shouldn't be smoking in front of young kids. The kid asks if there's any way to order it and the man takes down the kid's name and number, saying he'll call him when it comes in, but Bob knows he won't because right as the kid leaves, the man lights up another cigarette and turns up the radio behind the counter.

"Where's Irene?"

"She's on a lunch break."

"Y'know when she'll be back?"

"Sure don't," the man says, flicking the ashes of his cigarette in a plastic ashtray.

Bob holds up one of the stuffed frogs and says, "You shouldn't have lied to that kid. If you guys don't carry whale albums, then you shouldn't say you're going to order 'em. You don't even know what a whale song sounds like."

"I do too. Sound like a bunch of tubas, so don't bother me."

Bob's mom sits in a corner booth, the dimmest part of the restaurant. The shades are busted so that the light comes in, slanted, like an arm across the table, dividing it in half. Lately, she has been thinking a lot about how things are separated from one another. How the walls of the Mexican restaurant separate the inside from the outside. How the darkness is bottled up on the inside, save for the light from the busted shade, and how bright it must be on the outside. She sips her margarita, asks the waiter for another bowl of tortilla chips and waits uncomfortably, waits for the door to slowly open, for Irene to walk in. Bob's mom feels the need to get information from Irene now that Bob spends so much of his time with her. She wonders what there is to this funny-looking red head whose picture came through the mail one day, on a Christmas card. She was wearing baggy pants and a kelly green sweater. Her hand was draped around Bob's father's broad shoulders. Bob's mom had seen Irene at the funeral, her back arched against the refrigerator door. She was drinking a beer and was talking to Bob very matter-of-fact about his father, between sips. Bob had no need to ask his mother anything—he already knew that part. Bob's mom feels the sour margarita going to her head. She finds it hard to believe that this woman, who came out of nowhere, has such an effect on Bob. But Bob's mom knows she didn't come out of nowhere and that this is what draws Bob to her. The door opens. The shape flutters in the light beneath the door-jamb and hesitates for a moment, as if it were about to cross a border. Bob's mom smiles, waves her hands mechanically at Irene who smiles back and heads towards the table. When Irene sits across from her, Bob's mom no longer feels compelled to find out about Irene, but rather she wants to explain herself. She wants to talk about herself and Bob. Her knees bounce up and down under the table and she feels physically awkward, as if all her grace was thrown out in the dumpster, along with her tap shoes. Without looking up, she says to Irene, "Y'know in a lot of ways I'm just like him."

Irene picks up a menu and says, "How are you like him?"

The man behind the counter was the first one he told the lie to, just because he didn't want the man to know anything about him. But he kept it up in school, too. Not that he was ashamed of anything. It's just that they appreciate it more if his dad died in some plane crash over the Grand Canyon.

"It just went down, smack into the Colorado River. You mean you didn't hear about this? It was on the news all day long. The pilot they think, was an alcoholic, but they can't prove it. I'm surprised you never heard it. It made headlines."

The only one that didn't believe him was Rebecca Math. She said, "S'm'possible. I would have heard about it," which really surprised Bob, because who would question him about his own father's death?

The man behind the counter said, "Oh, wait, yeah, yeah, I think I do remember that," and then moved on to another customer.

Bob thinks that his lies are no more fantastic than his father's. His father had told him once that he could build a car engine out of nothing but recycled tin cans. He told him that he could, if he wanted to, lift five hundred pounds over his body weight. He was very good at convincing Bob that everything he said was true. He told Bob that he would teach him how to surf over the summer, and he didn't even know how to surf.

Bob goes over to the poster bin, shuffles past a few sunsets and dalmatians in firehats, until he reaches the "Hang In There Baby" poster. The cat is a siamese and her eyes are a clear sky-blue. Funny thing is she doesn't look panicky like before. She just looks worn out. Like she's been waiting for Bob to, one day, shuffle his way back to her and figure out a way to get her down.

Bob feels hands on his shoulders. He turns around and it's Irene, back from her lunch break.

"How long you been here?" she asks.

"Just got here."

And just by the way she smiles, the way she lets her hand rest on his shoulders, Bob knows she would have found a way to have gotten the cat down. She just has that ability. It's like rolling your R's. Either you can do it or you can't. She can. She can be trusted.

She is the only one Bob hasn't lied to.

"It's cold," Bob says as Harlan finds another place on his chest to stick that stethoscope.

"Stop talking. Breathe in deep... now out... now in."

"C'mon."

"Don't be an ingrate," Bob's mom says, turning off the t.v. "You know, most doctors would charge you fifty, sixty for this. You're getting this for nothing."

He holds the stethoscope against his chest for too long, as if he were trying to gain information. Bob pictures a safecracker with his ear to a vault listening for clicks. He pictures Rebecca Math, when she holds the side of her face to the ground. She says that if you listen hard enough you can hear if an earthquake or a train is coming. Bob wonders if he held this stethoscope up to his mother's chest for this long, and how much did he learn about her that Bob, himself, didn't already know. Bob thinks if he held the thing on her all night, she wouldn't complain. Harlan turns his eyes to the ceiling as if he can't hear a heartbeat or as if he is drawing blanks.

Bob says, "Enough already. I don't even feel sick."

"You never know, Bob," Harlan says. "These things can creep up on you."

Irene sits in a patio chair on the back porch, drinks a beer, watches him. Bob's father lies on his stomach, tracing his fingers along the edges of the wooden boards. The boards are warped and the edges curl up. His hand slides up the curve of the boards. He looks back and says, "The sun's warped 'em. Look at this..." He traces his fingers between the boards and along the slats, showing her how some spaces are wider than others.

"Does that look right to you? It doesn't to me. We should get someone down here to fix it."

"What good'll that do? It'll just warp up again, won't it?"

"I'm talking temporary," he says, getting up and walking over to the cooler to grab himself a beer. He brushes sand off a patio chair and pulls it up next to Irene.

He rubs his hands along the neck of the bottle and the neck of

Irene at the same time. "Can you believe this is all ours?"

"It's pretty great." She concentrates on the bottle, peeling the label off the sides and stuffing it through the top. Neither talks for a while. It's quiet.

"You think Bob'll like it here? He's always liked beaches and water and stuff. He'll like the arcade."

"You think he'll like me?" Irene asks.

"Yeah, I do. I think he'll like you a lot."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, he's my son. He's like me."

Bob's cat lifts her head slowly from the arm of the couch and looks directly at him. Her eyes are not sad or worn out like they are on the poster, or like Bob thought they would be. They look directly at Bob, twinkling gold, as they turn toward the kitchen light. She looks almost proud, as if she doesn't realize she's dying. She scratches her sides furiously, shedding grey fur, and then looks up, as if to say, "What are you looking at?" Bob has always believed that cats always land on their feet. Now he wonders if maybe that's just what they want you to believe. You look into their eyes, so calm, as if nothing happened—just something you, for a second, thought you saw.

Harlan sits in between Bob and his mother at the dinner table, with his stethoscope still wrapped around his neck. He scoops the mashed potatoes on to his plate. Then Bob's mom scoops some on hers. He puts on some poppy-seed dressing on his salad; she puts some on hers. And it's this follow-the-leader number that Bob is sick of. She waits for him to take his first bite, before she'll take hers. It's the same thing as when she's driving her car around. She won't put her headlights on until someone else puts theirs on. They make the decision for her. They let her know when it's dark enough to use them. Sometimes it gets to the point where she can no longer see the double lines. When Bob complains, she says, "Do you see anyone else with their lights on?"

Bob turns sideways in his seat and looks at his mother's eyes.



He notices how as they pass underneath street lights, the blue color seems to wash out into a sharp silver. Bob thinks about how vulnerable they look. They don't dare wander from the road. His mother's lips are parted as if she were going to speak. Does she want to talk to him? Bob wonders how Harlan's seriousness is now her seriousness. Bob doesn't have to ask where they are going—he knows where they are going. He knows which off-ramp his mother will choose.

She takes Bob by the hand. She knows exactly where it is. Bob's feet seem to sink slightly as he steps on to the grass. Bob doesn't understand his mother completely. She won't eat her potatoes unless someone else eats theirs, but she will wander through cemeteries at night by herself. She stops walking and then pulls a Bic out of her purse.

"Here we are," she says. She walks right up to the stone, almost on top of it. She holds the light up to each letter. Bob can see the first name—DENNIS. Dennis. Bob thinks about the name. It is more important now than ever.

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*What do you want to know about him?*

You want to know about his condo, third floor, two blocks away from the beach, carpets always damp, towels and shoes full of sand, laid out in front of the washing machine, always a damp, wet feel, always a damp, wet smell. About how he tans on his backporch where everyone can see him. About how the smell of his coconut tanning oil was his permanent smell. About how he likes the smell. About how I like the smell. About how the waistband of his skivvies cuts a deep red dividing line between his crotch and his belly. About how he was an innie and your mother is an outie. About how he finds significance in that. About what he does when he's not working for Anheiser-Busch, labelling bottles. About how important it was for him to play on the company's basketball team. About how he missed the free-throw that would have tied the game and sent it into overtime. About how I tried to tell him it's just a game and how he slammed the ball on the floor, clipping off the ends of my sentences. About how that night he had a heart attack on the pier and about how I did not know what to do. About how

I was the last one to see him alive. About how old he was when he died, so young—forty-two. About how much older his heart was.

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Bob's dad has no sisters or brothers, and his mother and father are dead—so only three wooden chairs are set up on the grass in front of the casket. The third seat is for Harlan, who sits next to them in support. Bob looks up as a man he has never met extends his hand and says, "He was a good man." Bob nods. What else is there to do? A line forms behind them of people waiting to pay their respects. Bob looks over at his cousin Pete, who he met only one time, at a brunch. Pete sits away from the group underneath a lemon tree, scooping up dirt. He touches a pillbug with a stick and watches it curve into a little ball.

Bob blurs all of the handshakes with the funeral party into one big handshake. Out pops another hand in front of him. "You must be Bob." A head of red hair bends down and kisses his cheek.

A lady in a rainbow-colored blouse says she's dying for a Coke. Bob finds that there is no room to move in this damp, sticky place. The reverend sits awkwardly in a corner, eating a turkey club sandwich. Bob weaves his way through the reception, heading towards the kitchen.

She is there, leaning against the refrigerator, drinking a beer. She looks up at the ceiling, then down at her shoes. She clears her throat. "How are you doing?"

"Fine."

"Your father said you were coming up for the weekend. He said you like beaches."

"Yeah, I do. You must be Irene."

There is a silence. She gulps some of her beer and stares back up at the ceiling. Bob stands in front of her, waiting for her to look down again. Bob looks expectant. She looks at him through strands of red hair.

"What do you want to know about him?"