

## *THE FINAL EXHIBIT*

### **Dave's Wake**

Wrestling with depression and intrigue, Tommy Butler sat in chilling silence, staring at Dave Rucker's remains. Mesmerized by the highly professional cosmetic job done on Dave's head, he tried to make sense of this unbelievable tragedy. Just a few days ago, Dave placed a gun in his mouth and blew his gray matter through the back of his skull, all over the walls of his archaically decorated living room.

Dave's Uncle Joey was called in to identify the remains. In spite of the violent path Dave took in meeting his maker, Joey said Dave's face vaguely seemed to hold a rather content, almost sneering expression. His current appearance—that of a strait-laced, well-groomed citizen—represented the finest of modern undertaking. Tommy found himself contemplating the extreme measures humans take in preparing their deceased for the final rites of passage, burial, and deterioration.

Tommy Butler's current fate had him playing the role of a respectful mourner in O'Grady's Funeral Home, a family operation and a prime example of a successful and persevering capitalistic institution. Funeral parlors are among the most unique establishments in American society, in a league with brothels, psychiatrists' offices, and public latrines. Each, in its own sensitive way, reeks of privacy, yet provides us with an avenue to reveal things we wouldn't dare expose in a more public setting.

At that moment, in that particular funeral parlor, the exposure came in the form of emotional release, mostly directed at the guest of honor, Dave Rucker.

To say this agonizing ritual had diverse attendees would be a massive understatement. Amongst that well-rounded sampling of humanity, one person distinctly stood out. He was a neatly dressed, well-groomed young man in his mid-teens. He sat a few seats to Tommy's right, staring at Dave's body with fierce intensity. His expression represented simultaneous confusion and determination. Tommy wondered who this kid was and why he sat there all alone. He considered stirring up a conversation but passed because he didn't appear to be in a sociable mood. Plus, Tommy was feeling tense and uneasy sitting just a few yards away from an embalmed corpse.

At that point, Tommy's mind wandered, reflecting on his relationship with Dave Rucker—the now *late* Dave Rucker. They grew up together in suburban Long Island, in the shadow of the world's most complex city, New York. Considering their plethora of similar experiences, including their pre-adulthood “programming” in the form of twelve years of Catholic schooling, they probably should have been more alike. But they were actually vastly different, as evidenced by the different paths they led after high school.

Tommy joined the Air Force and spent most of his service time as a mechanic in Europe, while Dave joined the Marines and wound up in Vietnam as an infantryman, ultimately earning a medal for valor. Upon getting discharged, Tommy moved out west, got married, and lived a fairly stable life as the owner of a small antique shop. Dave's post-war ventures were too long and erratic to mention in one sitting. What a character. They ought to make a movie about this guy. It was really incredible how things change.

As seventeen-year-old high school graduates, they were inseparable partners with big plans. They talked about taking on the world together, but reality took over, and they went their separate ways. Since then, their relationship consisted mainly of an occasional letter or phone call.

Seventeen years had passed since high school, as if their lives were intentionally structured into seventeen-year phases. Phase Two (Dave's last) was over. Tommy really admired Dave. What had driven him to do such a terrible thing?

### **Drinks With Old Friends**

As that profound thought crossed Tommy's mind, likely mirrored in the minds of many of his co-mourners, a hauntingly familiar face appeared directly in front of his. It was Vernon Rucker, Dave's irritating younger brother. Tommy never did like the guy. He was everything Dave wasn't: conservative, consistent, overbearingly dependable, and annoyingly predictable. Tommy really wasn't in the mood to talk with him, but like many of life's unplanned occurrences, he had to display an appropriate façade.

Tommy greeted Vernon, and they nervously exchanged small talk for a few minutes. Contemplating spending an extended period of time with this guy, Tommy's uneasy feeling grew worse.

Within minutes, however, Tommy was pleasantly surprised by the sight of another old acquaintance, Karl Brooks. He was a classmate of theirs during their school days. Tommy hadn't seen him for at least ten years, but he clearly remembered him as a fun-loving, free spirit. He was tall and lanky with a look of awkward sophistication. Some new additions to his image—gray around the temples, a beard, and round, wire-framed glasses—added to the effect. Karl, Vernon, and Tommy sat on O'Grady's uncomfortable folding chairs and quietly chatted about Dave's disastrous destiny. After a while, they decided to sneak out to a local pub to reminisce.

They selected a quaint Italian restaurant located two doors down from the funeral parlor. The typical New York establishment held all the necessities (booze, tables, chairs, bathroom, pool table). Having selected a table in the rear corner of the bar, they agreed to share a bottle of Chianti. Their initial conversation was geared toward their current situations. Vernon was doing well as a sales manager with an appliance company, and Karl was teaching philosophy at a local junior college. They both seemed content, but Vernon's face showed signs of excessive stress.

Karl mentioned that Dave's suicide really stunned him. On that dreadful night, they had attended a Knicks game together. Karl quipped that the Knicks won, so they probably weren't the cause of Dave's suicide. That angered Vernon, but after a short argument, they mellowed out.

Tommy took advantage of that peaceful moment to mention that he was quite shocked himself. Vernon expressed that although he loved Dave dearly, he learned to expect the unexpected from his brother. Dave never seemed to discover what he really wanted to do or become. Karl intervened by stating that very few people ever really did, and besides, because of that unpredictable nature, Dave earned a legendary reputation back in high school.

### **The Legend of Dave Rucker**

Tommy started with a classic tale occurring in their junior year. He remembered it as if it happened yesterday. They were in Health class, listening to a painfully boring lecture by Mr. Jackson, their football coach. That man was a bulldog: hard-nosed, ugly, and mean, with bad breath.

In the middle of the lecture, Dave raised his hand and mockingly asked Mr. Jackson, "Do you have any idea what the hell you're talking about, sir?"

It was incredible! They all assumed Dave's earthly existence would be terminated, but Mr. Jackson was cool. Without even acknowledging the remark, he calmly finished his lecture.

The bell rang, and class adjourned. They cruised up the hallway, laughing in a sort of mock celebration. Dave was king of the hill—at least until football practice that afternoon.

That had to be one of Dave’s worst experiences ever. Mr. Jackson ran him through a torturous series of exercises—push-ups, sit-ups, the works—while the rest of the team practiced plays. As always at the end of practice, Mr. Jackson gave them a pep talk. During the talk, he told a now exhausted and pathetic-looking Dave to run one more lap, which he did obediently. After completing that final, painful lap, he staggered toward the team as Mr. Jackson wrapped up his speech. Dave stood right next to Mr. Jackson, bent over, and vomited. Fragments spattered on the coach’s hospital white sneakers. Silence overcame the area.

On that distinctive note, Mr. Jackson concluded practice.

That seemed to put an end to the subject. In Saturday’s game, Dave went berserk. He tied a school record by scoring four touchdowns, and they won big in what was expected to be a tough contest. Everyone assumed this would unquestionably clear things up between Dave and Mr. Jackson. As a matter of fact, in the locker room after the game, the coach appeared to be on the verge of using that scenario as a motivating lesson. But before he could get to the heart of the lesson, Dave stood up, told the coach to “fuck off,” and quit the team. He got suspended from school for a week and was barred from the school’s sports program for the remainder of the year.

Dave later told Tommy it was one of the most satisfying things he’d ever done.

To cope with that situation, Dave resorted to excessive partying. During that timeframe, he achieved what the boys viewed as one of the most monumental feats in the history of mankind.

Tony Lovella was unquestionably the most feared student in St. Joseph’s High School, by students and teachers alike. The senior played defensive end on the football team. Simply put, Tony was a thug—big, rowdy and an experienced street fighter. One night at a school dance, Dave asked Lovella’s girlfriend to slow dance while Lovella was in the bathroom. When Lovella came back and saw them dancing together, he flipped out. He challenged Dave to step outside, and Dave accepted, sporting an arrogant smile. They stormed out behind the school.

Dave’s facial expression reeked of ease and confidence. Lovella was much bigger and stronger and appeared to be unbeatable. Tommy remembered thinking that if he was Dave, he probably would have apologized and tried to convince Lovella he was merely keeping his girlfriend warm until he got back from the bathroom.

As young men normally did during this sort of ritual, the two of them squared off and sized each other up. Suddenly and without warning, Dave kicked Lovella firmly in the groin. Lovella's face turned purple, and he bent over in intense pain. Dave quickly followed with another kick, this one square in Lovella's face, breaking his nose. Dave then dove on him like an animal, punching furiously. Four young men had to pull him off of Lovella. The victorious underdog's reputation as a legend was galvanized.

As he reminisced, Tommy had Karl and Vernon's undivided attention. They all knew these were just a few of an unending list of incidents which enhanced the allure of Dave Rucker.

Vernon then took over the conversation, describing some of Dave's exploits since high school. He spoke of Vietnam and Dave's fascination with that whole scene, especially dealing with the fear. Dave seemed capable of accomplishing anything he put his mind to. He completed a master's degree by combining credits from four schools and started a potentially prominent career in the business world, ultimately quitting because of boredom. Vernon also expressed disappointment in his inability to stabilize Dave.

### **Dragon Birds**

Karl, who lately knew Dave better than anyone, redirected the conversation with some inquisitive observations about Dave's tendencies. Dave appeared to revel in simply getting to a particular point in life because he loved to observe. The achievement was to arrive, not to excel.

"I guess that's why a lot of folks considered Dave to be a quitter, but you had to understand the guy. He viewed life as a museum, and he wanted to see all the exhibits. In fact," Karl said, "I wouldn't be surprised if Dave shot himself simply to experience death, to see what's on the other side—the final exhibit."

He continued by mentioning a highly unusual story Dave read a few years ago entitled *Flight of the Dragon Birds*. Written by an elderly Japanese author, it described the lifestyles of the fictional dragon birds. They were incredibly colorful and majestic, flying in a carefree manner without direction. Their existence was merely a constant quest for pleasure. Once dragon birds were satisfied with their earthly experiences, they would willingly dive into poisonous thornbushes, causing instant death and entrance into a euphoric afterlife. In fact, it was actually honorable for dragon birds to die in that fashion. On the other hand, dragon birds that didn't die by their own choice were viewed as failures.

Karl went on to explain the story had a serious impact on Dave. The story was the first thing that came to his mind when he heard Dave killed himself.

### **The Boy at the Funeral Home**

With that bizarre thought, their conversation reverted back to the funeral parlor and present reality. Tommy recaptured the vision of the young boy he saw earlier. He described the kid to Karl and Vernon and asked if they knew him. Looking perplexed, Karl informed Tommy that he was Dave's son. Tommy was shocked, as he thought he knew all about Dave.

"Yeah, Dave knocked up Buddy McLeod's wife, Linda, while Buddy was over in Nam," Karl explained. "Dave was consoling her in her loneliness. Being a recent Vietnam vet, Dave could supposedly 'relate' to Linda's situation. The whole thing turned out to be a hassle for everyone involved. As you can imagine, Buddy was pissed off when he got back, so he beat the shit out of Linda. He also confronted Dave, who beat the shit out of Buddy. Needless to say, the marital situation wasn't looking very bright for the McLeods. After the divorce, Linda kept the kid, and Dave sent her money when he could. The kid turned out to be pretty strange."

Tommy inquired, "What do you mean?"

"He's different, almost eccentric. He's real intrigued by power and money, which is kind of strange for a kid his age. As a matter of fact, he's upset because he doesn't get any cash from Dave's life insurance policy due to the suicide. I'm really worried about him."

On that somber note, they took their last sips of Chianti and headed back to O'Grady's. When they got there, the situation was the same as when they left—morbid. The kid hadn't budged; he still sat and stared. Tommy went up to the casket, knelt, and stared at Dave. He tried to give the appearance he was praying, but he was actually thinking about the conversation at the bar.

This was truly an incredible man: intelligent, complex, idealistic and, ultimately, out of touch with reality. Heading back, Tommy reclaimed his original seat near the kid. He would chat with him later if an opportunity should present itself.

Tommy must have been sitting there for about ten minutes when the kid casually walked over to the corpse, leaned over, and spat in Dave's embalmed face. He then pointed at him and shouted, "You worthless bastard!"

A quick scuffle followed. A few of Dave's uncles grabbed the kid and took him outside to calm down. The spectacle shocked those in attendance. Mr. O'Grady immediately responded by cleaning up Dave's remains.

Tommy decided it was time to head back to his hotel room.

### **The Funeral**

The funeral, a tense and quiet affair, took place the following morning. Tommy had a flight out early that afternoon, so he couldn't attend the traditional post-funeral social gathering, which didn't bother him a bit.

During the ride to the airport, he reflected on the experiences of the last few days. Dave Rucker was dead and gone. What did the guy accomplish and what did he leave behind? Were Karl's thoughts accurate? Did Dave kill himself to observe another exhibit? What about that strange Japanese story? Would a grown man emulate a fictional bird?

Whatever the justification for his decision to die, Tommy felt no real sadness for Dave Rucker, only disappointment. Like the honorable dragon birds, he chose to die.

### **The End**