For One More Day

Mitch Albom

Published by Little, Brown

Extract

SPHERE

First published in the United States of America in 2006 by Hyperion
First published in Great Britain in 2006 by Sphere

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-0-316-73093-8
ISBN-10: 0-316-73093-9

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

A Member of the Hachette Livre Group of Companies

www.littlebrown.co.uk

"Let me guess. You want to know why I tried to kill myself."

—Chick Benetto's first words to me

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A FAMILY and, as there is a ghost involved, you might call it a ghost story. But every family is a ghost story. The dead sit at our tables long after they have gone.

THIS PARTICULAR STORY belongs to Charles "Chick" Benetto. He was not the ghost. He was very real. I found him on a Saturday morning, in the bleachers of a Little League field, wearing a navy windbreaker and chewing peppermint gum. Maybe you remember him from his baseball days. I have spent part of my career as a sportswriter, so the name was familiar to me on several levels.

Looking back, it was fate that I found him. I had come to Pepperville Beach to close on a small house that had been in our family for years. On my way back to the airport, I stopped for coffee. There was a field across the street where kids in purple t-shirts were pitching and hitting. I had time. I wandered over.

As I stood at the backstop, my fingers curled in the chain-link fence, an old man maneuvered a lawn mower over the grass. He was tanned and wrinkled, with half a cigar in his mouth. He shut the mower when he saw me and asked if

I had a kid out there. I said no. He asked what I was doing here. I told him about the house. He asked what I did for a living and I made the mistake of telling him that, too.

"A writer, huh?" he said, chewing his cigar. He pointed to a figure sitting alone in the seats with his back to us. "You oughta check out that guy. Now *there's* a story."

I hear this all the time.

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"He played pro ball once."

"Mm-hmm."

"I think he made a World Series."

"Mmm."

"And he tried to kill himself."

"What?"

"Yeah." The man sniffed. "From what I heard, he's damn lucky to be alive. Chick Benetto, his name is. His mother used to live around here. Posey Benetto." He chuckled. "She was wild."

He dropped his cigar and stomped on it. "Go on up and ask him if you don't believe me."

He returned to his mower. I let go of the fence. It was rusty, and some of the rust came off on my fingers.

Every family is a ghost story.

I approached the bleachers.

WHAT I HAVE written here is what Charles "Chick" Benetto told me in our conversation that morning—which stretched

out much longer than that—as well as personal notes and pages from his journal that I found later, on my own. I have assembled them into the following narrative, in his voice, because I'm not sure you would believe this story if you *didn't* hear it in his voice.

You may not believe it anyhow.

But ask yourself this: Have you ever lost someone you love and wanted one more conversation, one more chance to make up for the time when you thought they would be here forever? If so, then you know you can go your whole life collecting days, and none will outweigh the one you wish you had back.

What if you got it back?

May 2006

I. Midnight

Chick's Story

LET ME GUESS. You want to know why I tried to kill myself.

You want to know how I survived. Why I disappeared. Where I've been all this time. But first, why I tried to kill myself, right?

It's OK. People do. They measure themselves against me. It's like this line is drawn somewhere in the world and if you never cross it, you'll never consider throwing yourself off a building or swallowing a bottle of pills—but if you do, you might. People figure I crossed the line. They ask themselves, "Could I ever get as close as *he* did?"

The truth is, there is no line. There's only your life, how you mess it up, and who is there to save you.

Or who isn't.

LOOKING BACK, I began to unravel the day my mother died, around ten years ago. I wasn't there when it happened, and I should have been. So I lied. That was a bad idea. A funeral is no place for secrets. I stood by her gravesite trying to believe it wasn't my fault, and then my fourteen-year-old daughter took my hand and whispered, "I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to say good-bye, Dad," and that was it. I

broke down. I fell to my knees, crying, the wet grass staining my pants.

After the funeral, I got so drunk I passed out on our couch. And something changed. One day can bend your life, and that day seemed to bend mine inexorably downward. My mother had been all over me as a kid—advice, criticism, the whole smothering mothering thing. There were times I wished she would leave me alone.

But then she did. She died. No more visits, no more phone calls. And without even realizing it, I began to drift, as if my roots had been pulled, as if I were floating down some side branch of a river. Mothers support certain illusions about their children, and one of my illusions was that I liked who I was, because she did. When she passed away, so did that idea.

The truth is, I didn't like who I was at all. In my mind, I still pictured myself a promising, young athlete. But I was no longer young and I was no longer an athlete. I was a middle-aged salesman. My promise had long since passed.

A year after my mother died, I did the dumbest thing I've ever done financially. I let a saleswoman talk me into an investment scheme. She was young and good-looking in that confident, breezy, two-buttons-undone fashion that makes an older man feel bitter when she walks past him—unless, of course, she speaks to him. Then he gets stupid. We met three times to discuss the proposal: twice at her office, once in a Greek restaurant, nothing improper, but by the time her per-

fume cleared my head, I'd put most of my savings in a now-worthless stock fund. She quickly got "transferred" to the West Coast. I had to explain to my wife, Catherine, where the money went.

After that, I drank more—ballplayers in my time always drank—but it became a problem which, in time, got me fired from two sales jobs. And getting fired made me keep on drinking. I slept badly. I ate badly. I seemed to be aging while standing still. When I did find work, I hid mouthwash and eyedrops in my pockets, darting into bathrooms before meeting clients. Money became a problem; Catherine and I fought constantly about it. And, over time, our marriage collapsed. She grew tired of my misery and I can't say I blame her. When you're rotten about yourself, you become rotten to everyone else, even those you love. One night she found me passed out on the basement floor with my lip cut, cradling a baseball glove.

I left my family shortly thereafter—or they left me.

I am more ashamed of that than I can say.

I moved to an apartment. I grew ornery and distant. I avoided anyone who wouldn't drink with me. My mother, had she been alive, might have found a way through to me because she was always good at that, taking my arm and saying, "Come on, Charley, what's the story?" But she wasn't around, and that's the thing when your parents die, you feel like instead of going into every fight with backup, you are going into every fight alone.

And one night, in early October, I decided to kill myself.

Maybe you're surprised. Maybe you figure men like me, men who play in a World Series, can never sink as low as suicide because they always have, at the very least, that "dream came true" thing. But you'd be wrong. All that happens when your dream comes true is a slow, melting realization that it wasn't what you thought.

And it won't save you.

WHAT FINISHED ME, what pushed me over the edge, strange as it sounds, was my daughter's wedding. She was twenty-two now, with long, straight hair, chestnut-colored, like her mother's, and the same full lips. She married a "wonderful guy" in an afternoon ceremony.

And that's all I know because that's all she wrote, in a brief letter which arrived at my apartment a few weeks after the event.

Apparently, through my drinking, depression, and generally bad behavior, I had become too great an embarrassment to risk at a family function. Instead, I received that letter and two photographs, one of my daughter and her new husband, hands clasped, standing under a tree; the other of the happy couple toasting with champagne.

It was the second photo that broke me. One of those candid snapshots that catches a moment never to be repeated, the two of them laughing in midsentence, tipping their glasses. It was so innocent and so young and so . . . past

tense. It seemed to taunt my absence. *And you weren't there.* I didn't even know this guy. My ex-wife did. Our old friends did. *And you weren't there.* Once again, I had been absent from a critical family moment. This time, my little girl would not take my hand and comfort me; she belonged to someone else. I was not being asked. I was being notified.

I looked at the envelope, which carried her new last name (*Maria Lang*, not *Maria Benetto*) and no return address (Why? Were they afraid I might visit them?), and something sunk so low inside me I couldn't find it anymore. You get shut out of your only child's life, you feel like a steel door has been locked; you're banging, but they just can't hear you. And being unheard is the ground floor of giving up, and giving up is the ground floor of doing yourself in.

So I tried to.

It's not so much, what's the point? It's more like what's the difference?