



How's tribute

written by Doris Mertink

Late summer. 1961. I was living the good life. My own crib. Lots of nice, soft blankets. Soft, plush stuffed animals lined the crib. A tall bottle of Carnation milk at the ready. Momma, five loving sisters and one reluctant brother at my beck and call. Chin-chucked and cheeks-tweaked wherever I went. All I had to do was point at something and it was mine. Little did I know there was a disturbance looming on the horizon...a squalling, red-faced, slobbering, bald disturbance that rode in on a storm called Hurricane Carla that would flip my nice, cushy life upside down.

In early September of 1961, Momma said little brother, Howard Clyde Mertink, How as I called him, made himself known when Carla had just been declared a category 1 hurricane near the Yucatan

Peninsula and was churning rapidly towards the Gulf of Mexico. Later that week, while Momma and How were waiting to come home, Carla made landfall as a category 4 hurricane near Port O'Connor, in between Galveston and Corpus Christi and made a beeline for Central Texas. But the inevitable happened...he came home in the driving rain and soon garnered the attention of Daddy, Momma, five sisters and one grateful brother. Brother David was relieved that there was finally another male in the family, but they were still far outnumbered with six girls. Slowly the attention was shifted from me to him. I was kicked out of my nice comfy crib and relegated to sharing a bed with a sister. Oh, the humanity! My plush, stuffed animals that once lined my crib were callously tossed on a cedar chest to fend for themselves. HIS were the cheeks that were getting pinched now and folks embarrassingly fawned over the latest Mertink boy. Like the fading Hurricane Carla, I suffered in silence as my demands were ignored. I had been replaced as the "cute one" and I was just going to have to accept it.

As the months passed, I felt my icy cold heart beginning to melt. His bald head was starting to sprout a color of hair unknown to man. A platinum white cornsilk that virtually glowed in the dark. Even though he still slobbered a lot, he smiled the cutest two-tooth smile on the planet and I was partial enough to him to donate some of my own stuffed animals...the ones with the missing eyes and those in need of repair, of course. He took a shine to one old, faded, missing-eyed white stuffed cat that had been scorched by a hot movie projector

Cousin Edward brought once to show some family movies. When How was learning words, he called the cat Mercy. Why that name, who knows. Possibly for what the poor thing had gone through.

More time passed and we got to be playmates while the other siblings went to school. I just remember there was a lot of dirt involved playing with him. Dirt and water. Usually those can both be found in conjunction in a garden and we played in between the rows of squash, cucumbers and dill stalks. Almost every Christmas, he would either get some kind of a Tonka, earth-moving tractor or a farm set that went nicely in our little town that we made in the garden paths. Roads were made by dragging a broken, business end of a cotton hoe, through the dirt. I would mostly build Flintstone houses on my end of town as he excavated tons of soil on his end. Sometimes he would be so involved in his earth-moving, he wouldn't hear momma calling us for supper. When she noticed one was missing, before we would pray, she would send me out to collect him. I knew just where to look. I would go to the old washroom door that looked out on where our garden was at the time. I would hear him "putt-putting" before I saw his glow-in-the-dark head amongst the dill stalks, and call him. When he stood up, you couldn't tell where he began and the garden ended, he was that dirty!

In the spring and summer, our family made the rounds around local farms as cotton pickers and choppers and while my older siblings groaned when it was time to head to the fields to pick or chop cotton, How and I didn't mind. There was a LOT of dirt under the shade of the cotton trailer and he would pack his fleet of Tonkas and dig away. He still slobbered a lot, especially when he made "putt-putt" tractor sounds, but I stood clear of the flying spittle and besides, it cleaned up some of the dirt from his face. When we got bored, we would wait for the pickers to make a round in the field and catch a ride on Momma's long cotton sack when they came back our way. My time under the trailer building Flintstone houses was coming to a halt. Papa Mertink presented me with a chopping hoe whose handle, he said, had been broken. It was just the right size for me. That "break" looked suspiciously clean and had saw marks, but I took my place in one of the rows. I had been officially inducted into the cotton patch.

From my row, I could see How's platinum head under the trailer as I chopped weeds from around the cotton plant. I could vaguely hear the "putt, putt" of his tractors and I longed for the old carefree days of under-the-cotton-trailer life. But it wasn't long before he received a suspiciously cut choppin hoe himself and joined us in the fields.

As he grew up, scabs, in varying stages of healing, started to replace dirt. Scabs, lures, hammers and nails. Summers, Saturdays and after suppers, he would go to various jobs with daddy and David and learn about carpentry or farming and he became proficient in both. How was somewhat of a daredevil on the many bikes he begged, borrowed or put together from scraps. Getting fingers caught in chains, skinned knees falling off bikes going too fast downhill on Sheller Road when the brakes would lock, or trying his "Evel Knievel" daredevil stunt down the concrete incline under the IH-35 bridge downtown, were just a few of his bike adventures. Brother David recalls How even went as far as Walburg on his bike to fish in Papa's tank and also to Georgetown with a buddy! I guarantee Momma never knew about that or he would STILL be in the woodshed.

High school brought the usual homework, sports and FFA and any scabs he earned in football practice, games or with a power tool, he particularly wore as badges of honor.

Soon a young lady, Becky, caught his eye at Jarrell High School and it wasn't long before she was able to turn his head from crops, footballs, wood and even fishing...for a while.

Howard and Becky were married in August of 1983 and together they built the house Becky still lives in. How started taking guitar lessons and that added one more skill to what he could already do. He worked as a carpenter with brother David at CSS Construction in Gatesville for almost 30 years. I don't know if I could have ever worked with any of my sisters, but I think since they were the only two boys in the family, they stuck together. They fished together, attended Jarrell Bass Club, and coached T-ball and Little League together too.

It wasn't long after he added "great husband " to his list of skills, that he added "great dad". He had two sons that matched him, strand for strand, with platinum white "glow-in-the-dark" hair. As they grew up, there were the usual school activities, sports and working in the concession stands.

Holy Trinity Catholic Church played a huge part in their lives and they attended faithfully and worked at many of the fundraisers.

Time and responsibilities have a way of stealing hours and years and we began to see each other only in passing at birthdays, holidays and other family gatherings at the home where we grew up. The old garden where he had spent so much time with his tractors was long grown over with grass. Knees got creaky and eyesight dimmed, but we tried to all see each other as often as we could. He would bring his guitar and we would sing together long past bedtimes. Then those times grew few and far between.

He had been a lifelong Dallas Cowboy fan, but had grown irritated at the big dollar signing deals and holdouts and other things that took the attention away from the game itself. Sister Dorine and I still remained Dallas Cowboy fans and would text each other during all four quarters. Soon he would tap into our text and razz us when there was a Dallas fumble, or more likely, an interception.

August. 2017. We had just begun a new school year at JISD and I had just gotten home from my job as a fifth grade teacher. Becky called as I just sat down and said she had news that wasn't great. She and How had been to an oncologist and the doctor had found a tumor in How's colon. When the room stopped spinning, I heard her say that the doctor suggested the rest of us siblings get tested also. For the next five years, he fought that cancer with everything he had. He got radiated, chemotherapied, and lasered, and a combination of those things kept the cancer at bay for a while. In August of 2022, he and his family went to a hospital in San Antonio where they had heard there was a specialist who could possibly help How. The cancer had come back and was now wreaking havoc on his liver. The doctor drew blood, did tests, and MRI's and concluded from the results that there was nothing more he could do. How was put on hospice and was sent home the next day. When Becky called to tell me they were coming home, that the doctor had put him on hospice, How hollered in the background that he was ready to go and see Momma and Daddy in Heaven and we were instructed not to cry for him.

I spent a lot of time with him when he got home. From his hospital bed, through the living room window, he could see his son Matt plowing the front field and he could see faithful dog, Brady laying in the yard.

Becky, he said, was the prettiest of all of his nurses as she attended to him. We watched episode after episode of Gunsmoke and The Andy Griffith Show. I think Opie reminded him of himself growing up.

I sat with him one day when Becky went to run errands and in the middle of Andy and Barney talking, he told me “It isn’t just anyone who can single-handedly build their own house.” I looked at him and I told him, “Surely you don’t think that was the most important thing you ever did on this earth. Not many people could do that for sure, but you have a wonderful family, two sons who are grown men now who know who Jesus is and what He did for them and the whole world and because of Him, we who believe will be together forever, and you and Becky are responsible for them knowing that. THAT was your most important thing you ever did here on earth.” He looked out the window then and nodded his head.

It was soon after that, on a Monday, September 26, 2022, one year ago today, that Becky called around 8:30 p.m. and told me How had gone on to Heaven. No hurricanes to usher him out. Just a quiet, ordinary Monday night. Dallas was playing that night on Monday Night Football and sister Dorine and I couldn’t figure out why How wasn’t razzing us.

Becky told me later that he had the slightest of smiles on his face when he went. I would like to think that he had heard Momma calling him, as she had called him a million times when he was growing up, and she was telling him it was time to come home.

Why write such a tribute to him? It wasn’t like he was a President or anyone famous. But he sure showed how to stand up in trouble and lean into Jesus. He knew exactly where he was going and he kept the faith until it turned to sight and I want to be just like that. Life can sometimes be like walking a tightrope across the Grand Canyon. But when you have Jesus as your safety net, there is no need for fear.

I think Jesus will send How to meet me when it is my time. They both know I have no sense of direction and that may prolong my meeting with the Savior! To know that I will be there for eternity with fellow believers and there will be no more crying or sickness...all because of Jesus.

Oh, but what I wouldn’t give, to stand at the old washroom door one last time and see that tow-headed, platinum white, glow-in-the-dark head bobbing up and down the garden path and that “putt, putt” sound on the cool, evening air, as I called him in for supper.

I miss you every day, How ❤️🎵
Until we meet, at Jesus’ feet.

