

Brothers

Tom Gates

A Brooklyn firefighter (retired). During his earlier work years, he was a policeman. His words pour forth, stream-of-consciously.*

I'M SIXTY YEARS OLD! I just made a will out, and I feel *much* better. My son's going to be a lawyer and my daughter works in a courthouse in Pennsylvania—she's going to college. That's what I'm looking forward to, the kids.

Life and death? I never felt so alive as when you're a firefighter. To go into a fire with the heat and the fear and people's lives on the line . . . I remember sometime in July or August, summer, you'd be coming out of the fire and the sweat would be pouring off you, and you'd taste cold water and it was the greatest taste in the world. Better than any drugs, which I don't know anything about, but I know about cold beer and cold water and nothing beats it.

When you're dead, you don't know you're dead, right? So what's the big thing really, when you think about it? The ones that suffer are your family and your friends. They're going to be suffering with your memory.

I remember in 1956, when I was sixteen years old, we saw this man crying on a park bench. Prospect Park. He was about forty-one. He had a beard. We went over to him. "What are you crying for?" He said, "I just lost my mom." We asked, "How old's your mom?" "Sixty-four." We started laughing. "Sixty-four—that's old! She lived a long time." He looked up at us and said, "Listen, it doesn't matter if your mother's sixty-four or a hundred and four, when she passes away, you're going to miss your mom. Don't forget what I'm saying."

In 1981, I was coming out of the firehouse and there were these

*I first met him twenty-seven years ago. He appeared in *Working*, along with his brother Bob, a police officer, and his father, Harold.

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teenagers hanging around the corner. I went over and told them to take a civil service test, become a firefighter or a policeman. You get security, you get a pension, and there's no better job than serving the public. As I walked away, another kid came over and asked his friends on the stoop, "What'd the old man want?" Meaning *me!* It brought back the past, 1956, the forty-one-year-old man with the beard. . . . It was like a flashback. I turned around and said, "Listen, like they say: as I am now, so shall you be."

To me, life is like a relay race. You're tired, you hand the baton off to somebody stronger and fresher. That's what life is, right? The oldest thing in a human being is sperm, right? Sperm goes back to the beginning of time. I got a son now and a daughter, and they're going to carry on. Somebody said that the Earth is a spaceship and sometimes the ride, like yours, Studs, is lasting eighty-eight years. Me, I'm on a spaceship ride called Earth sixty years. Some people only ride it for one day. So we're lucky.

When you're sixteen, you don't know about death. Your friends are young, your aunts and uncles are only in their late thirties, forties. As I get older, half my friends are gone. My aunts and uncles are passing away. My father passed away, colon cancer, 1988. He was eighty-one years old. Before he died, he lived with me for two months. I got one of those wind-up beds. I'd wind him up and I'd lay down on the couch right across from him. A couple of nights before he died, every fifteen minutes he woke up, swung off the bed, and lit a Camel cigarette. He took two puffs, put it out. Five minutes later, Camel cigarette. All night. I said, "What the fuck is *this?*" I don't want to curse, but I was going crazy. I said, "Stop smoking." He looked at me and said, "You see the clock up there?" I said, "What clock?" It was dark—four in the morning. He said, "I was born at twelve o'clock. The hands are coming around and my time is coming to an end, and it's going to end at twelve o'clock." It was unbelievable.

He was five-foot-six, a powerful man, a truck driver, longshoreman, a father—he was everything. He went from a hundred and fifty pounds down to seventy-eight. I remember changing his bag, cleaning it, and he was so embarrassed. I said, "Dad, it's good in a way because it saves on toilet paper." He ran out of the bathroom laughing. He said, "Catch me if you can!" He was running around the

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kitchen and I was running after him. It was the first time I saw my father's legs in eighty-one years. They were skinny, the same size as mine.

I was up all night for days and days and I was starting to get mad because he was taking the life from me. I'm telling you honest, I loved my father—he was a great man.* He was just wasting away, wasn't eating... One night he was breathing hard and then he stopped. He was panting, then nothing for five or ten minutes. I said, "Oh, my God, he's dead." I relaxed. I says, "I'm not telling anybody. I'll notify the family in the morning." I wanted to close my eyes and get a few hours' sleep because I was exhausted. Just then, he started breathing again, I said, "Son of a bitch!" That was my human feeling—I got pissed. He lasted two more days. I felt guilty, but I know he would have said the same thing. If it was me, I'd just want to let go, pull the plug—'cause I don't want my family, friends, to suffer. My mother was in her seventies at the time. She's still alive at eighty-eight. I saw her starting to go. We're all going into the hole. A friend of mine committed suicide by Blockbuster. His wife and his son died. He kept renting videos all day and all night and just drinking liquor, scotch. They found him with the VCR running. He was only in his fifties.

When you're above ground and you're healthy it's great. My father used to have an old picture with all his friends on a Model-T Ford, sitting in the back on the rumble seat and on the step of the car. He was telling me, "This fellow's gone, this fellow's in the hospital, this fellow's dead." I said, "Dad, you're sad." He said, "It's gonna happen to you. But it's great to live long because you're gonna outlive your enemies!"

I'll always have memories of my father. I was in a place in Pennsylvania and I saw a man that looked like my father. He was smoking a Camel cigarette and my father loved to blow the smoke in the air. It was like a dance. This guy had his back to me and he had a hat like my father, same size. I said, "That's my dad!" I sat there and I looked at him, knowing my father's dead and the memories come

*As a longshoreman, Harold Gates, a union man, was one of the independents who fought the thugs on the New York waterfront. He was the hero of a novel by the poet Thomas McGrath.

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back—old smells, old songs. Then he got up and he wasn't my father.

Like you, Studs—you look like my father. You know what I mean? I want to interview you. When are you gonna give it up? You're eighty-eight years old! *Unbelievable*... The great medicine now, you can go for ninety or a hundred. But you gotta have your faculties. You gotta be able to walk and talk and chew, enjoy food. That's the great joy of life, food and companionship and laughter. Laughter shoots chemicals into your blood...

Funny thing, memories. Looking back now, my mother was really the strength in the family. Five kids, and my mother kept us together. My father, he took off a number of times, but your mother's *always* there.

Let's talk about firefighters. January, 1976. I was on vacation when Charlie Sanchez and nine guys from my firehouse went into the basement of an A&P. Charlie Sanchez got killed, and they thought the other eight were dead. They heard the firemen crying for their mothers on the walkie-talkies and the guys outside were crying, too. The fire commissioner come down and said to give up, they were dead, turn off the walkie-talkies. They told the fire commissioner to get the fuck out of there. They're doing their job. They breached the wall with a battering ram, sixteen inches of brick. In the 1800s it had been a prison room for slaves. They grabbed the eight firemen and dragged them through the hole.

I went to the hospital and I remember Paul Matula, a big Polish guy—senior man, Ladder 131. Tremendous hands. I said to him, "Paul, did you talk to God?" I don't believe really in churches. To me, churches is business—but there could be somebody out there. Paul said, "Listen, I thought I was dying, so I gave God a couple of shouts." You couldn't do better than that.

Gordon Sepper, the carbon monoxide was getting to him, and the smoke, he was falling asleep, his head down, knowing he was going. Just then, he says, a twenty-four-foot portable ladder appeared and he knew he could be saved. So he started reaching up, climbing up the rungs, and when he got to the top rung, his brain told his hand to grab the floor of the A&P there, because he was all carbon-monoxide-to-the-brain disorientated, right? Just then two firemen grabbed him by the coat and pulled him out. Another guy was Joe

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Pennington. When the A&P was collapsing into the basement, Joe counted eighteen steps to the street—he knew enough to count the steps. They went down eighteen steps in the basement next door and breached the wall. I look up to those men. It was the greatest job you can ever have, a fireman . . .

Most firemen die after they retire, eight to ten years earlier than the general population. Cancer, emphysema, stuff like that. Smoke inhalation—it's cumulative. The chemicals, the plastics burn. My brother Billy was thirty-five years a firefighter—he's got a disability. He can't breathe. He's got asthma, emphysema—he never smoked. He was a marathon runner, twenty-six miles.

It's even worse than with the miners, who get everything, black lung, cave-ins, everything. I'm going with a woman whose father was a coal miner in Scranton, Pennsylvania. When she was a little girl, she remembers her father coming home with one finger chopped off from a mine accident. He took the finger, still in his glove, and threw it into the fireplace. A few days later, he went back to work . . . We've come a long way since then, but they're still my heroes, working-class people. My father instilled that in me.

I remember August 2nd, 1978. Six firemen got killed in Brooklyn. Louise O'Connor, with three kids, went to see her husband at the firehouse near Sheepshead Bay. They were going for a weekend down to the Jersey Shore . . . Just a routine fire. Her husband was on the roof of the Ward Bond grocery—he waved to her as the roof caved in.

I was on vacation walking on a country road. My father came running down. "Six firemen just got killed." It's like being at war and you're home. I said, "I gotta go in. I gotta go in." My wife says, "Why do you gotta go in?" Because, I told her, this is my family, my second family. She said, "You gotta stay here." I said, "No, I gotta go in." I went in the shower. I didn't want her to see me cry. I put the water on and started screaming, "*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*" I went in and was missing for three days. I went to as many funerals as I could—'cause it was two, three different churches. That was twenty-two years ago.

I ran into Louise O'Connor again in 1988 at the American Legion Post where another guy killed in a fire was being honored. She introduces me to her son, who's now a New York City cop. I said,

“That kid was a couple of years old when your husband got killed.” So the beat goes on. It never ends.

I hate guns. I wasn’t a good cop because I used to walk around with no bullets in the chamber. I used to have them in my pocket and kid around saying if somebody starts in, I’ll just throw the bullets real hard. [*Laughs*]

A few times I pulled my gun on guys. One time I went on the roof of this project and there’s this big black guy, about six-seven, on top of the stairs. He had his back to me. I said, “Hey, fella, turn around.” He said, “Yeah, wait a minute, man.” I said, “*Turn around* and put your hands against the wall.” He said, “Yeah, yeah, wait a minute.” It dawned on me he had a gun caught in his belt and was tryin’ to take it out. I said, “Holy shit . . .” So I took my gun out and said, “You fucker, I’m gonna shoot.” He threw his hands up against the wall. He had his dick out and was tryin’ to zip up his fly, and there was a girl standing in the corner, which I couldn’t see. So here was a guy gettin’ a hand job and maybe a lot of guys would have *killed* him. I said, “Holy shit, I coulda killed ya.” He started shaking and the gun in my hand was shaking like a bastard. I said—I musta been cryin’—I said, “Just get the hell outa here . . .” That’s when I decided to quit the force and become a fireman.

My brother Billy was a fireman five years before me. He said, “It’s a different quality of life—it’s great.” He was in a fire in a high-rise, knocking out windows in the bathroom. The bathtub gave way and he fell through the floor. They teach you when you fall to put your elbows out to your side. He caught on to the floor and the firemen come in and grabbed him. He said, “No, let me go, I’ll fall to the next floor and I don’t want to take you with me.” The two firemen said, “If you go, we all go”—that’s the job.

I retired from the fire department in ’88 and as a fire safety director in ’95. Now it’s just a memory. I just sit back and watch the world go by. Talk about dying—it affects everything I do. I feel life is like the twenty-four-second clock in a basketball game. I got the ball now and I gotta score. By scoring, I mean I want to travel, see the world more. I got twenty-four seconds left and I want to stretch it out. But if they hook up tubes to you and you’re on a monitor and unconscious for months, they gotta be kidding. I’m outa here. Twenty-four seconds ran out.

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We had a great fire captain, Bill Huber. When he passed away, I went to his wake, his funeral. He had a simple pine box, closed, with a picture on top of him in a fire uniform. That's what I want. In red pajamas, fire red. Then I want to be cremated. I want my ashes to be thrown into a beautiful pond in Jersey. I want somebody to sing "I'll Be Seeing You." [*Sings*]

*In all the old familiar places
that this heart of mine embraces
all night through
I'll see you . . .*

Isn't that wonderful? All the old girlfriends, the old neighborhood . . .

I remember years ago, a Laurel and Hardy movie, they're in the First World War. Hardy says, "If we get killed, what do you want to come back as?" Laurel says, "I want to come back as myself." Hardy gets mad: "You stupid, you can't come back as yourself, you have to come back as something else. You're gonna come back as a donkey." They both get killed and Hardy comes back as a donkey.

I always said I'd like to come back as myself but with a great voice like Johnny Mathis or Tony Bennett. Well, this one time, I got off the subway train at Seventy-ninth by mistake, and there's a black man about fifty, in rags, with a bag to put money in, singing "My Funny Valentine." He sounded like Sammy Davis, Jr., a beautiful voice—unbelievable. I'm saying, *Holy Jesus*—I just wanted to come back as myself with a great voice and you can end up on the goddamn IRT, penniless.

Right now, I'm OK. My hearing's going, I got a ringing. My eyesight's going. The thing I still got left is my taste buds—I still love food.

These days I get out of a car like my father used to get out: grab the roof and pull yourself out. I got a bad back. My father passed the baton on to me, and I'm passing it on to my kids.

I'm not going to worry about any hereafter. A few months ago, my sister got a call at one in the morning. The police told her that they found her husband dead in bed. They were divorced, but they still loved each other and called each other up every day on the phone. I drove her in about two in the morning. My sister told me

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she had a dream a couple of days before that there was a hand coming out to her. I went into the bedroom where her husband was laying and he had his arm outstretched. My sister is strong, they got two sons. He was a young man, fifty-five. Like I said, it's a spaceship and we gotta keep going on.

So, here I am, a retired firefighter who almost died from drowning in the ocean. It was 1994, I was down in Bermuda, walking along this beach, hardly anyone in the water. It was a beautiful day. I went in. I'm not a good swimmer. Before I knew it, I was dragged out in the tide. It was up to my chest. The lifeguard was on a hill, couldn't hear me scream. I figured this was it, I'm going to die in Bermuda. Everything went through my head, the kids, memories—it's all over. The water was way past my chest and dragging me out. So I took a deep breath and dived toward the beach. My legs were kicking, hands moving, hoping when I came down I wasn't stepping on water, and when I got to the beach, I was like . . . [*gasps*] . . . heavy breathing. Barely made it. That was 1994. I'm sixty years old and I have a second chance. Yeah, I think about death more and more, but I can't do nothing about it. It's gonna come. Suppose somebody said, "You can be alive forever, but you gotta drive through the Holland Tunnel for the rest of your life"? What would you do? Would you want to live forever driving through the Holland Tunnel?

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Bob Gates

Tom's brother. He is sixty-one. A New York City police officer, retired for thirteen years, he was a member of the Emergency Service and then joined the Police Crime Unit, the homicide squad.

Emergency Service is like a rescue squad. You respond to any call, any incident: a man under a train, trapped in an auto, bridge jumpers, floaters, psychos, guys that murdered people and then barricaded themselves in. We go and get these people out. It was sometimes a little too exciting. On a couple of incidents I felt I wasn't going to come home.

EVER HEAR OF the Statue of Liberty job? We had a guy climb to the top of the statue, break through the center port window of the head, and stand on the top of the crown. For over an hour. He's there for a cause, and he's jeopardizing our lives by doing so. He was threatening to jump from the crown to the head.

After speaking to him for a while, my partner and I saw an opportunity and pinned him down, handcuffed him, and held on. We were tied in through a rope, but the tie was below us. If he had thrown either of us off, just the stress from the rope would have killed us.

Did I mention the World Trade Center job? That's a hundred and ten stories high. We had a guy, he defeated the tower security system. There was a rabbi there, with a priest on the way. The guy had climbed over the top of the World Trade Center and dropped approximately a foot onto a window washer's ledge, which was about four inches wide. My partner and I were looking down from above, trying to talk him into coming in. His problem is he was born a Jew and is now a Christian. He was mad at the Jews because, he claimed, they were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. I said to him, "Well, suppose they'd only sentenced him to seven and a half to fifteen years? We wouldn't be Catholics today." He said to the rabbi, "I'd like that officer to come down and talk with me." They rappelled

me over. I kept on talking to him. As I handed him a cigarette, I grabbed him in a bear hug and we both swung over, up on top of the World Trade Center. Besides being dangerous, it was *such* a beautiful sight . . . At a hundred and ten stories up, the East River is a half-inch wide. Talking to him, I just wanted to concentrate on him not grabbing me. I wasn't sure if he had a knife. At that point, it was life-threatening. I thought briefly about dying, but I had partners there to back me up—and it happened so fast.

You don't have time to have fear because you have to prepare psychologically, get focused on what you're gonna do—you got a job to do. With the sirens and the lights around, you're thinking about equipment, about who's gonna get the rope, who's gonna wear the Morrissey Belt, that looks like a safety pin . . . You're so hyped up, keyed up, you can feel and hear your own heart beating.

If it's a barricaded psycho, and he's got a gun and he's threatening to go out and kill somebody, you're focused on that person, on not killing him. They don't like the word "kill" anymore—you're gonna *stop* 'em. But you're there to try and save his life. If not, you have to take other measures.

You always look at them as another human being. You try to get into a conversation and tell him what he's giving up, find out if he has a family. Sometimes it's not so good if he has a family, 'cause they're the ones he could be mad at. When they show up, that's when he may jump, or shoot himself.

Then there's the floater that drowns and eventually comes up. We pulled this kid out of the pond. You look at him with the hook in his eye. A woman asked me, "What color was he?" I said, "Lady, he's ten years old—what *difference* does it make?" She said, "You pulled him out, you should know." I just walked away from her. It never entered my mind whether he was white or black. He was a life that had to be saved, but it was too late. And people that hang themselves . . . if the body's there for a certain period of time, it decomposes. Sometimes we call that "the smell of death." You come into an apartment, the body's been there for a couple of weeks, and the acids are floating through the air. The body swells up and the gases inside penetrate the air and stick in your nostrils while you're cutting the person down. Maybe people should ride with emergency service, get into the shoes of a cop and see what it's like, see what

they go through. The average life span of a cop today is fifty-nine years old—twelve years short of an average person.

Death . . . The most vivid case in my mind is a space case I had. A guy was caught by the train and rolled between the platform and the train. When we got there, the transit police were in conversation with him. He had a family, several children. He was caught in a four-inch space. The reason he was still alive is because everything was still intact above, keeping his heart pumping blood into his system. So you could converse with him while he was sitting there. There wasn't much else you could do. The medical people said the minute that we start to jack this train away from the platform, he would pass away. You could almost predict his death, but meanwhile you're talking to him.

I thought about the family as we jacked the car away from the platform with what we call a journal jack. You fit it between the supports of the train, the subway car, and the platform. As you start jacking, it pushes the train away from the platform, giving you another six inches to take the body out. The body is rolled like a bowling pin. He just went off to sleep, he passed away right there. Was he wondering, "What are they gonna do to get me out? What's the story here?" I was talking to him: "We're doing the best we can." "I don't feel my legs . . ." "We're handling that now—we got people under the train . . . Where do you work?"—just questions to take his mind off what was happening.

We get to go in where your heart is pumping, your adrenaline is running and you've got your hand just off the hair trigger. You're in there because this is your job, and if you have to kill you will—but you don't want to. You have fear of accidentally pulling the trigger. You think about these fears afterwards. If you can save a life, you'll save that life. Thinking about the death end of it and your safety end of it usually comes after.

Since the time I first met you, I found spiritual solace and guidance. I stop off in church once in a while now. I believe in the hereafter. Yeah. But I have questions, too. Why do young people have to die? Why do people have to threaten to kill themselves?

One of the jobs I had was a private house where a man placed a twelve-gauge shotgun under his chin and blew his head off. Half of it went onto the ceiling and half onto the walls. We had to take the

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photographs and notes. I noticed the serenity of a death scene, how quiet. I was writing notes on this body, sitting at the kitchen table, when part of the skull and face drops onto the table and onto my shoulders. All I said to myself was that it was raining death, *raining* death in that kitchen. Sometimes you're a little annoyed because if somebody is going to kill themselves, why do they want to make such a mess? If they're gonna do it, if they made up their minds . . . [Suddenly] Police officers are one of the highest rates of suicides in the country—because of the strain, the stress, the problems. I knew a guy that committed suicide, a cop. I went to the scene. He was on the top of the stairwell. He had a picture of his wife and kids leaning against the wall, and he shot himself in the head.

I never had that thought, thank God. But if I ever get to that point where they put the tubes in me, and the IVs, and I'm gonna vegetate, I want to have mind enough to tell them, "Pull the plug." If I'm put in an old-age home and I still got my faculties, I want my kids to bring me up some chocolate chip cookies, wipe my mouth, and wheel me out of the sun.

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