

1-1-2009

Chief

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Recommended Citation

O'Neill, M. A., "Chief" (2009). *Outreach: Society for Advancement of Poynter Library*. 30.
http://digital.usfsp.edu/npml_outreach_advancement/30

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Chief

1958 Lowell

Chief's sudden death stifled the heat wave which nearly suffocated Mike. To his credit, Mike registered the loss of his best friend with a frighteningly charitable ruefulness and got on with the business of living and dying without much in the way of emotional displays. For instance, he calmly finished his supper and asked to be excused. His mother Ruby threw down her knife and fork, unwilling to allow Chief's death to go past the dinner table without some kind of cliché death rattle. Ruby never could prevent herself from diving onto railroad tracks.

Peter, Mike's father, smiled grimly at Ruby from his embattled foxhole behind the salt and pepper shakers. A stiff drink and a pill would shut up Anna Karenina. Peter leveled a glance toward his youngest son, hoping for an alliance of men against the display of weak hysteria playing out before them. If Peter were to willingly share anything with his son, it would be contempt for weakness. But Peter's patriarchal overture missed its mark. The blue eyes raised towards Peter were not conspiratorial. They were clouded—unseeing. The day Chief died, Mike Callahan lost the ability to look his father in the eye.

Mike first met Chief in the spring, long before the heat wave crested over Lowell, drenching the townspeople with their own sweat. On the occasion of their first meeting, Chief refused to leave the Callahan barn, preferring the quiet loft to the mayhem of a burgeoning spring on the farm. Mike, who normally spent his free time fishing at the creek to avoid his father's rebukes, gave up his solitude to play with Chief. The two were just drawn to each other. Often, Mike would vent his frustrations to Chief, who

unfailingly listened to that confused little boy. Much of the confusion came from Mike's parents, a God-fearing older couple who were very much surprised when Mike came along. A full decade spanned the distance between Mike and his older brother John. To commemorate the late-in-life baby, Peter tattooed an Indian chief on his forearm, remarking to Ruby, "I've lived long enough to become a reckless young man all over again."

That tattoo, in Mike's eyes, was the coolest thing since that train ride to New York when he was five. Often, when Peter tucked his young son in bed at night, Mike would trace the tattoo with his finger, wishing his own arm matched. So when Peter stopped tucking Mike in at night and retreated to his workshop in the basement for days at a time, and Ruby just shrugged her shoulders and turned away, Mike was truly at a loss. Chief wandered onto the Callahan farm at precisely the right moment.

"Chief, the key to effectively conversing with an alcoholic is to demonstrate your complete lack of investment in the conversation. One must assert his position and cling to it, hell or high water. If eye contact occurs, run for your life. You have just opened a door that is better left shut." Mike grinned at Chief, proud of reshaping his father's drunkenness into language—an assertion of knowledge.

"It's good for the boy to play with a friend. He needs somebody, Pete. You sure as hell aren't listening to him. Let him play with Chief," Ruby put her foot down and blessed the friendship over Peter's objections. The spring became summer and before long, the heat wave gripped everyone in Lowell, not just Peter, with a sense of drunken confusion. It was too damn hot to think. Or to work. Mike wrested freedom from his daily chores by taking long walks through town and hanging out with Chief in the barn,

shunning his father with deft turns and the invisibility that only children possess. Pete knew his son shied away from him, but he saw this development as useful. The sooner Mike grew up, the better.

To that end, Peter asked John to invite his younger brother to work with him one August morning. The two brothers would spend the whole day together, with John displaying the tough masculinity which Mike so clearly lacked. Peter planned everything carefully, leaving nothing to chance. When Mike returned at dusk, worn out from repairing cars and thrilled by the heady company of adults, a red-eyed Ruby laid dinner out on the kitchen table. As usual, the Callahans ate in silence. Observing Mike's nearly clean plate, Peter asked if he enjoyed his day.

“Yes sir! John showed me how to bang out dents on this old truck.”

“You worked up quite an appetite, huh?”

“Yeah...thanks for dinner Mom.”

“Good chicken, don't you think? I wrung his neck this afternoon. That big old rooster in the barn. I think you used to call him Chief.”