



Guess What? I Almost Kissed My Father Goodnight

Robert Cormier

Robert Cormier worked as a reporter in Worcester and Fitchburg, Massachusetts, before turning to fiction. He was born in 1925 in Leominster, Massachusetts, where he continues to live. He was married in 1948, and he and his wife have four children.

The Chocolate War (1974), I Am the Cheese (1977), and After the First Death (1979) all won Outstanding Book of the Year awards from The New York Times and Best Book for Young Adults awards from the American Library Association. The Bumblebee Flies Anyway (1983) also won the ALA award. Cormier's other works include Beyond the Chocolate War (1985), Fade (1988), Take Me Where the Good Times Are (1991), and Tunes for Bears to Dance To (1992). His short stories are collected in Eight Plus One (1980).

Cormier has said that he writes books with young adult characters, not young adult books. The many letters he receives from his readers attest to the wide popularity of his books, which deal with serious subjects in a way that appeals to adults and younger readers alike.

I've got to get to the bottom of it all somehow and maybe this is the best way. It's about my father. For instance, I found out recently that my father is actually forty-five years old. I knew that he was forty-something but it never meant anything to me. I mean, trying to

imagine someone over forty and what it's like to be that old is the same as trying to imagine what the world would be like in, say, 1999. Anyway, he's forty-five, and he has the kind of terrible job that fathers have; in his case, he's office manager for a computer equipment concern. Nine-to-five stuff. Four weeks vacation every year but two weeks must be taken between January and May so he usually ends up painting the house or building a patio or something like that in April, and then we travel the other two weeks in July. See America First. He reads a couple of newspapers every day and never misses the seven o'clock news on television.

Here are some other vital statistics my research turned up: He's five ten, weighs 160 pounds, has a tendency toward high blood pressure, enjoys a glass of beer or two while he's watching the Red Sox on television, sips one martini and never two before dinner, likes his steak medium rare and has a habit of saying that "tonight, by God, I'm going to stay up and watch Johnny Carson," but always gropes his way to bed after the eleven o'clock news, which he watches only to learn the next day's weather forecast. He has a pretty good sense of humor but a weakness for awful puns which he inflicts on us at the dinner table: "Do you carrot all for me? I'm in a stew over you." We humor him. By we, I mean my sisters. Annie, who is nineteen and away at college, and Debbie, who is fourteen and spends her life on the telephone. And me: I'm Mike, almost sixteen and a sophomore in high school. My mother's name is Ellen—Dad calls her Ellie—and she's a standard mother: "Clean up your room! Is your homework done?"

Now that you've gotten the basic details, I'll tell you about that day last month when I walked downtown from school to connect with the North Side bus which deposits me in front of my house. It was one of those terrific days in spring and the air smelled like vacation, and it made you ache with all the things you wanted to do and all the places you wanted to see and all the girls you wanted to meet. Like the girl at the bus stop that I've been trying to summon up the nerve to approach for weeks: so beautiful she turns my knees liquid. Anyway, I barreled through Bryant Park, a shortcut, the turf spring-soft and spongy under my feet and the weeping willows hazy with blossom. Suddenly I screeched to a halt, like Bugs Bunny in one of those crazy television cartoons. There's a car parked near the Civil War cannon. Ours. I recognize the dent in the right front fender Annie put there last month when she was home from college. And there are also those decals on the side window that give the geography of our boring vacation trips, *Windy Chasms*, places like that.

The car is unoccupied. Did somebody steal it and abandon it here?

Wow, great! I walk past the splashing fountain that displays one of those embarrassing naked cherubs and stop short again. There he is: my father. Sitting on a park bench. Gazing out over a small pond that used to have goldfish swimming around until kids started stealing them. My father was deep in thought, like a statue in a museum. I looked at my watch. Two-thirty in the afternoon, for crying out loud. What was he doing there at this time of day? I was about to approach him but hesitated, held back for some reason—I don't know why. Although he looked perfectly normal, I felt as though I had somehow caught him naked, had trespassed on forbidden territory, the way I'm afraid to have my mother come barging into my bedroom at certain moments. I drew back, studying him as if he were a sudden stranger. I saw the familiar thinning short hair, the white of his scalp showing through. The way the flesh in his neck has begun to pucker like turkey skin. Now, he sighed. I saw his shoulders heave, and the rest of his body shudder like the chain reaction of freight cars. He lifted his face to the sun, eyes closed. He seemed to be reveling in the moment, all his pores open. I tiptoed away. People talk about tiptoeing but I don't think I ever really tiptoed before in my life. Anyway, I leave him there, still basking on that park bench, because I've got something more important to do at the bus stop. Today, I have vowed to approach the girl, talk to her, say something, *anything*. After all, I'm not exactly Frankenstein and some girls actually think I'm fun to be with. Anyway, she isn't at the bus stop. I stall around and miss the two-forty-five deliberately. She never shows up. At three-thirty, I thumb home and pick up a ride in a green MG, which kind of compensates for a rotten afternoon.

At dinner that evening, I'm uncommunicative, thinking of the girl and all the science homework waiting in my room. Dinner at our house is a kind of ritual that alternates between bedlam and boredom with no sense of direction whatever. Actually, I don't enjoy table talk. I have this truly tremendous appetite and I eat too fast, like my mother says. The trouble is that I'm always being asked a question or expected to laugh at some corny joke when my mouth is full, which it usually is. But that evening I stopped eating altogether when my mother asked my father about his day at the office.

"Routine," he said.

I thought of that scene in the park.

"Did you have to wait around all day for that Harper contract?" my mother asked.

"Didn't even have time for a coffee break," he said, reaching for more potatoes.

I almost choked on the roast beef. He lied: my father actually lied.

I sat there, terrified, caught in some kind of terrible no-man's-land. It was as if the lie itself had thrust me into panic. Didn't I fake my way through life most of the time—telling half-truths to keep everybody happy, either my parents or my teachers or even my friends? What would happen if everybody started telling the truth all of a sudden? But I was bothered by his motive. I mean—why did he have to pretend that he *wasn't* in the park that afternoon? And the first question came back to haunt me worse than before—what was he doing there, anyway, in the first place?

I found myself studying him across the table, scrutinizing him with the eyes of a stranger. But it didn't work. He was simply my father. Looked exactly as he always did. He was his usual dull unruffled self, getting ready to take his evening nap prior to the television news. Stifling a yawn after desert. Forget it, I told myself. There's a simple explanation for everything.

Let's skip some time now until the night of the telephone call. And let me explain about the telephone setup at our house. First of all, my father never answers the phone. He lets it ring nine or ten or eleven times and merely keeps on reading the paper and watching television because he claims—and he's right—that most of the calls are for Debbie or me. Anyway, a few nights after that happening at the park, the phone rang about ten-thirty and I barreled out of my room because he and my mother get positively explosive about calls after nine on school nights.

When I lifted the receiver, I found that my father had already picked up the downstairs extension. There was a pause and then he said: "I've got it, Mike."

"Yes, sir," I said. And hung up.

I stood there in the upstairs hallway, not breathing. His voice was a murmur and even at that distance I detected some kind of intimacy. Or did the distance itself contribute that hushed, secretive quality? I returned to my room and put a Blood, Sweat and Tears on the stereo. I remembered that my mother was out for the evening, a meeting of the Ladies' Auxiliary. I got up and looked in the mirror. Another lousy pimple, on the right side of my nose to balance the one on the left. Who had called him on the telephone at that hour of the night? And why had he answered the call in record time? Was it the same person he'd been waiting for in Bryant Park? Don't be ridiculous, Mike, I told myself; think of real stuff, like pimples. Later, I went downstairs and my father was slumped in his chair, newspaper like a fragile tent covering his face. His snores capsized the tent and it slid to the floor. He needed a shave, his beard like small slivers of ice. His feet were fragile, something I had never noticed before; they were mackerel white, half in and half

out of his slippers. I went back upstairs without checking the refrigerator, my hunger suddenly annihilated by guilt. He wasn't mysterious: he was my father. And he snored with his mouth open.

The next day I learned the identity of the girl at the bus stop: like a bomb detonating. Sally Bettencourt. There's a Sally Bettencourt in every high school in the world—the girl friend of football heroes, the queen of the prom, Miss Apple Blossom Time. That's Sally Bettencourt of Monument High. And I'm not a football hero, although I scored three points in the intramural basketball tournament last winter. And she *did* smile at me a few weeks ago while waiting for the bus. Just for the record, let me put down here how I found out her name. She was standing a few feet from me, chatting with some girls and fellows, and I drifted toward her and saw her name written on the cover of one of her books. Detective work.

The same kind of detective work sent me investigating my father's desk the next day. He keeps all his private correspondence and office papers in an old battered roll-top my mother found at an auction and sandpapered and refinished. No one was at home. The desk was unlocked. I opened drawers and checked some diarylike type notebooks. Nothing but business stuff. All kinds of receipts. Stubs of cancelled checks. Dull. But a bottom drawer revealed the kind of box that contains correspondence paper and envelopes. Inside, I found envelopes of different shapes and sizes and colors. Father's Day cards he had saved through the years. I found one with a scrawled "Mikey" painstakingly written when I was four or five probably. His secret love letters—from Annie and Debbie and me.

"Looking for something?"

His shadow fell across the desk. I mumbled something, letting irritation show in my voice. I have found that you can fake adults out by muttering and grumbling as if you're using some foreign language that they couldn't possibly understand. And they feel intimidated or confused. Anyway, they decide not to challenge you or make an issue of it. That's what happened at that moment. There I was snooping in my father's desk and because I muttered unintelligibly when he interrupted me, *he* looked embarrassed while I stalked from the room as if I was the injured party, ready to bring suit in court.

Three things happened in the next week and they had nothing to do with my father: First, I called Sally Bettencourt. The reason why I called her is that I could have sworn she smiled again at me at the bus stop one afternoon. I mean, not a polite smile but a smile for *me*, as if she recognized me as a person, an individual. Actually I called her three times in four days. She was (*a*) not at home and the person on

the line (her mother? her sister?) had no idea when she'd arrive; (b) she was taking a shower—"Any message?" "No"; (c) the line was busy. What would I have said to her, if she'd answered? I've always had the feeling that I'm a real killer on the phone when I don't have to worry about what to do with my hands or how bad my posture is. The second thing that happened was a terrible history test which I almost flunked: a low C that could possibly keep me off the Honor Roll, which would send my mother into hysterics. Number 3: I received my assignment from the Municipal Park Department for my summer job—lifeguard at Pool Number 38. Translation: Pool Number 38 is for children twelve years old and younger, not the most romantic pool in the city.

Bugged by history, I talked Mister Rogers, the teacher, into allowing me some extra work to rescue my mark and I stayed up late one night, my stereo earphones clamped on my head so that I wouldn't disturb anyone as the cool sounds of the Tinted Orange poured into my ears. Suddenly, I awoke—shot out of a cannon. My watch said one-twenty. One-twenty in the morning. I yawned. My mouth felt rotten, as if the French Foreign Legion had marched through it barefoot (one of my father's old jokes that I'd heard about a million times). I went downstairs for a glass of orange juice. A light spilled from the den. I sloshed orange juice on my shirt as I stumbled toward the room. He's there: my father. Slumped in his chair. Like death. And I almost drop dead myself. But his lips flutter and he produces an enormous snore. One arm dangles to the floor, limp as a draped towel. His fingers are almost touching a book that had evidently fallen from his hand. I pick it up. Poetry. A poet I never heard of. Kenneth Fearing. Riffing the pages, I find that the poems are mostly about the Depression. In the front of the book there's an inscription. Delicate handwriting, faded lavender ink. "To Jimmy, I'll never forget you. Muriel." Jimmy? My father's name is James and my mother and his friends call him Jim. But Jimmy? I notice a date at the bottom of the page, meticulously recorded in that same fragile handwriting—November 2, 1942—when he was young enough to be called Jimmy. By some girl whose name was Muriel, who gave him a book of poems that he takes out and reads in the dead of night even if they are poems about the Depression. He stirs, grunting, clearing his throat, his hand like a big white spider searching the floor for the book. I replace the book on the floor and glide out of the room and back upstairs.

The next day I began my investigation in earnest and overlooked no details. That's when I found out what size shoes, socks, shirts, etc., that he wears. I looked in closets and bureaus, his workbench in the cellar, not knowing what I was searching for but the search itself im-

portant. There was one compensation: at least, it kept my mind off Sally Bettencourt. I had finally managed to talk to her on the telephone. We spoke mostly in monosyllables. It took me about ten minutes to identify myself (“The fellow at *what* bus stop?”) because apparently all those smiles sent in my direction had been meaningless and my face was as impersonal as a label on a can of soup. The conversation proceeded downward from that point and reached bottom when she said: “Well, thanks for calling, Mark.” I didn’t bother to correct her. She was so sweet about it all. All the Sally Bettencourts of the world are that way: that’s why you keep on being in love with them when you know it’s entirely useless. Even when you hang up and see your face in the hallway mirror—what a terrible place to hang a mirror—your face all crumpled up like a paper bag. And the following day, she wasn’t at the bus stop, of course. But then neither was I.

What I mean about the bus stop is this: I stationed myself across the street to get a glimpse of her, to see if she really was as beautiful as I remembered or if the phone call had diminished her loveliness. When she didn’t arrive, I wandered through the business district. Fellows and girls lingered in doorways. Couples held hands crossing the street. A record store blared out “Purple Evenings” by the Tinted Orange. I spotted my father. He was crossing the street, dodging traffic, as if he was dribbling an invisible ball down a basketball court. I checked my watch: two fifty-five. Stepping into a doorway, I observed him hurrying past the Merchants Bank and Appleton’s Department Store and the Army-Navy Surplus Supply Agency. He paused in front of the Monument Public Library. And disappeared inside. My father—visiting the library? He didn’t even have a library card, for crying out loud.

I’m not exactly crazy about libraries, either. Everybody whispers or talks low as if the building has a giant volume knob turned down to practically zero. As I stood here, I saw Laura Kincaid drive up in her new LeMans. A quiet, dark green LeMans. Class. “If I had to describe Laura Kincaid in one word, it would be ‘class,’ ” I’d heard my father say once. The car drew into a parking space, as if the space had been waiting all day for her arrival. She stepped out of the door. She is blond, her hair the color of lemonade as it’s being poured on a hot day. I stood there, paralyzed. A scene leaped in my mind: Laura Kincaid at a New Year’s Party at our house, blowing a toy horn just before midnight while I watched in awe from the kitchen, amazed at how a few glasses of booze could convert all these bankers and Rotary Club members and Chamber of Commerce officials into the terrible kind of people you see dancing to Guy Lombardo on television while the camera keeps cutting back to Times Square where thousands of other people, most of them closer to

my age, were also acting desperately happy. I stood there thinking of that stuff because I was doing some kind of juggling act in my mind—trying to figure out why was she at this moment walking across the street, heading for the library, her hair a lemon halo in the sun, her nylons flashing as she hurried. What was her hurry? There was barely any traffic. Was she on her way to a rendezvous? Stop it, you nut, I told myself, even as I made my way to the side entrance.

The library is three stories high, all the stacks and bookshelves built around an interior courtyard. I halted near the circulation desk with no books in my arms to check out. Feeling ridiculous, I made my way to the bubbler. The spray of water was stronger than I expected: my nostrils were engulfed by water. For some reason, I thought of Sally Bettencourt and how these ridiculous events kept happening to me and I ached with longing for her, a terrible emptiness inside of me that needed to be filled. I climbed the stairs to the third floor, my eyes flying all over the place, trying to spot my father. And Laura Kincaid. And knowing all the time that it was merely a game, impossible, ridiculous.

And then I saw them. Together. Standing at the entrance to the alcove that was marked 818 to 897. Two books were cradled in her arms like babies. My father wasn't looking at the books or the shelves or the walls or the ceilings or the floor or anything. He was looking at her. Then, they laughed. It was like a silent movie. I mean—I saw their eyes light up and their lips moving but didn't hear anything. My father shook his head, slowly, a smile lingering tenderly on his face. I drew back into the alcove labeled 453 to 521, across from them, apprehensive, afraid that suddenly they might see me spying on them. His hand reached up and touched her shoulder. They laughed again, still merrily. She indicated the books in her arms. He nodded, an eagerness in his manner. He didn't look as if he had ever snored in his life or taken a nap after dinner. They looked around. She glanced at her watch. He gestured vaguely.

Pressed against the metal bookshelf, I felt conspicuous, vulnerable, as if they would suddenly whirl and see me, and point accusing fingers. But nothing like that happened. She finally left, simply walked away, the books still in her arm. My father watched her go, his face in shadow. She walked along the balcony, then down the spiral stairs, the nylons still flashing, her hair a lemon waterfall. My father watched until she disappeared from view. I squinted, trying to discern his features, to see whether he was still my father, searching for the familiar landmarks of his face and body, needing some kind of verification. I watched him for a minute or two as he stood there looking down, his eyes tracing the path of her departure as if she were still visible. I studied his face: was

this my father? And then this terrible numbness invaded my body, like a Novocain of the spirit, killing all my emotions. And the numbness even pervaded my mind, slowing down my thoughts. For which I was grateful. All the way home on the bus, I stared out the window, looking at the landscapes and the buildings and the people but not really seeing them, as if I was storing them in my mind like film to develop them later when they'd have meaning for me.

At dinner, the food lay unappetizingly on my plate. I had to fake my way through the meal, lifting the fork mechanically. I found it difficult not to look at my father. What I mean is—I didn't want to look at him. And because I didn't, I kept doing it. Like when they tell you not to think of a certain subject and you can't help thinking of it.

"Aren't you feeling well, Mike?" my mother asked.

I leaped about five feet off my chair. I hadn't realized how obvious I must have appeared: the human eating machine suddenly toying with his food—steak, at that, which requires special concentration.

"He's probably in love," Debbie said.

And that word *love*. I found it difficult to keep my eyes away from my father.

"I met Laura Kincaid at the library today," I heard my father say.

"Was she able to get a copy of the play?" my mother asked.

"Two of them," he said, munching. "I still think *Streetcar Named Desire* is pretty ambitious for you girls to put on."

"The Women's Auxiliary knows no fear of Tennessee Williams," my mother said in that exaggerated voice she uses when she's kidding around.

"You know, that's funny, Dad," I heard myself saying. "I saw you in the library this afternoon and was wondering what you were doing there."

"Oh? I didn't see you, Mike."

"He was supposed to pick up the play on my library card. But then Laura Kincaid came by . . ." That was my mother explaining it all, although I barely made out the words.

I won't go into the rest of the scene and I won't say that my appetite suddenly came back and that I devoured the steak. Because I didn't. That was two days ago and I still feel funny about it all. Strange I mean. That's why I'm writing this, putting it all down, all the evidence I gathered. That first time in the park when he was sitting there. The telephone call. That book of poetry he reads late at night, "To Jimmy, I'll never forget you. Muriel." Laura Kincaid in the library. Not much evidence, really. Especially when I look at him and see how he's my father all right.

Last night, I came downstairs after finishing my homework and he had just turned off the television set. "Cloudy tomorrow, possible showers," he said, putting out the lights in the den.

We stood there in the half-darkness.

"Homework done, Mike?"

"Yes."

"Hey, Dad."

"Yes, Mike?" Yawning.

I didn't plan to ask him. But it popped out. "I was looking through a book of yours the other day. Poetry by some guy named Fearing or Nearing or something." I couldn't see his face in the half dark. Keeping my voice light, I said: "Who's this Muriel who gave you the book, anyway?"

His laugh was a playful bark. "Boy, that was a long time ago. Muriel Stanton." He closed the kitchen window. "I asked her to go to the Senior Prom but she went with someone else. We were friends. I mean—I thought we were more than friends until she went to the Prom with someone else. And so she gave me a gift—of friendship—at graduation." We walked into the kitchen together. "That's a lousy swap, Mike. A book instead of a date with a girl you're crazy about." He smiled ruefully. "Hadn't thought of good old Muriel for years."

You see? Simple explanations for everything. And if I exposed myself as a madman and asked him about the other stuff, the park and the telephone call, I knew there would be perfectly logical reasons. And yet. And yet. I remember that day in the library, when Laura Kincaid walked away from him. I said that I couldn't see his face, not clearly anyway, but I could see a bit of his expression. And it looked familiar but I couldn't pin it down. And now I realized why it was familiar: it reminded me of my own face when I looked into the mirror the day I hung up the phone after talking to Sally Bettencourt. All kind of crumpled up. Or was that my imagination? Hadn't my father been all the way across the library courtyard, too far away for me to tell what kind of expression was on his face?

Last night, standing in the kitchen, as I poured a glass of milk and he said: "Doesn't your stomach ever get enough?" I asked him: "Hey, Dad. You get lonesome sometimes? I mean: that's a crazy question, maybe. But I figure grownups, like fathers and mothers—you get to feeling *down* sometimes, don't you?"

I could have sworn his eyes narrowed and something leaped in them, some spark, some secret thing that had suddenly come out of hiding.

"Sure, Mike. Everybody gets the blues now and then. Even fathers

are people. Sometimes, I can't sleep and get up and sit in the dark in the middle of the night. And it gets lonesome because you think of

... ”
“What do you think of, Dad?”

He yawned. “Oh, a lot of things.”

That's all. And here I am sitting up in the middle of the night writing this, feeling lonesome, thinking of Sally Bettencourt, and how I haven't a chance with her and thinking, too, of Muriel Stanton who wouldn't go to the Senior Prom with my father. How he gets lonesome sometimes. And sits up in the night, reading poetry. I think of his anguished face at the library and the afternoon at Bryant Park, and all the mysteries of his life that show he's a person. Human.

Earlier tonight, I saw him in his chair, reading the paper, and I said, “Goodnight, Dad,” and he looked up and smiled, but an absent kind of smile, as if he was thinking of something else, long ago and far away, and, for some ridiculous feeling, I felt like kissing him goodnight. But didn't, of course. Who kisses his father at sixteen?

Responding to the Story

1. Why is the narrator surprised at seeing his father sitting on a park bench? Do you understand how Mike felt at that moment? Explain.
2. “Didn't I fake my way through life most of the time—telling half-truths to keep everybody happy, either my parents or my teachers or even my friends?” Do these words ring true to life as you know it? Explain.
3. “Even fathers are people.” What does Mike's father mean by these words? What evidence do you have that these words are or aren't true about all fathers, not just Mike's?

Exploring the Author's Craft

Figurative language is language that makes use of comparisons to bring a picture to the reader's mind. *Similes* make comparisons using *like* or *as*, and *metaphors* simply say one thing is another. Note some of the similes and metaphors in this story: