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The Attorney

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THE ATTORNEY

— by Joanna Thurston Roper

Even when I was a little kid, I knew Pud Atkins wasn't Danny's dad. That is, I say I knew it — fact is, I didn't know it intellectually. It was just a feeling. You know the kind — when you finally find out, you say, "I was afraid of that." Even before I knew anything about it, there seemed to be something wrong. I even remember thinking back when we were in the first grade that Danny's handwriting was better than Pud's! But that didn't make me think Pud wasn't his dad — it just seemed strange.

nine feet tall. He whipped each foot out like he was marching. Nobody else in Danny's family was shaped like him, either. Even as scrawny as Pud was, he had a pretty good shape for a guy. But Danny was as flat in the rear as he was in front — well, actually, I guess he was flatter in the rear because he was a pretty good eater, and he tended to be a little pudgy. Seeing them walking along together you wouldn't just automatically think "father and son."

Someone might think, well, maybe

emn like. Danny, I guess, woke up laughing about something — at least that's the way he got to school. He was one of those fellows who had a new joke every time you saw him. But I doubt if old Pud ever laughed at one of his jokes. Not that he was gripey — he just didn't laugh much. And I can just see Mrs. Atkins smiling at him, nodding maybe. Probably making him feel good about his jokes.

Danny went out for every sport our school had — not that he was ever much good at anything. Oh, he did all right in football after he was a junior or senior in high school. By that time he'd developed a lot more strength but not much in the way of height. He could crouch over, stick his elbows out and stop nearly the whole line. Coach said he had a low center of gravity. That low gravity kept him on the bench in basketball, though. He made every practice, and he even played a few times when we'd run the score up so high he couldn't hurt us. And in track he'd come floundering in last, arms flailing, breathing hard, but when he got his breath back, cheerful as ever. In baseball, now, he was better than average — mostly, I guess it was because of that low center of gravity he could drive solid home runs across the back fence — if he ever connected with one, of course.

He was one of the guys — it never mattered that he always — nearly always — came in last. He wore his blue and silver athletic jacket with the best of them.

Of course, none of this has any bearing at all on whether or not Pud Atkins was Danny's dad or not. We



ILLUSTRATION BY JIM BAILEY

Lots of things were strange back then. Like, I look a whole lot like my dad — most guys do — shape of the nose or mouth — something like that. But not Danny. Pud was a long, lanky guy — almost seemed skinny and shrunk up. He was tall, but he didn't walk tall. Even though he wore cowboy boots, he took steps like he was trying not to step in something. Danny was a short, squatty little fellow, and he walked like he was

Danny looked like his mother. No, he wasn't like her, either. She was a good-looking, graceful lady. Slim and pretty with lots of dark brown hair and brown eyes. She was — well, just different. You couldn't look at Pud and Mrs. Atkins — always Mrs. Atkins — not Dorothy — and figure how those two had Danny.

And another thing — Danny was one cheerful fellow. Pud wasn't. Not grouchy or grumpy — just sol-

never thought about it — it probably wouldn't have mattered if we had. I sure never talked about it at school. I don't think kids analyze their friends' families — they just sort of accept them the way they are.

I think it was just in my subconscious that I knew things were different over at the Atkins'. But then there was that one morning — it was summer, the first day school was out. I remember how green and — oh — fresh and bubbly everything felt. The excitement was still new. Anyway, I had just come downstairs looking for breakfast, and Mom and Dad were out on the patio — at least Mom was, and Dad was squirting water on the roses. They were talking back and forth — a little loud because of the water and all. I wasn't listening — their kind of talk didn't usually hold my attention. I tuned in every once in a while to make sure I wasn't missing something important — like what's for my birthday next week or something. I wasn't really listening seriously when I heard Danny's name mentioned. I perked up right away because I was going to Nine Flags with the Atkins on the week end. I heard Mom say, "Do you think Danny knows who his father is?" My mind sort of froze — what about Pud, I thought. I heard Dad say, "I don't think Pud and Dorothy will ever talk about that. Where's Mack?" "He hasn't got up yet," Mom said. I heard the water go off.

By the time Mom and Dad opened the patio door, I was back in my room kicking off my jeans and shirt and diving back into bed. I hadn't had time to think about what I'd heard. I just **knew** down deep that it was one of those conversations not meant for me. I still felt like my brain was frozen down — I didn't dare touch what I'd heard. When I heard Mom coming up the stairs, I flopped over on my stomach — she'd know in a flash I wasn't asleep if she saw me lying there pretending. I never could keep my eyelids from wiggling when I tried to fool her. Today I sure didn't want

her to know I'd been awake. Or downstairs. Most of all downstairs.

I heard the door open — close softly. I felt a huge wave of relief. Mom was going to let me sleep late this first day of vacation. I didn't want to talk to anyone until I had this figured out.

That was the first time that the problem had ever come to me — face to face. It was always just in my mind before — just a vague little bother in the back of my mind. I felt like something had changed. Something about **me** had changed. First of all, I didn't really know what Dad meant. Maybe Danny was just adopted. But somehow I knew that didn't seem right. There were adopted kids in school, and we all knew it. Sometimes Mom and Dad and I talked about them, just natural like. No big deal. They never would have talked about Chuck Abernathy like that and then asked real cautious like, "Where's Mack?"

So I felt pretty sure he wasn't adopted. But the question that just sat there like a rock was where did Pud and Dorothy Atkins get Danny? How else do folks get kids unless they're born or adopted?

I don't remember what happened the rest of that day. I doubt if I learned anything because I'd sure remember that. And the big event of the summer — going to Nine Flags — is gone. Things like that, I guess, blend in with all the other good-time summers. But one thing I do remember. A morning like that summer day when I first learned for sure about Danny always brings it back. I all of a sudden feel like a little boy again with a big problem and no one to fix it.

As soon as kids in our town get big enough, they get a job for their spending money. Any kid that doesn't work, he's sort of looked down on. Kids whose parents run some business in town usually work for their folks, so everyone expected Danny to work afternoons and Saturdays for his dad down at the Good Year Tire Store. But he started mowing lawns!

That surprised everyone. Can you imagine Danny Atkins behind a lawn mower — just barely as tall and a little bit wider! His main customer was Judge Lex Wicker — he lived 'way out on South Trinity Avenue. He had a huge lawn and all kinds of shrubs and flowers and stuff. Mrs. Wicker would be out there with him, wearing a yellow straw hat with a wide brim and pointing out what to do. I had me a job sacking groceries and stocking down at Taylor's Grocery, so I couldn't understand why he'd want to go out to the Wickers and work out in the sun all summer. Of course, Mr. Wicker took Danny and his friends to the semi-pro games over in Livingston a lot of times. That was sure a big deal, but I didn't think Danny got that job just to give his friends a trip to a baseball game. Mr. Wicker was one of the big shots in the Livingston League, but I don't know what he did. It wasn't important to me — not with batting averages of guys like Sparky McMillan and Bud Patterson to be figured.

Getting jobs was good for me and my crowd. We were losing our kid look and starting to shape up. My voice would break and sputter along sometimes, but I was almost as tall as Dad, and I'd passed Mom a long time ago. And working at Taylor's and sports made me strong. But Danny, now, he hadn't grown hardly at all. He was just about as short as ever and almost as wide. And his chest and shoulders were thicker. His arms sort of stuck out from his body like one of those Mickey Mouse ballons that has too much air in it.

One day after football drill, some of us were goofing around, trading insults and swapping lies. Danny made some funny remark, and ol' Al Curtis dropped back to kick him in the rear. Then he laughed and yelled, "Hey, Atkins, you ain't got no rear to kick! You're shaped just like ol' Judge Wicker!" We went on laughing and carrying on.

continued

Looking back, it seems like it wasn't any time at all before Danny and I graduated from high school and went away to college. Most of the guys went to state universities — except Danny (Dan now) and me. He went to law school, and I went out of state to a private school. I really missed ol' Danny. Dan, I mean. When I first left home, I was miserable for awhile — I guess all freshmen are. Then I began to sort of melt in — joined a lot of organizations — ran for office — met people, made new friends. Of course, I was anxious for fall break and talking to Dan — comparing notes.

It just happened that my freshman year was the year everyone celebrated our Bicentennial — 1976. One of my history teachers assigned a research paper on our home towns, so I had to spend lots of time in the library and the newspaper office. I sat in the back room of the JOURNAL reading old crackly yellow papers, getting totally absorbed in the headlines of early-day folks around here.

One day I had got up to 1958, and I ran across a story about the 1958 high school graduates getting summer jobs. The first one mentioned was Miss Dorothy Austin working in the law offices of Wicker and Beck. Well, I thought, history repeats itself — Mrs. Atkins worked for the old man before Dan did. Funny Dan never mentioned that all those years he worked for the judge. I skimmed on through the list to find Mom's name — public library, I knew. A little further on there was a spread on the society pages about the local girls going away to college. There was a big picture of Mom and Mrs. Atkins (Austin then, of course) sitting on a bed looking at a Samsonite suitcase. They looked so prim and serious — and **young!**

Well, I kept on going, looking in the want ads and public records — even building permits and the court news.

I kept getting distracted by stories about people I knew — or stories the folks had told me about. I hadn't thought this research would take so long — of course, I never expected to read so much stuff that wasn't going to be in my paper, either.

Then in a December paper I found a notice in the marriage license report — Dorothy Austin, 19, Melvin Atkins, 29. Gosh, I thought, Pud's lots older than Mrs. Atkins! I scribbled on my paper — 1958 minus 29 — he was born in 1929 — that means he's 47 now. That's pretty old — still he looks older than that.

So help me, I had no idea what I was heading for.

Of course, since I knew that they had bought the license, I expected to find a big picture of Mrs. Atkins in her wedding dress and the usual story that families like that had. I almost missed it. It was in the big Wednesday paper with all the grocery ads. There was a little story about two inches long that said something like, "Dorothy Austin and Melvin Atkins were married Friday in Judge Duncan's quarters." Well, gollee-ee! No wedding, and it was during Christmas vacation! Even then I felt a twinge of disappointment. I felt something else, too — I didn't know what, though. That little story was so terse.

I flipped on through the book of old dailies, studying all kinds of things, comparing prices, reading minutes of council meetings — lots of interesting stuff showed up.

On March 1, 1959, there in the hospital dismissals was "Mrs. Melvin Atkins and Baby Boy." Wow! From December to March! Well, gosh! I guess that happens — at least they were married. I thought about Marge in my graduating class — she had an abortion before school was out. Oh, well, I thought — maybe that's why he doesn't have a rear — he was so premature it never developed! My little joke sounded kind of hollow

even to me.

On the front page of the next day's paper, there was a story about the Wickers. "Mr. and Mrs. Wicker Depart for Europe," it read. My mind was still on ol' Danny being born so early. Pud and Mrs. Atkins had to be foolin' around as far back as maybe July. I was figuring in the margin by the story about the Wickers. I sat there thumping my pen on the page, and just thinking about Lex Wicker made him come into my mind — short, thick chested, flat fore and aft, self assured stride — and then another image just burned itself into my brain. Danny! That's exactly what he looks like!

I groaned. I put my head down on the book. I beat my hands on the table. "Do you think Danny knows who his father is?" "You ain't got no rear to kick!" Danny working for him all those years — going to Judge Wicker's old school to be a lawyer — Danny's mom working for him back then — I felt sick.

That's just another day I'd like to forget. Not that it's ever made any difference in our friendship — it just seems like I wasted lots of my life trying to figure something out that, as it happened, I didn't want to know anyway.

Well, after college we both came back here — things haven't changed much. We're still the best of friends. I went to work for the oil field as a landman, and Dan joined the Wicker law firm. When the oil played out around here, I started with an insurance company — turns out that's what I'm best at — and of course, after Judge Wicker died, Dan took over the Wicker offices. Right after he came back, they put up a new sign down there — Wicker, Atkins, Attorneys at Law. It's still there. I guess by rights it should be Wicker, Wicker, but no one around here talks about that. Least of all, me.