

Clara Barton.

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Once the condensation claimed the last clear square of the windshield, I could almost forget. It had taken twenty minutes, give or take. I knew this because I had exchanged what was left of my waking moments of the day for the privilege of watching the warm breath of four men co-mingle in the stale air above our heads, and then drift towards the low-pressure cold of our front windshield. It was caked on the outside with the day's bounty of bugs collected during our trip down from Albany. With the addition of this dew on the inside, an all-natural curtain conveniently maintained our privacy. And now that the outside world was finally behind this gentle, opaque coating, I could almost forget where I actually was.

Immediately, I was laying on my back. I was inside my dad's ancient sleeping bag on the floor of a van. My hands were intertwined behind my head, which in turn were resting atop a long-ago washed lump that had once been a functioning pillow. To my right, my old college housemate and current band mate Sean, a lumbering 6'2", nearly all of it adorned with tattoos. To my left, our singer Matt, a fellow-history major with Sean, and no less comfortable to share a floor with. Somewhere in the distance, on the one bench, the only thing that could charitably be called a comfortable place to sleep in our "home", was our drummer Johnny. We were a rolling bastion of democracy, alive in a post-911 world that made such notions seemed radical, if not quaint. Once every four nights, we each got the "couch." All others were asleep, apparently free of the existential calculations of trading law school for voluntary homelessness and hearing loss; the very thoughts that had wrenched me awake every night for two weeks.

Locally, I was in southern New Jersey. We were parked under a hardworking overhead light in the desolate parking lot of the Clara Barton Rest Stop. Strategically, we always selected for our slumber the part of the parking lot closest to the Cinnabon, to assure an expeditious breakfast. Tonight was no different, and I knew from experience it wouldn't be long before the odors of artificial icing started wafting through the vents in the van, signaling the part of the day where we prepared to do the same thing we had just done, every day, for uncountable days before.

What made tonight special, in part, was that after two years, this was in all likely hood my last Jersey Turnpike night ever, baring unforeseen circumstances not related to music and instead probably related to the whole part about deferring admission to law school.

There are 12 named rest stops spanning the Jersey Turnpike, named after illustrious Garden State natives or celebrities, from Vince Lombardi to Walt Whitman to Thomas Edison. It seemed, at least from where I lay, a rather undignified remembrance of their individual and collective accomplishments. Nonetheless, as of this eve, I now had an accomplishment of my own: I had slept in the parking lot of all 12 in just under two years. That too, made this a night to remember, for reasons both ominous and celebratory.

And so this is where I was, temporally, on the arc of my life. 23 and wedged between

two grown men. A college graduate, with two majors and two minors in the humanities and designs on becoming a litigator in the courtrooms of New York City. Since one first begins having notions of a reason for living, I knew that I would bare a suit and tie for the types listed by Emily Lazarus in that bay a hundred or so miles to the north of where I now tried to force myself to sleep. I was getting desperate and warning myself of the hazards driving to central Virginia while being even more physically and emotionally exhausted than I already was.

As was now my wont, I thought of the fact that I was born of two hardworking Connecticutians, each college graduates themselves. They worked hard indeed, one taught kindergarten, the other sold bearings. My hometown was gritty and beaten down by the collapse of the defense industry after the end of the Cold War. It was not known for its scholarship, or producing progeny that might engage in it, but there was never a question that I or my sister would graduate high school with honors, or go to college, or graduate from there. Robb and Janice didn't stress education in our home, but rather presumed its primacy in a way that need not be spoken of. I had not let them down.

But now, and for a fortnight of nights before, their specter haunted me at the exact moment every night when I most needed to be devoid of every heady and worldly thought. I could not help but think back, over the years; over the sacrifice and the work. In my mind, and thus in front of my wide-open eyes, whirled a slide-show history of my conscious existence. The first day of kindergarten. The spelling tests and spelling bees. The baseball games and orchestra recitals. The student government meetings and National Honor Society speeches. The day I moved to college. The dawn that broke as I walked to my professor's office to turn in my final, final paper. The grip-and-grab, rehearsed to the point of mechanization, when I took my diploma, shook the dean's hand, and stepped off the stage and into a world that seemed ready for me, at least judging by the packets of law school acceptances I had shuffled through months before. These images added up to a nightly panoply that ended with a resounding thought: that my parents had not worked so hard so that I might lay awake in my twelfth of twelve possible Jersey rest stop parking lots.

I was flashing backwards two years before this moment in the van, to a time not long after my exit, stage left, with diploma firmly in hand. That was when I had what may only very liberally be called an exhausting epiphany, as I had only 21 years of life to draw on and contemplate. Music was in my blood, mixing and swirling with a simmering political conscious; not quite radical, but not ready to no longer shout "no!" For a few months prior to graduation, Sean and I had been writing songs in our on-campus house's basement, smashing discordant structures into pummeling drums. When screamed lyrics were layered on top, shredding vocal chords with what were, at least to us, critical insights into hegemony, globalization, bullshit pre-textual wars and a general disregard for the liberties our grandfathers had gallantly battled for fifty years before on French beaches, we felt alive. Some protested in the streets, some sat in, some said this was our Vietnam. We got in the van. For two years now, broken up by recording sessions and a day job at a public interest law firm west of Boston, this had been my life. It was a content one, in its own way. But I also clung to idea that I was "getting it out of my

system." That somehow, if I did this now, I wouldn't feel the overwhelming need to do it when I was 46, married with kids and a mortgage. If I need to live the music, I thought, if I need to actually live it by making it my life, better to scratch that itch now, when the eyes that would be rolling would be those of my peers, and not later, when the eyes would belong to the people I was responsible for.

In those two years, this band had become a machine, specializing in delivering elegant, polemic brutality. First in VFW halls and basements around Boston. Then to towns across the union. We were not rock stars, nor did we carry ourselves as such. That behavior was common in those who temporarily shake off the bonds of responsibility in the name of amplification, but never quite "make it." We shunned that attitude, rejected it with force. We saw ourselves as not important in and of ourselves, but of doing something important. In our young and angry minds, this administration had made unimaginably worse what was already a world that was damaged at best. We had blood on our hands, and if you knew it, you had an obligation not just to say it, but to scream it. We chose to do it over 30-second blasts that could loosely, maybe, be described as songs. We were just another in a long-run of American Punk Rock. Write it. Record it. Drive. Scream. Repeat. And so we did, and proudly so.

Alas, I had left more than law school behind. I had two cats and a woman I loved very much in an apartment south of Boston, all of whom showed their affection upon my frequent departures and returns. But they had all grown weary of the routine in their own way. The late night calls after the shows. Did you send in the cable bill? How was your shift? When do I get home again? She too had deferred law school, but by undertaking the eminently more practical adventure of two years as a paramedic. The cats, it seemed, were less interested in my lap every time I came home, dropped my bag and my bass at the door threshold and sighed deeply.

I knew from the outset that this band would be but a brief detour from a life of responsibility and advocacy. I had promised myself that much when I decided that I would not go immediately back into a classroom for three years. Instead, I climbed into a 1997 Chevy van and turned the stereo as loud as it would go. I knew that no matter how much I loved the music and the message and the kids at the shows who sang along, that I always was just a lawyer. And knowing its artificial and pre-determined termination, I tried as hard as I had at anything, to enjoy every minute as the person who was privileged enough to do this amalgamation of art, passion and living in a somewhat serious manner. But the ever-souring homecomings, the exhaustion, the futility of preaching to an unwashed choir, the war that raged on half way across the world that I somehow, naively, felt I had something to say about; these things all took a toll I could not have imagined. They made what was supposed to be a quick two-year detour from reality into an exercise in endurance in every sense of the word.

And so, in that moment, awake and on my back, I knew I was done. No more rest stops. Goodbye, Walt Whitman and Vince Lombardi. No more load-ins. No more load-outs. This would be my last record. My last tour. I'd go home. I'd take a shower. I'd send in my deposit and I'd be in New York before fall's chill.

Only then, when the warmth of that decision washed over my body, and my whole being, could I give in to sleep. As I felt my eyes close, finally, I smiled to myself. I did it. This is no less an accomplishment. I have dreams, not a dream. I pursued one. I succeeded. And now I was free to succeed again in my next endeavor. Clara Barton Rest Stop. 2:15 AM. I could not be happier.