

Chicken Drumsticks

“They ate each other’s fingers like chicken drumsticks,” Dad says to me the year I am seven. He is telling me about the Donner Party. We are sitting around the campfire in the woods up above Tahoe, the flames becoming embers and the little dancing shadows they had cast disappearing into the darkness. He says that on a quiet night you can still hear their bones rattle in the wind. Behind his back he clacks a pair of sticks. I jump and squeal and he laughs his big saloon laugh. All night in the tent like a little worm I wiggle in my sleeping bag to be closer to him.

From then on, whenever we made the drive over Donner Pass, he would howl, “Chicken drumsticks!” as we crested the summit, roaring down the highway tight to the concrete median and winding past 18-wheelers and the blue blur of Donner Lake.

Now I’m 43 and driving the same stretch of road in the opposite direction, away from Tahoe and the stories of my childhood. There is a song on the radio I don’t hear. My seat is scooted forward more than is comfortable and I’m bowed over the wheel like an old, hunchbacked lady. The Prius, with its first-in-class storage and 800-pound payload, is unbothered by the cargo in the back seat—a 305-pound man inside 280-pound coffin. Dad.

I remember him best on those camping trips. We hike as far as we can, my brother and I pushing our little legs over the loose gravel and up towards the tree line, each year a little farther but never above the pines. We camp wherever we end up, always illegally—“because outside should be free, goddammit!”—one of his

creeds.

“Nowadays, you could never get away with that,” he said last Christmas. He was tearing into the turkey leg. “You’d be in violation of ten different laws and subject to a small fortune in fines.” He was shaking the poor bird’s leg and holding court like a jester. “You’d just about die of hassle, be put to death by it.”

My father William James Wheaton died in Reno on Tuesday. He had a problem with his heart. It was 10:07 in the morning and he was at Bonanza, his hand on the arm of a Bikini Beach slot machine, when the blood in his coronary artery clotted and he was gone.

I don’t know much about his final days—what he was doing in Reno, how he was spending his time, where his mind was. To tell the truth, I haven’t for many years, and maybe, I never did. Even as the people closest to us, our parents remain mysteries.

This much I do know: he spoke with my brother Niall last week and with me the week before and everything was “peachy;” he had a blue Tommy Bahama shirt draped over himself, a white bucket hat cocked on his head, and the complimentary hotel slippers squeezed over his feet at the moment of his death; and the final charge on his American Express was from Toucan Charlie’s buffet at 9:43 AM for \$53.76.

How to spend that much at breakfast confused me at first—that can’t be right—but then many things that go on in that state across the border are like that.

“You know Bill.” Niall said. I hate that he called Dad Bill, like he was one of his advertising buddies. Dad had been in advertising too, doing what exactly I never

knew, and Niall had followed suit, selling digital ads for the Auburn Journal, our humble and dying local paper. As a brother, I have only ever been close to him in terms of proximity “I bet he had prime rib and eggs.” Niall went on. “And a Manhattan.” Maybe, he’d had a piece of chicken, too, for the hell of it.

Paul, the representative from the casino who phoned me, was very courteous and professional, and though he didn’t say as much, it seemed like he’d had this same conversation before, many times. “We can refer you to our in-house mortuary if you like, or provide you with a list of others in town.”

“I don’t think the funeral will be in Reno,” I said. “He was only visiting.”

“Of course,” said Paul. “Again, my deepest condolences. We can arrange for transportation to any destination of your choosing.”

When Paul quoted the price, I almost had a heart attack of my own. Then I decided to go collect Dad myself and drive him the two hours back to Auburn in the Prius. Paul called the plan “unconventional,” but did not object. There is very little that casino people object to, it seems.

“There’s one more thing I must mention,” Paul said. “Your father, when his heart stopped, pulled down the handle of the slot machine. He won a \$5,000 jackpot. Congratulations.”

When I got to the casino, amidst the lights and flashes and beeps and breasts and free watered-down drinks and ill-fitting shirts and cankles and mobility scooters and chronic disease and smoke wafting towards a ceiling that seemed as immense as the vacuum of space, everything gravitated towards that most American of hopes—getting rich quick. Paul greeted me with a professional coldness that

seemed appropriate to the task at hand. He gave me the option of collecting the prize in chips or cash. I thought about the 47.6% chance of doubling it on red—“Always put your money on red. Always. It’s right there in your blood,” another creed of Dad’s—but in the end I played it safe. I confirmed that the body was indeed his, signed a couple of documents, and a team of casino employees wheeled the complimentary coffin out to the Prius and loaded it in the back. Miraculously, it just fit, the edge wedged up against the back glass. Credit to Paul, the whole exchange was about as quick and easy as picking up dry cleaning, and I went through the motions barely there as if that’s exactly what I was doing.

You might be thinking that the money could cover the transportation costs, or, that in a sane and ordered world, life insurance should. Well, on my 18th birthday, Dad made sure to tell Niall and I that since we had both “made it,” he cancelled his policy. Auburn to Reno is only two hours, and five grand is a lot to a teacher. Especially since I have to split it and I have no idea what inheritance is coming my way.

When I brought this last fact up to Niall, he said, “You know, in Belgium, when someone dies you choose if you want your inheritance. They don’t tell you until after you decide whether it’s money or debt.”

The jackpot is in the glove box. I think about how long it would take me to make that much. Six weeks, three days, two hours, and thirteen minutes, give or take. I’m a math teacher, and little problems like this make me feel in control, like I do in fact know something. Next is how long it will take to drive the 64 miles to my door in Auburn at my current speed of 73 mph, and then if I am feeling spry and a

touch exotic, how long it takes the Eurostar high speed train to go the 317 kilometers from London to Brussels at a speed of 186 mph. About an hour for each.

The cash came in an unmarked white envelope. I wrote “Gold Dust” on it, though later realized that wasn’t the right name of the casino. I had seen a billboard on the way in for “Gold Dust,” along with about a dozen others, so I just wrote as many as I could remember, “Gold Dust Silver Legacy Nugget Bonanza Circus Circus.”

Dad would have liked that. He was always trying to find poems. Poems and gold. The poems came easier. He was a lister, taking words he found and making collages of them. He could work with anything—gas station receipts, paintings in museums, hardware store paint samples, fast food menus, newspaper headlines. Purses were a favorite source of material, and book and record stores were particularly fruitful. He would rattle them off, “much to your mother’s delight.” I remember one that I still think about regularly, “7-Eleven Grass Valley August 2003”:

O!
Henry Snickers,
Big Gulp, Wrigley
Spearmint Taquito
Lotto Ticket 100 Grand
Bar.

As for the gold, he always said all the gold in these mountains hadn’t been found, that the mother lode was still out there. “A little nugget for our trouble, at least,” he’d say, and then go ripping up the grass at the side of some creek and picking through the roots.

He claimed an old Indian had told him that this was the secret. “One day when I was young, about 20, walking up the side of Highway 49 to a swimming hole,

a car stopped in the middle of the road. Inside was an old man. Tanned and wrinkled. With long hair and wearing sunglasses. Next to him in the front seat he had a great big fluffy white dog. He leaned over the dog, pulled down his glasses, and said, 'Look to the roots and you'll find gold.' Then he sped off, hot damn."

The rest of his life, Dad thought he was going to find riches in the roots of every plant he ever laid his hands on, but it never came to nothing. Anything. That's Dad's double negative, not mine. It's as if his way of talking is still here, lingering in me.

In truth, I am not thinking about the money. I am telling you about it because it is a thing we are supposed to be interested in, but I am not really thinking about it. What I am really thinking about is the camping trips.

I can see him straddling a rock like he's landed on the moon, singing, "I was born under a wand'ring star," from *Paint Your Wagon*. As we set up camp, he takes out his old flag inspired by the movie. It's a white rag painted with black letters:

No Name City
Population: Male Drunk

The summer I am seven on that first camping trip, he crosses out *Male* very ceremoniously and says, "That won't do with you here, Winter. To you, and to Mom, and to all women who make the world go." He clinks his flask to Niall's canteen and then to mine. He looks us dead in the eyes. "Mom and I, we'll always be in your camp."

Mom never came on the camping trips. She loved winter—that was how I got my name. Dad said he agreed so he would have a reason to love it. We get an inch of

snow a year in Auburn, and “no inch ever gave Mom so much pleasure,” Dad’s big laugh again. When the snow came, she would always go out walking, no matter the time, it could be the middle of the night. It was one of her little rituals that “keeps a body sane.” Her voice through Dad’s, always through Dad’s. The year I was three she was out after dark one December night, letting the flakes brush against her cheeks like the fingertips of angels, when a bus lost control, swerved onto the sidewalk, and killed her.

She was tall, with rosy Irish cheeks and long straight hair that was dark as coal, and she wore long dresses printed with flowers, sleeves always rolled up. She was a teacher, like me, but an English teacher, and really more like a character from one of the books that she taught, the teacher who everyone wanted because they were never sure what off-kilter thing she would say. She read me Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson when I was a baby, not because it would somehow make me more intelligent but because it put me to sleep and she didn’t want to waste her time with baby books. She was dressed as a pirate at my third birthday, a treasure hunt she’d made up that was completely over the heads of three-year-olds, and she did a little voice for the stuffed parrot on her shoulder, making it swear like a sailor, which we kids didn’t understand but which didn’t go over well with the other parents except for Dad. She was seriously considering getting me a parrot for Christmas because they live so long and I wouldn’t have to experience death the same way I would with a dog or a cat, and “because they can talk, goddammit.”

Now, she is a stain on a road, a body in a box, a stone on a hill. She is a tall tale, a stranger who I’ve never met, a figment talked into existence by the many

stories I've heard as if the memories were my own.

The campfire is where I hear them, where it is okay to acknowledge the pain of her death. We talk about her, Dad's face full of glowing admiration, as if she could come dancing right out of the flames and the years without her would seem nothing more than a bad dream.

Each time Dad builds the fire, the sacred fire, it is in tribute to her. He attends to it as his own ritual of sanity—the gathering of the wood, the construction of the kindling, the seating of the spark, the feeding of the flames. There is even a little dance he does after dinner, hopping from one foot to another and hooting like an owl. But first dinner, which is a can of Chef Boyardee that he grabs out of the coals with his socks on his hands. He uses the socks later as puppets to tell stories of her favorite outlaws and rebels and pioneers—great men and women who walked their own paths, lived life as an adventure, and held discovery as the ultimate goal. “And a little gold if they could manage it,” this last bit his own addition.

I don't remember her funeral. No one ever talks about it. Certainly not Dad. Now his is next Friday. Niall said that funerals should be on Fridays. “It makes them less sad.” He said I should be the one to speak, that I am used to it, speaking all day in school, but no one wants to hear about algebra or statistics, especially not the infallible probability that we are all going to die.

How to capture a life in two to ten minutes? That's the length recommended by Google. I know I am supposed to tell a story. A funny one if possible. People like that. I should work in something about the camping trips. I hear a strange sound, a groaning from the car that sounds like “yup.” My car has always agreed with me, but

never so plainly. I look in the rearview mirror at the box and think how this is our last adventure. Again the groaning, “yup.”

I should be worrying about the car, but driving has become as automatic as breathing, and what will I say in front of all those people waiting to hear about my father? I can see myself up there, draped in black, tall and thin as a three-year-old tree. I’ve imagined it before, many times, this moment, even while he was still alive, which always made me feel guilty, and now that it’s here I’m not sure what to do. This might be the last and the longest anyone ever talks about him.

On the side of the highway the wind on invisible feet is running through the boughs of the pines. I want to talk about love. I have this phrase that keeps rolling around in my head—“I am loved, as you are loved, as he was loved, as he *is* loved.” I try saying it out loud. “That’s a good ending,” I tell myself.

“It is,” a voice says. Not the groaning of the car, but Dad’s voice. Not in my head, but from the backseat. “The coffin is fine by the way.”

“You would be the first person in history to complain about it,” I rib him as if nothing’s happened and this is all a big joke.

“Nonsense.” His voice is as grand as it ever was. “People used to get buried alive all the time and I’m sure they had nothing good to say about their confines.”

“Better than getting eaten.” I banter back, white-knuckling the steering wheel without realizing.

“Like chicken drumsticks!” he bellows in my ear. We laugh.

“You haven’t said if you’re still here.” It doesn’t seem as important as I would have thought.

“What do you think? If I still had shoulders I’d shrug ‘em. So what are you going to tell the people who care enough about me to show up Friday?” I shrug my own shoulders with muscles I can’t feel. “Tell them about the gold Indian,” he muses.

“No.”

“Tell them about the jackpot.”

“No.” I groan.

“Are you going to tell Niall about the jackpot?”

“I already did.”

“You didn’t have to, you know.” Now he is ribbing me.

“You should know I already did. Don’t you have dead sight or something?”

“There are certain privileges, yes, but they are limited. And whether I knew already or not doesn’t matter.”

“And whether I told him or not doesn’t matter either, because I did,” I am a teenager again, defensive at every opportunity.

“Good for you,” he says, genuinely happy.

“Yeah.” I say. I am not.

“Hey don’t be angry. You should be happy to be alive.”

“I am.” I take a deep breath to prove it.

“I don’t mind being dead.”

“You want me to put that in the eulogy?” There is a pause, and I’m not sure if I hurt his feelings or my own, but all of a sudden I am small. “Can we start over?” I ask.

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he says.

“I’m not even worried that I’m talking to you,” I say.

“You shouldn’t be.” I can almost feel his comforting hand, as if we are around the campfire again.

“I miss Mom,” I confess.

“Me too.”

“Will you be together now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me about her.”

“The happiest moments of my life were when we were together.”

“What was she like?” I’ve asked this question so many times and always got some variation of the same.

“She was a lunatic.” There is another pause. What he says next I don’t know or expect. He always told eccentric stories but never talked about the person behind them, and now the fragile make-believe of my mother is being threatened by who she really was. “She was impulsive and obsessive and had terrible mood swings. Mountain-top highs and Death Valley lows. She drank too much and couldn’t get to sleep sober. She was always trying to live out the stories she read. Once she spent the whole summer training a frog she found in the yard to jump. Another summer she walked around the foothills with a donkey panning for gold.

She was going to buy you a parrot. I know I’ve told you that story. But I didn’t tell you that she did, she bought two dozen of them, a whole pandemonium, and was going to start breeding and selling them. She was keeping them in the garage. I’m

amazed you don't remember the noise. It was going to be this big surprise. For Christmas. And then she died and the sight of them made me so sad I opened the garage door one night and they all flew away.

The people in town had been worried about her. I had even been worried about her. I shouldn't have been. She loved life so much. She was so much fun."

I start to cry. Hearing about her makes me at once terribly sad and irrationally happy.

"Why can't I love you like I did as a kid?" I blurt out, laughing.

"No grown kid can. You know too much." He starts to laugh with me but it becomes a sigh.

There is a another pause, and I am conscious of the world again, Donner Lake to my left, clear blue water reflecting heaven, the car chugging along almost autonomously, the digital hybrid engine on the dash in perpetual motion, the numbers of the speedometer and clock on the dash, home in 48 minutes, I am driving, a red car suddenly in front of me also driving, the person in the car driving—not the car driving, I am driving, I must be careful, a bumper sticker on the back of the car suddenly, *Avenge yourself...live long enough to be a problem to your children.*

"That looks like something you would have," I say. The problem is the problem doesn't end with death. I touch the brakes and ease back from the red car.

"What?" he asks. I read him the bumper sticker and then I ask if he really can't see it.

"The best part about being dead is you don't know nothing." He gives a long,

deep laugh that is as good an end as any.

The car jolts. I jerk. The airbag fails to deploy. My face bashes into the wheel. My mouth tastes like metal. My father's voice is gone for a second time.

The car is stopped in the middle of the road. As I sit and collect myself, I don't hear the song on the radio. How am I going to explain all this? I start shaking. I start to cry. I am 43 years-old and I want my parents to make it all okay.

Some deep-seated survival instinct takes my mind to the Donner party again. Would Dad have eaten Mom? Probably not. Would Mom have eaten Dad? Yes, if only to find out what he tasted like. I laugh. I feel deranged. I wipe my face on the front of my blouse and take a deep breath. I look in the mirror and see I've been rear-ended by a hearse.

Its paint is chipping, its windshield is cracked, and the shadow stepping out the driver's seat does not seem like a funeral director. He has long blonde hair, a grungy goatee, a tie-dye shirt, and no shoes. He looks a little like Kurt Cobain.

He comes up to my window and asks, "Are you okay?"

I tell him, "Sure, I'm fine."

"Is your body okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I repeat, not realizing what he means. "What about you?"

"Oh, I don't have one. This baby is out of commission, purely recreational."

He's pointing over his shoulder to his car.

I turn and see that the back window of the Prius broke in the crash and the hatchback opened and somehow so did the coffin and Dad is spilling out onto I-80 like a bundle of firewood.

“Oh God,” I scream, bolting out of the car and onto the ground to hug Dad, still in his Tommy Bahama and bucket hat, and try to muscle him homeward.

“I’d offer him a ride,” Hearse Cobain is gesturing to his car again. “But my bed is in the back. I, uh, live in there,” he laughs. I groan as I struggle to lift my father’s cadaver. “Sorry,” he says, “Uh, let me help.”

So now we are heave-hoing Dad into the Prius, which I hope won’t be his final resting place, before a CHP shows up to take me off to Folsom. Deep down I know none of this is my fault but in that shattered moment it feels like it is—the accident, the body, the jackpot, my dead parents, everything. My flimsy explanation that Paul from the casino told me it was okay seems all the flimsier across state lines. I could pay the phantom cop off with the jackpot in a mob-movie-“you-didn’t-see-nothing-here” deal. That’s probably what Mom and Dad would have done. Or said they’d have done. Or imagined they’d do. “Always carry cash, in case you get in an accident, even if you’re in the right. You don’t want the insurance companies involved.” Dad and his creeds. And Mom, whispering into my ear in a voice I can’t remember, “Money comes and goes, who cares, but experiences last. Do it for the story.”

What I should really do is just tie a rock to the accelerator, drive the car into the lake and ride off in Hearse Cobain’s mobile home with the jackpot. My life would become one of Mom’s stories, a tall tale told at the end of the bar, and Mom and Dad would become distant ghosts best remembered around the fire. But, no, I can’t. They’re in my camp, always.

We manage to shove Dad back into his box before anyone notices, and we agree that if I don't say anything about getting rear-ended, he won't say anything about the body.

"Undertaker's Code," he says, and then he starts telling me about the guy he bought the car from, something about a *brujo* down in Mexico who needed some quick cash. He is about to launch into the next story, I can tell, so I fare him well and get into my car, still shaking.

I pull away as he is shouting, "*Hasta la muerte!*" and then I am speeding up and over the pass.

After twenty minutes of choking on my own breath, I realize that I have been hyperventilating. I pull into a Burger King parking lot, get out, fast walk in a few tight circles, then bee-line past the *Chicken Fries Are Back!* sign and shoulder myself into the bathroom. In the handicap stall, cheap grungy tiles and twitching fluorescent light to set the mood, I sit on the toilet with my pants on, my head in my hands and my tears in my palms.

Some time later, I get up and splash water on my face. I order the Chicken Fries, large, in honor of the Donner Party. I don't have any cash on me and when the tired face behind the register asks me how I would like to pay, I am lost for a moment. Then I come to, excuse myself, and go out to the car for the envelope in the glove box. I pay with a crisp hundred-dollar bill and get a stack of change that I don't bother to count. I sit sideways in a plastic booth with my legs up on the bench. The food comes far too quickly. I eat and think about my parents, how I knew them

about as well as I know where these chickens came from. It takes me six minutes in all, from first bite to last, and after I feel sick.

I go outside and stand in the lot for a minute taking in the last of the thin pine air. I don't think I'll be going to Tahoe for a while or to Nevada ever again. Only 39 miles home. At 73 mph, I'll be there in 32 minutes. I look up and see a splotch of red in a pine tree. It looks like a parrot. There must be gold in those roots.