

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

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Reaganomics Lying in the Road

Mother wasn't as pretty as Father. Not even close.

She was a short woman with nice and clean legs but her stomach seemed to protrude a bit much for someone as small as she. And when she wore her glasses, she reminded you of the librarian at your school.

Mother and Father met in high school, had me when both were eighteen, and spent the rest of their years (collectively) – him chasing, her supporting – his dreams in music.

"When your Father makes it we gonna' be rich, son," she'd say. But, I didn't know at the time what she meant.

Father spent most weekends away from home, especially when I was really young. On Friday nights he packed three shirts, two pair of underwear and various pairs of patent leather shoes in a gray duffle bag with faded black handles and a lopsided drawstring, sat the bag by the door, and held his guitar in his hand. He'd be chewing gum. Every black kid in my Englewood neighborhood spent Saturday morning with cereal and a television, tuned to the tightest cartoons the ABC network could offer. Mine were different. I'd stand at our front door modeled with weak wood, with Mother's dark hand pinned to my shoulder, yelling for my father. There would be the horn of a blue van ringing in the background. Mother usually told me to make sure I gave my father the best sendoff I could, because, of course she would as well, and this just may be the weekend he got his 'lucky break'.

Sometimes, it seemed as though he was heading to the army for boot camp and not on another trip throughout the Midwest playing music he loved. He came to the door slowly, casually as usual, with a cigarette in his left hand and a guitar pick in the other. It never rained or snowed or anything like that on those Saturday morning gigs Father left on, even in April or December. He'd wear the black and white version of Michael Jackson's jacket on the *Beat It* Video, with a bleached white t-shirt underneath. Each time he left I peered through the window trying to get a better glimpse of who he'd be leaving with while Mother continued kissing him. She'd remove her glasses when Father left for gigs. Although she'd be as blind as ever, Father's telling her that she looked really nice without them kept her doing it.

After they finished he'd kneel down in front of me, look me square in the eye with the cigarette dangling loosely from his lips and say, "Pretty soon I'm gonna' start taking you with me, son." I'd reply with a quick 'OK', although I never believed him. Even at the early ages of five and six, I learned to not believe what Father said. He was a convincing man who looked you fresh in the face while speaking, without quivering, blinking, thinking. I'm sure that at least fifteen to twenty percent of what he was saying had truth but it was rather hard trying to figure out what part that was.

Christmases and birthdays were letdowns that by the age of eight or nine I'd been numbed to. His weekend trips on the road began extending longer than Saturday to Monday and proceeded to Tuesdays and Wednes-

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days; they grew into weeks, two weeks, sometimes a month. Over that time I grew incredibly close to my mother.

She was a great cook and an even better hair washer. (She did this thing where she tickled the top of my head with her fingertips.) As long as I made sure my homework was done and the bathroom cleaned, we got along like roommates in college. But, on those long trips when Father would be on a gig I'd have to walk into their bedroom in order to see her. I'd notice her sitting in the chair watching the wall. Eventually, I'd begin staring at the blue wallpaper, wondering what she saw.

"Hi, Mother," I'd say.

"Philanderer."

"What'd you say, Mother?"

She'd nod and smile.

Mother had the straightest white teeth ever. She would've put any dentist out of business.

"What were you saying, Mother?" At that moment she'd push her glasses tight to her face and look at me. The smile would then be gone. "What's wrong, Mother?"

"Oh, nothing, son."

"Then why are you looking at the wall like that?"

"I'm waiting for your father."

"He coming back soon?"

She wouldn't reply but simply continued staring at me.

"Did you eat your dinner?" she'd ask. I nodded as she smirked for a second. "Come here, son."

I walked toward her sitting in the dark colored chair thinking maybe she was mad. "I did my homework too, Mother. You don't have to be mad at me."

She pulled me close and propped me between her legs. Mother then began examining my face, skin especially, as if at seven years old she expected me to have developed pimples.

"You look just like your father," she said. "Nice skin, always shiny and clean like it was produced in a factory."

And that was the beginning of my father's extended trips and my mother's staring at walls mumbling the word: philanderer.

Sometimes we'd talk a bit as she sat in the chair:

"What you doing, Mother?"

"Nothing."

"Why you staring at the wall?"

"I'm looking for your father."

"Do you see him?"

"I see all kinds of things."

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Those *things* changed, though. Father would return from his trips way overdue, smiling, shining, hugging and kissing Mother, and wearing new clothes. Along with those new jackets he wore and the eighties' blue jeans that 'flooded', Father had so many new clothes stuffed into his duffle bag that it was hard for the zipper to close fully.

Father eventually held on to one of his promises.

He approached the door on a Friday afternoon in the summer, horn from the blue van vibrating the dust of our windows, and hugging my mother tightly. When they separated, he looked at me. He didn't have to kneel as far as he did when I younger. I'd grown rather tall for an eight-year-old. Father placed his wide hands along my shoulders, fingertips calloused from pressing guitar strings, and began speaking in a serious voice I'd never heard previous.

"I think you're about ready to start hitting the road with me," he said. His breath smelled as though he smoked three cigarettes at a time. I immediately looked at Mother, who turned her eyes to the window to get a better glimpse of the van outside. She was breathing so hard that I easily saw her chest expanding and contracting. "It's about time you learned what life is like in the real world," Father continued, hands remaining on my shoulders.

Before my mother turned to acknowledge what he'd said we were already shuffling through the beige dresser in my bedroom, grabbing the same things I'd noticed him packing each and every time he went away: two pair of underwear, a pair each of dress and sweat socks, three t-shirts, jeans, and the jacket I thought I looked coolest in. I hugged Mother abruptly and walked down the unpainted stairs of our home as though I was never coming back.

When I got closer to the van I immediately noticed that it wasn't totally blue. It was this dark green tint and had a door on the side with no window and a big handle that definitely took a grown person's arm to maneuver. Father moved into the van, lifting me as easily as he had when I was a newborn, and shoved me to the far side of the van's wall. There was no window on my side as well, which made the inside of the van very dark when the door closed. In the back were two bench seats and an open space that looked large enough to fit dead bodies. There was a drum set there, though, a beat up guitar I knew was beneath Father ever touching, and a large black speaker with various cords dangling like tentacles.

"This is the band, son," he said as the van shifted into drive.

I scanned everyone's face as though I were choosing them from a criminal lineup. The driver had to have been the leader of the band. He had chalky skin and sat firmly in the front seat with the wheel in his right hand gripped only by his third and fourth fingers. He had a cigarette in the other and spoke in a squeaky voice that did not go with his serious demeanor. To the right was the only woman in the entire ensemble: Beverly. She was a phony blonde with those fishnet Madonna *Like a Virgin* gloves and wore eyeliner that made her look mean and mysterious. Beverly's teeth were as straight as my mother's and she seemed to spare no one the luxury of viewing them.

"Hi there," she said. Although I knew there were two other male band

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members in the back, seeing as though I could feel the heat of their breath; I didn't bother speaking or even turning my head to acknowledge them once I'd seen Beverly. She smelled like peacefulness and I stared at the back of her head.

After I buckled my seat belt, noticing that my short legs still came nothing close to the rug on the van's floor, I began looking at my father. He sat in a position you wouldn't believe a man with testicles could in such a cramped space: his left leg folded over the right, with the guitar resting in his lap like a baby preparing for a diaper change.

We rode in this smoke filled silence for what seemed like two days, but was actually only three or so hours, until we arrived in Lone Tree, Iowa. In school, while studying the states on a map, I never realized how long it took or how far it was to get from Chicago to those towns in Iowa. Along the way we passed wheat fields and corn fields and big grass groves filled with enough beef to make a million burgers. I had to stretch to the back or front windows in order to see them clearly.

Father spent the majority of his time tuning the guitar, smoking cigarettes, chewing gum, humming smooth tunes in a voice like Smokey Robinson's, and asking me, "Are you ok, son?" I'd never nodded my head that many times in my life. But, when we got to Iowa, it all began to make sense.

We pulled up to a reddish-brown brick building, with windows cleaner than crystal. It looked like a castle you'd see in a medieval movie, complete with a drawbridge and dragon that blew ferocious fire at unwanted guests. A man with a uniform began grabbing bags from the van and wheeling them on a cart. There was a white guy sitting behind a desk, talking on the phone, writing, doing so many things with such speed I couldn't keep track. He had a jet-black mustache that covered his top lip completely. Looked like he may have lost food in there when he ate. He spoke in a tone I knew he made up to make him seem special.

The driver of our van was a short man, closer to my height than Father's, and *definitely* was the band's leader. He walked to the counter, barely able to see over it's wood surface, and began speaking with whatever authority he could command from that squeaky voice.

He was Beverly's husband.

Because, though he held a cigarette in his left hand, puffing between sentences as he talked, the other remained locked with hers as she stood to his side, quietly.

The attendant divided the room keys and Father and I proceeded up the stairs quickly. He carried his duffle bag loosely, as if he valued nothing inside, and plopped it onto the bed.

"You ok, son?" He began lighting another cigarette. "You like it so far?"

I nodded.

The walls were thin in our hotel room and I could easily hear people conversing on each side of me. There was a 19-inch television, one big bed (which meant Father and I were sleeping together), and a red wood table with a lamp. Straight ahead was the only window, a large window that

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extended floor to ceiling, and slid open left to right. Father immediately walked out there after lighting his cigarette and I approached the television.

"Come out here with me, son," he said no sooner than I'd turned on the power.

Iowa wind felt different than anything I'd ever experienced in Chicago. It didn't maintain a consistent force, nor was it even strong enough to blow papers away. It was almost charming, blowing softly into your ear as though it were whispering you a secret.

"This is what your father does on weekends," he started again, while patting his pocket for more cigarettes. He lit the stick with speed, and placed it in the corner of his mouth as he spoke. "You need to see what happens in the real world now," he continued. But, Father didn't look at me as he talked. His eyes were focused to the sky or something in the air, and they panned back and forth as though his words were written on one of those jet-banners for the entire world to see. "These are the eighties, son. Things are different now than when I grew up. They're not better, they're worse. Everything's more expensive and most of it is not reachable. A black man's gotta' get what he can."

I remained silent and still with my eyes darting from the top of his head to his feet. Father lit cigarette after cigarette while talking. Seemed as though he smoked each one in two pulls. After he smoked the cigarette down, he'd place the butt between his middle finger and thumb, shooting them as though they were from a slingshot. I'd watch each one as they landed like raindrops in the road.

"This here is Reaganomics we live in, young man."

I looked at him closely because I'd heard that word before; Mother mentioned it often when she watched the wall. The news sometimes played faintly in the background but she didn't focus on it. Until Father returned, Mother sat in the bedroom listening to radios and televisions. Said she learned more about life by listening to it rather than watching.

"Now you get to see what I do all the time, son," he started again. He moved quickly inside the room, snatched his guitar with less care than I'd ever seen him handle it, and stepped back to the balcony.

The balcony was wide enough for us both to stand, but, the moment he came outside with the guitar, it seemed overwhelmingly crowded.

"This is how you make it, son. There is no small-time right now. Listen to the news, listen to the world, listen to it all, and remember...there will be no trickling down effect. You are black and always will be, and you have to be aggressive and take all you can." Father extended the guitar to me but I made no motion to take it. "Aim high, son. Aim high."

That same night was the first I'd ever witnessed my father on stage. He galloped and sprung on his legs with the agility of ballerinas, singing, dancing, strumming the guitar, and pointing at me. On that night, in the hotel bar with the stage that seemed as big as the Apollo's, I was allowed to do things I could've never done back home. I sat in a crowded, smoke-filled room with at least fifty white men and women in suits; I drank four glasses of soda-pop because Father told the waitresses to give me what I wanted; I ate pretzels with salt chunks as big as rocks, was called 'cute'

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repeatedly, and didn't get to bed until the early hours of the next morning.

Father was in bed with me for a while after his show. He tucked me in tightly beforehand, telling me repeatedly that I'd better not pee from drinking all that soda-pop. I didn't. But, I did. And no sooner than I'd come close to dozing off, I heard a knock on the room's side door. Initially, I assumed that it was some sort of storage area for clothes or cleaning products. I was wrong. And the knocking cleared my confusion. It was actually a door leading the room next to us.

Father opened the door and Beverly's small frame shot through.

"He's downstairs drinking," she said. They walked out to the balcony, held hands and whispered in the Iowa wind, while Beverly's blond hair blew in the breeze. "Is he asleep?" I heard her ask.

"Yeah, he's fine."

Father stood on the balcony kissing Beverly different than he did Mother, like she was an Olympic medal he didn't deserve, or a new car he'd won on a game show, if he didn't take all he could at that moment...

The next morning I was allowed to play in front of the hotel alone. There was a small, clear-watered pond with ducks quacking around it. I took three pieces of bread that were leftover from breakfast and began feeding them. Beverly came and sat on the bench right next to me. Her hair seemed to continue blowing even when there was no wind.

"You look just like your dad." She spoke as though we were friends. "Good looking, just like him."

I nodded.

"Do you like army men?"

Another nod. I continued chopping small pieces of the bread, tossing them to the birds.

"I got a surprise for you," she continued while pulling her left hand from her back.

When she handed me the figure I didn't immediately take it. I just stared at her for a while.

"I bought it for you," she said.

"Beverly likes you, son," Father said as he strolled up behind me. "She's your mother away from your mother."

And I couldn't help but notice the toy's packaging. All my favorite colors lay there: blues, shiny silvers, anything with gloss and shine. I didn't move.

"Remember what I told you last night, son." Father walked around the beach, breath sweet with chewing gum and as musty as an ashtray. "There will be no trickling down effect. Take what's yours."

He opened his palm and I placed the remaining chunk of wheat bread there. After he turned and began tossing pieces, he yanked a cigarette from his pocket, took two normal puffs, and nudged me with his elbow. "Trust your father, son." He began speaking while looking off into the distance like the night before. "You have to."

I turned my head to notice Beverly sitting there, hair continuing to

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blow, and smiling with those good teeth.

From that weekend on I traveled with Father at least once a month, traveling with Beverly's Band. Once the band began booking better gigs they bought a new van with as many windows as Chicago skyscrapers. It rode smooth and gave everyone enough space to stretch their legs easily, and Father could tune and play his guitar without cramping. We traveled as far as the Las Vegas deserts and even made stops in San Antonio. I saw mountains in Denver, palm trees in Miami.

After a while Beverly and Father sometimes held hands on the opposite side of their seats in the van, out of view. He'd always sit right behind her; she'd wrap her hand around the right side and touch his knee. Father was doing a good job of taking things, of working his way around Reaganomics. I'd hear Beverly's husband arguing before and after gigs, louder and squeakier each time; could even smell the liquor on his breath from next door. Ironically, we always ended up with the room that was connected to theirs. Her husband would then storm from their room, slamming the door hard enough to wake everyone in the building. Within five to ten minutes Beverly would be tapping that side door, whispering my father's name as though he were to read her a bedtime story. They'd tiptoe to the bathroom, the balcony, or the bedroom (if we had a suite.) In those I slept on the sofa. Their whispers were easy to make out. Father asked her where her husband was, she'd say it didn't matter. He'd tell her his bills were piling at home and that I needed things; she'd tell him it would be handled. I heard them kissing and fondling often and the entire time they assumed me asleep.

Mother never found out about Beverly, even after Father's long road trips became more frequent and he was eventually fired from the band. He told Mother it was because of 'creative differences' and that the band's *real* leader, Beverly's husband, didn't want to play any up and coming material.

But I knew the truth.

And Father jumped from band to band after leaving that group and slowly began playing less and less. There would be no early morning waking on weekends to the strum of his guitar, or the tuning of his strings. He and Mother were eventually 'married.' On the night before their wedding he packed the guitar in the black case I hadn't seen since he purchased it years previous, and placed it in my room. It sat in the corner, alongside the steel bedpost with a note attached: "This is for you now, son. Take what's yours."

The note is still on it and I never learned to play.