

Some Anecdotes for My Son · *Rolf Nelson*

THE TIME I DIDN'T HOLD THE DOOR

This one takes place next to a flat, green lake in the middle of Wisconsin, at a home my father was building while weathering a divorce.

I was sixteen, and it was a Saturday afternoon in late spring. You will know the feeling someday. My father had invited his colleagues up for a big department picnic, and I found myself standing on his new patio at the center of a bouquet of sociology professors in bright Hawaiian shirts.

That was the kind of day it was. School was out and they were playful. They moseyed in and out of conversations, holding Mooseheads to their chests. Except for a forsaken, cross-eyed baby who had been playpenned out on the lawn, I was the only one there at the picnic under forty, so I was having to make up fast answers to questions about my future. "William here is going to be an historian," one would tell another. "Well!" the other would say. I stood there nodding and smiling as arms were slung around my shoulders.

Don't let this happen to you.

I had had a few beers that morning while helping my father rebuild his carburetor, and by the time this takes place they had drained away and left my head feeling opened and emptied. Perhaps that was a factor. And my father had had the patio blacktopped just the week before—it was still so fresh and sticky you had to lift your feet to mingle, and everything, the air, the carrots, and even the clam dip tasted vaguely like asphalt.

It was a cool afternoon, but the sun was so bright it had tricked the professors, lured them out of their sleeves, and as I stood there I watched goosebumps make big, raw drumsticks of their pale arms. Away from the patio the day was quiet. The lake, which had been choppy all spring, was as flat and green as a bird bath. The reflections of clouds and pine trees were floating on the water like a film.

We had had what my father called "a long, rough year." Perhaps that is what drives the drama here. Or perhaps it is just that I am sixteen and focusing on the end of my nose the laser of my private headache. Anyway, I have been standing there for what seems like hours when suddenly the sea of professors parts, and my father approaches the screen door with a huge,

rattling cooler full of ice. I can see how heavy it is in the straining straps of his sandals. I hear it in his grunting. I watch his arms quiver as he pauses before the door a moment, considering his options, and, though I am only a couple steps away, I decide very consciously that I won't walk over and hold it open for him.

It was and is an interesting moment for me. I watch him try to catch the handle with his elbow. I watch him slosh ice water down his belly trying to brace the cooler on his knee, and I feel good about it. It is, I am aware, my first conscious, real act of revenge, and for a moment my skin feels clean and tingly. But when he gives in finally and bends to set the cooler down, the feeling is suddenly over. I see his spine poking through his T-shirt, rising in a row of sad, little bumps from the muscles in his strong back.

I guess this one is about learning that the reptile in us binds us. You will know, when you're older, the humility of the skeleton. I saw his spine there and all I could feel was a little shabby and embarrassed.

I have tons of stories like this.

MY FATHER'S SWITCH TO BEER

It was sometime in the winter of that same year, when I was sixteen, that my father's second wife discovered he had something going with a graduate student, and it was then that he formally embarked on his crusade to find a new and better life.

The home on the lake was part of that. So was dialogue. Suddenly he was a great father. He said, "I've finally decided I'm not just going to stand aside and watch you zoom on by me." We would go on walks together in his new woods, where he would say things like, "this was strike two for me, Billy. You're looking at a man who has finally realized that he has to get back to the basics or go down swinging." His marriage with my mother had ended just a couple years before under the same circumstances. You may remember me telling you that one—where I run into him and a girl at the fireworks, recognizing the blanket they're sitting on before recognizing him.

This time, after his second strike, he dropped ten years in a matter of weeks. He started running and let his hair grow into long gray waves until he looked like a tanned and well-toned Beethoven. Though when I was a child he had never let me have a dog, he went out and bought himself a

skinny black Labrador whom he named Diana, after Diana Ross, and whom he took everywhere with him, even to his classes.

Until then, for as long as I had remembered, coffee had been the only liquid I had ever seen enter his body. He never even drank water. When we went to restaurants he would work the waitress so hard she would finally just leave the pot on the table, but his water glass would sit there in the corner where he pushed it, sweaty and unsipped. That winter, however, trying to relax, he dropped coffee and took up beer, allowing himself as many per day as miles he had run. Sometimes I still think about the relish there, the way he treated it as a new discovery, buying imports, reading labels, holding frosted, foamy steinfuls up to the light to evaluate their amber.

LEARNING IT'S A BIG PLANET

During the spring of his second divorce, after the snow had melted, my father came at me day after day in big, warm gusts of repentance. Every weekend he would pick me up from my mother's house, honking, and drive me up to the lake, where we would check in to see how his new house was coming along and sleep in sleeping bags on the unfinished floors.

In the afternoons we would lace up our new boots and hike the muddy trails that circled the lake. My father had never been interested in nature, but now he seemed amazed by it. He stopped and picked things off branches, squeezed them in his fingers, and tasted them.

There was an abandoned beaver lodge across the lake from his house, and we would often stop there for lunch. We would drink beer and eat cheese curds while Diana, his dog, would wade before us in the icy, recently-thawed water and slowly dismantle the lodge by tugging on its sticks.

"It's a damn big planet," my father said, as we sat there one afternoon. He was looking out across the choppy glare. The sun was so bright he was squinting even behind his sunglasses. "That's something that's easy to forget."

I said I wouldn't forget it. I looked across the lake. I still remember the layout. Over the pine trees and birches that ringed the shore, a line of hills receded off in all directions. A fire tower stood halfway up the side of one of them, and wires swooped down from it in beautiful, even arcs. Here and there the big picture windows of fancy cabins glinted through the trees.

“Beavers realize it’s a big planet,” my father said. He had been watching nature specials. “The beavers that built this place may have spent years in it, raising their families and all. Beavers will swim miles for just the right stick. They’ll lay down a floor of mud and line it with their own fur, but still they realize it’s a big world and they aren’t afraid to leave it all behind.” He looked at me. “Something happens and they move on. That’s what I’m talking about, Billy. They could be swimming in Canada now. They probably are. It’s a perfect example. Change is possible.”

“I see it,” I said. We sat there together, quiet and thinking. I could tell he liked that. Diana froze at one point and watched a pair of ducks descend and skid into the water a hundred yards down the shore.

“It’s a good planet,” my father said. Sitting there on his log, he sort of leaned out into the day. His muddy boots were planted wide, and in his thick sweater, the way he rested his elbow on one knee, he looked like a model in a Camel ad, completely at ease in the world. He squinted at me, and I smiled back, as I had been smiling all spring. The beer had made me feel happy to be there, but I felt strange about it. Suddenly, it was as if he had no history. I had heard him apologizing to people for months and seen it only make him stronger. Four years before, my mother and I had played checkers for three straight hours one night, waiting for my father to come home, and as I sat there on that beaver dam I thought he believed he was no longer that man. It’s hard now to describe the feeling. Across the lake I could see the yellow of the bulldozer that was parked next to his unfinished house, and the silver of the ladders and orange of the hunting jackets the roofers wore as they carried planks across the driveway. While he talked, I watched a couple of silver boats with fishermen, floating in a forest of stumps, the way their lines lit up in shiny arcs when they cast them into the sunlight.

MY DRIVING LESSONS

I learned to drive on the gravel roads around that lake, in the fifteen-year-old Buick station wagon that had been the family car while I was growing up.

My father was its original owner, and it had over one hundred eighty thousand miles on it. He had worked on it himself over the years. Throughout my childhood, the floor of our garage had been littered with

wrenches and cigarette butts, and there were times when I wouldn't ride my bike for entire weekends because I could hear him swearing through the door and was afraid to go in and get it. That spring, however, seeking to simplify, he had bought himself a new Toyota, and he was going to give me the Buick that summer when I earned my license. He taught me how to tune it and grease the joints, and together we rebuilt the carburetor and replaced the brake pads. He would check my work, testing the tightness of the bolts and calling me Mr. Goodwrench.

On those roads he would have me drive so fast the rear tires would slide out of the curves, and more than once we ended up sideways and halfway up a dirt embankment. Sometimes we would crash through bushes and get whipped through the open windows by budding summer branches. My father thought I should learn to control the sliding, and he would cheer me wildly, whooping it up as he kept one arm braced on the dashboard and the other around Diana, who, hanging herself way out for the air, would nearly be launched into space.

MY FIRST SAILING ADVENTURE

What can I say about this one?

My father decided to take up sailing. He bought a tiny two-man Sunfish, the kind you can tie to the top of a Buick, and we hauled it up to his lake the day of his department picnic.

After the picnic had been under way for a few hours, after my father had run Diana into exhaustion trying to prove to his patient colleagues that she could catch a frisbee—after all his throws had zoomed up and away with the wind, after that had failed—he decided that it was time for him and his son to show off their new boat. He had me help him carry it out to the lawn, and I stood there while he unwrapped it.

Since neither of us had sailed before, we had to use the instructions on the back of the box that held the ropes and the sail. I would read a step, and he would look over my shoulder at the diagram to make sure all the clips and pulleys were going where they should. The screws were sealed in little plastic bags, which I opened with my teeth.

Most of the faculty were still on the patio, but a few of the couples had wandered down to the water and were sitting on the new aluminum pier. One couple was wading. They were knee-deep—her in shorts and him with

his jeans rolled up his knees—holding drinks and hanging on each other’s shoulders. She was laughing and screaming—a scream that seemed to rise and hang in the air—about the freezing water and the squishy mud that was oozing through her toes.

It was six o’clock, and the sun was still bright, suspended high over the far shore. I was drinking Pepsi because I was sixteen and not allowed to drink beer in front of the guests. My father had propped his beer in a patch of grass and flies were gathering on it. As he consulted the pictures and worked at the sailing knots, I would shoo the flies away from it, and they would zoom off over the lake and into the trees in wide, frustrated circles, then settle again on top of the bottle and conspire along its lip.

My father unwrapped the bright, nylon sail and shook it out like a blanket. It settled down over us, and while my father clipped its grommets to the boom we stood there in its cool, blue light. Though I could hear the professors talking from underneath the sail, it seemed as if they were somehow distant and that my father and I were there alone. But when he hauled the sail up the mast, we suddenly had everyone’s attention. Even the one-year-old, who had been bribed into silence with a ring of keys a couple hours earlier, seeing us now took them out of his mouth, jingled them and cooed.

When the boat was ready, my father made a ceremony out of shaking hands with me. He picked up his beer, finished it, and shouted, “Bid us bon voyage, folks! The boy and his old man here are about to venture out onto the briny.” Several of the men toasted us, and a wife pretended to throw confetti. There on the lawn, the boat tilted to one side a little, weighed down by the mast.

“Bon voyage!” the professors yelled. They were waving, so I waved back.

“Say good-bye to your loved ones, Billy!” my father shouted, so I shouted, “Good-bye to your loved ones, Billy!” Everyone laughed and looked at each other, and my father looked proud of me.

As we carried the boat down to the water, Diana raced ahead, rejuvenated. She plunged in and started swimming in circles, as we put the boat in near the shore and tugged it out to the end of the pier. A slight breeze came through and flirted momentarily with the sail, uncurling it like a flag.

My father was excited. He sprinted back up to the house, slamming the screen door, then reappeared seconds later wearing a brand new sailor’s hat

and holding another one for me. He winked when he handed it to me, and I noticed that it was heavy and that there was a beer inside it. "Life preservers. Check," he said. He unwrapped them and tossed them into the boat. He grabbed the ring buoy from the end of the pier and tossed that in also, saying, what the hell, there might be choppy seas ahead.

He was giddy. He whistled as he lowered the wooden keel through its slot in the floor and threaded a rope through a couple of pulleys. He acted as if he knew what he was doing. He had read a book on it.

He sat down in the bow and held the boom in his hands. The seat was so low he had to spread his knees to keep them out of his armpits. He looked up at me and told me to push us out, and I gave a good shove and scrambled over the stern as we drifted out from the pier into the sunset.

"Bon voyage!" a man on the patio yelled. My father took off his hat for a moment and waved it at the loved ones we were leaving behind.

Momentum kept us drifting for a while as the sun glared in the water around us. The boat left little ripples in its wake as it eased across the flat water. When we finally drifted to a stop, my father lined the sail out and tried to find a wind, and it fluttered a moment, even billowed, but then fell slack and still.

"Well," he said. He swung the boom in different directions, testing the air, pausing now and then to sip from his beer, then swinging it again. But there was nothing. No breeze.

Diana stood on the beach now, barking. Wet, she looked skinny and small.

Every so often the sail would start to tremble, and my father would yell, "Hang on!" but it always collapsed again and hung above us sadly, like laundry, from the mast.

After a few minutes, Diana, unable to stand it any longer, jumped in and swam after us. She chugged out straight and purposefully, and when she reached us, she paddled back and forth along the side of the boat, silently, without complaining. With her black face riding low over the water, she looked more like a seal than a dog. Her lashes were tipped with fine drops of water, and there was no expression on her face, even after several minutes, when she started to cough and weaken. As she paddled back and forth, she looked up into my eyes, blinking. She just looked at me, and for all I knew she believed she could keep swimming forever.

"She's going to drown," I said.

My father was tightening a rope and frowning. "Well, haul her in," he said.

I reached down and hauled her in by the collar. She shook the water off her fur, and everyone on shore laughed as I leaned back and shielded myself from the mist, but my father didn't flinch or look up from his rope, just let it rain down on him.

"Hey, did someone break wind?" yelled one of the professors. A couple others were laughing.

My father looked up and shook his fist at them. "Landlubbers!" he shouted. The professors kept laughing, because they were too far away to see that my father was no longer amused by his boat. He kept maneuvering the boom, coaxing the sail to billow. But it was clear the day was dead. And finally he quit trying.

He crawled past my shoulder and slowly stood up, wobbly on the stern. He had had a few, and the boat rocked slightly to one side.

"My kingdom for a wind!" he yelled. His voice was huge. You could hear it reflecting off the lake. A couple more professors came down to the end of the pier, one fanning a paper plate in our direction. They were laughing, and a couple of them leaned out over the water, blowing toward us. From our distance, I could barely see their tiny puckered lips.

I moved to the bow and sat there on the plastic. I could feel the ring of the hat on my head. I opened my beer and drank some of it, while Diana sat next to me and leaned her wet fur hard against my leg.

My father turned and looked down at us, first at me, then at Diana. He took his shirt off and stood there, showing the white hair on his chest, then turned again, raised his arms over the water like Neptune, and yelled, "My kingdom for a wind!"

Nothing happened. I didn't know what to think. Everyone was watching us. Then someone came out to the end of the pier with a camera, and my father shouted, "Join the old man for a picture, Billy!" He held his hand down for me.

I didn't stand, however. That's the catch to this one.

"Come on," he said. He summoned me with his fingers, and Diana scrambled up and stood next to him. Her paws slipped on the wet plastic and she had a hard time staying on board.

"Come on," my father said. He was laughing, and the professors on shore were smiling.

“There’s not enough room,” I said. “We’ll tip it over.” I didn’t know what I was doing, exactly, but suddenly I wanted something to regret.

“There’s room,” he said. He was not angry. He was patient, even with the professors there waiting.

“Cheese!” yelled a woman on the shore.

My father stood there holding his hand down for me. He still had his hat on, and despite his new muscles he seemed old to me.

“I don’t want to,” I said. I sipped my beer, which was absolutely cold.

My father looked at me a moment longer, then gave up. He turned, tipped his hat for the camera, tightened it, two-handed, down over his head, then pressed his palms together like a belly dancer and dove straight into his freezing lake.

He still had his hat on when he surfaced and started swimming to shore. Diana was barking and the professors looked serious now. He swam clumsily and you could tell by the deliberate gasp of his breathing that the cold was working on him. The lake glared all around him while the professors stood quiet and watched. Diana whined and jumped in after him when my father started to slow just fifty feet from the boat.

I could hear the birds chirping up in the trees, and suddenly I sensed that here I was about to watch a bright and sunlit tragedy. When he stopped for a moment to tread water, his head was barely breaking the surface. I could hear the ripples from his dive lapping gently against the boat. I looked up and saw the professors were standing there holding their beers, and the one-year-old was sitting in his playpen, pulling up the grass. Except for my father’s breathing, it was as if none of us were there.

I thought this was it, so I grabbed the ring buoy. I got a good grip on the end of the rope and flung the buoy spiraling into the air. It hung there, red against the white sky, while the rope uncurled lazily behind it, then the rope settled gently in a line on the water, and the buoy bumped my father on the head.

It knocked his hat off, then this happened: he stopped swimming and just stood up. His feet were on the bottom. The water barely reached his navel, and he stood there in it for several seconds, looking at me, then looking at all of us, while water dripped from his long, gray hair.

Then, as if to relieve the moment of itself, he started to laugh. “Ow!” he yelled, feeling his head. “You really know how to rescue a guy!” He turned to the professors, but they were heading back to the patio already. Diana

paddled past him and headed for shore. My father looked back to me with no expression at all, then turned and followed her, wading up onto the beach with the buoy while I held the rope and let him tow me in.

THE TIME YOUR GRANDFATHER APOLOGIZED

My father drove the Buick on the way home from the party I've told you about. I had not had much experience, yet, driving in the dark.

With the windows rolled up it was quiet in the car. Diana was muddled, so she was in the back, sleeping on a blanket. We had the heat on, and I too felt sleepy, but my father's eyes were wide and alert. He watched the road and didn't say much for nearly an hour, until we had left the hills of central Wisconsin and eased down onto the prairie, and the road had leveled and straightened out in front of our headlights like a runway. Then, out of nowhere, he pulled the car onto the shoulder and stopped.

"Hey," he said. I sat up. There was no traffic, just black horizon and stars, and it was black inside the car. The old greens and blues of the dashboard lights were the only colors anywhere. He was pointing to them.

"Look," he said. I looked, but noticed nothing but the green light on the hairs of his hand. "There's something I've just realized," he said and then sat silent for a moment. "There's a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles on this old piece of shit."

I looked at him. "That's the speed of light," he said. "Think about it. If we had been traveling the speed of light, we would have come this far in one second."

THE DEATH OF A CAR

I loved the Buick dearly after it had surpassed the speed of light, and when it became mine, I would check the odometer constantly and watch the miles roll over as I drove. The story has a sad ending, however. By the end of that summer the gears were slipping, and two of the cylinders were frozen—and, though I tried to keep up with it, it was costing me a fortune and everyone, Mr. Goodwrench, even my father, came to the opinion that it was no longer worth saving.

But while it was still in all its glory, I would take it out late at night with my friends and drive up and down along the Lake Michigan shore so fast

you had to yell because of the rattling. Sometimes we would bring bottle rockets, and my friends would light them in the car. As the fuses crackled, they would hold the rockets out the open windows, and when they ignited and zoomed off ahead of us, I would speed up and try to catch them. Sometimes I could hang with them for a second or two as their red flames hovered in the headlights, but, to tell you the truth, I think I knew even then that I never had a chance.