Natural-Born Proud

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Natural-Born Proud: A Revery.
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WE’RE BURYING MY DAD TODAY. At one o’clock. He died suddenly last Thursday. When he didn’t come home from his office at the church, Mom got worried and called. No answer. One of the deacons went in and found him slumped dead over his desk. He was young, only 63, but he had a stroke like his mother, brother and sister before him. I now know the end that some of my genes may hold for me and my children. But right out of the blue? I bet if he’d had a choice, he wouldn’t have picked this as a surprise for his family and friends.

Feels like ages ago that Deke’s phone call got me up from the dinner table. “Hey, Satch. You better git down here. The Reverend died this evenin.” Just like that. Jesus Christ! So here I am driving that same hundred and thirty miles down to Monterey from San Francisco again. Must be the fifth time I’ve made this trip in the last seven days. I was just there yesterday, but had to go back to the city to pick up my wife and kids for the funeral.

Seems I’ve lived a whole life behind the wheel since last Friday, but this is the last trip for now. Claudia’s quiet and a little tight, but she looks pretty in her navy blue suit and hat. Prim and proper. Michael, Anna and baby Booker are so cute in their Sunday-go-to-meetin clothes. Wish it weren’t their grandpa’s funeral we were going to. Hard thing for an eight-year-old, a six-year-old and a toddler. Poor kids. Poor Mom. Poor Dad. Hell, poor all of us.

What a week! Mom falling into bed and needing the doctor. Bub and Carolyn flying in from Kansas City. Everyone running to me for what to do. Phone calls. Confusion. People pouring in and out of the house. Police escorts, flowers, undertakers, caskets, insurance, everybody and his brother “wanting to say a word” at
the service. Pounding back and forth up and down the freeway between San Francisco and Monterey. I feel like a zombie.

What’s that saying—“Life’s a beach and then you’re dead”? One week the Old Man’s cruising along, feeling great—making plans, doing just fine. The next week we’re putting him into a hole in the ground. And here I am doing everything from fathering other folks and deciding what to do to running little jive errands because somebody lost his goddamned car keys. Taking care of everything and everybody. Madness. It was my father that died, so who’s taking care of me? What am I supposed to do?

I didn’t need this. I’m not ready to be the head of this family. I’m too young. I need more time, time to get my own life in shape and my kids farther along in theirs. Besides, I wasn’t finished with my dad yet. But no, I’ve got to stiff-upper-lip it. Make sure everything comes out right for other people, manage their affairs. Besides, I hate funerals.

I can just see the hordes of people that’ll be there. They’ll jam the aisles and gather in clumps around the steps up into the church. The mayor and local business people droning on about his service to the community. His preacher friends, black and white, from all over the state praising his “faith in the Lord and his devotion to God’s people.” Same old stuff, but this time about my dad.

The music will be the only good part. No Bach chorales, no sorrow-song spirituals. Just plain, strong Gospel music. If everything about my folks’ religion were like the music, I could dig it. The choir singing “We Are Our Heavenly Father’s Children,” and the singers, the organ and the piano merging into a single sound, one that’s simple and complex, brilliant and dark, that thunders and soars. When they get to the last line, “He knows just how much we can bear,” even if I do have a hole as big as the Grand Canyon in the middle of my guts, I know I’ll feel like everyone else, transported right up through the ceiling toward heaven. What music!

Of course Sandra Wilkins, chubby and cherubic, will sing “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” my dad’s favorite, promising divine guidance on earth and everlasting life in heaven to everyone within hearing distance. It’ll make saints and sinners, birth
and death, all one. Bishop Jones’s sermon about God’s faithful servant’s having labored in the vineyard and gone on to his just reward will try to explain what’s happened. Maybe the Bishop’s words will satisfy some people. Make them feel like my dad’s early death was all right, that they and he will have many mansions to look forward to. But not me. No, sir. Hell, no. I’m not convinced God’s eye really is on the sparrow, or me.

I know the Old Man’s hunting buddies’ll be there. Of course, Deke will be there. I saw him at the church before I went home yesterday. Unca Billy’s been dead five years. I’m not sure about Willis because he doesn’t live on the Peninsula any more. If they all could come, I know they’d talk about those hunting trips we used to go on. Sure. And they’d probably bring up some of those old yarns and stories. Hunting and stories, stories and hunting. Damn.

Poor Mom seems lost. She’s three years younger than the Old Man was, but somehow, she always seemed to assume she’d die first or that his death wouldn’t be so quick or final, so inconvenient. For one thing, she doesn’t know the first thing about how to handle their finances because he always did that stuff. Oh, they discussed money and made decisions about big expenditures together, things like whether to buy a new car or more lots, “on speculation,” he called it. And they shared the view that even though the congregation dearly loved and took good care of their pastor, he and his family had an obligation to be independent of other people’s good will, free from the ways the spirit might move the two hundred house maids, manual laborers and pensioners from the military. Having the full responsibility for her life is something she hasn’t looked for, and she doesn’t seem prepared to do it or have much inclination to get ready to do it.

Bub’s struggling too. When I called, I first told him to sit down. He started to resist like he used to do when we were boys, “Why?” I raised my voice and spoke faster, “Would you please sit down and shut the hell up?” Sitting or not, he got quiet on the other end of the phone line. I told him the Old Man had died, straight and direct like Deke had told me. After Bub kept asking me, “What?” “What?” “What?” about ten times, like he didn’t understand English, he couldn’t stop murmuring quietly, “Oh,
Oh, shit. Oh, no. Oh, shit,” over and over. He was having a hard time.

I don’t think his problem is just that he’s younger than I am. It’s also that he feels guilty for what he believes are his past mistakes—running away to the army back when he was eighteen, not going to college, not getting saved. I wish he didn’t feel that way.

He acts like if he overwhelsms himself with scrambling around and helping take care of things, he’ll wake up one morning to find that all of this was just a bad dream. The Old Man will still be alive. He’ll walk into the folks’ bedroom, and there will be our dad, propped up in bed with pillows, reading his Bible or his Sunday School book over the top of his glasses, just like he did on Saturdays for as long as either of us can remember. Bub’s so manic he makes me nervous. With some more time, maybe he’ll be able to accept what has happened and move on with his own life. But right now he’s drowning in his grief, and I have to help him. I’ll deal with my own stuff later.

I’m sure that if I poked around in my own deepest feelings, trying to name my most basic response to my father’s death, and to his life, I’d have to admit to being more like my brother than different from him. I too feel cheated, robbed by Dad’s dying as he did, so young, so suddenly, mid-stride so to speak. And if I were honest about it, I’d confess that I, too, must have almost believed that the Old Man, in some ways so much bigger than life, was bigger than death too.

Goddamn, my Old Man and I went through a lot of things with each other. And we never did quite finish all that was left. Isn’t that always the way it happens? I remember how he rankled at my insistence on living in the City rather than on the Monterey Peninsula. And he felt a deep, but seldom-expressed sadness that I chose not to be religious in the same way he was. Wanted me to be a preacher too. He said I was “bookish” so I’d “study God’s word and be a good shepherd.” Not me, Jack. I’m no good at faith. I have a hard enough time trying to understand things.

Mom always said he and I were proud and born that way, that we bounced off each other like a Mack truck and an army tank. I’ve never known whether I was the truck or the tank, but I guess I am
stubborn and strong-willed like he was. I don’t mean to be. It’s just that...oh, I don’t know. But he seemed to think he had some innate sense of what was right that others didn’t have. Maybe that’s one of his family’s traits too, like the tendency toward stroke.

Of course, I really must have been a trial to my parents when I was growing up. I didn’t always mean to. It just happened. I know I made them crazy by refusing to argue; going ahead and doing what I was going to do regardless of what they said or did. It drives Claudia crazy too. She puts her hand on her hip and cocks her head to one side. Then she says, “You haven’t listened to me. You’re standing there with your head up in the air and staring off into space just like your father. You’re going to do as you please, right?” Then I usually have to laugh because she looks so cute that way, kind of like I imagine she must have looked when she was nine. If I’m not too pissed off.

The Old Man recognized early on that I was going to make my own decisions. He would say to my mother, “Don’t argue with that boy, Mama. He gits his mind set on somethin, and he’s just like a mule with the bit in his teeth.” I guess he was right.

Despite their objections, I did spend my last high school summer running a field Post Exchange trailer for the National Guard down at Camp Roberts by Paso Robles. And then I spent the very last summer at home before going away to school, not actually at home but on the road with Frank, Duke and Jimmy playing jazz gigs. I felt like I had to do those things.

Then I’ll never forget our blowout over me and Lucy. That awful scene was only one high point of his and my struggles as I grew up—one of many—but it sort of stood for all of them. Lucy Winston was my girlfriend from high school days clear up through my junior year in college. She was from Salinas, a smart and lively kind of girl a lot of men would like to marry. I ended up marrying such a girl, too, but I couldn’t do it back then, back when I was nineteen and Lucy seventeen. Her folks were the same brand of Pentecostal as mine, so they knew each other. I had come home from school for the Easter break, and she and I had gone down to Big Sur camping with a bunch of friends. What a good time! We swam naked in the river, played volleyball in the sand and made
love under the stars. The night air was brisk, and we were wet and warm in our zipped-together sleeping bag.

A month later, when I was home for Bub’s birthday, Lucy had called and talked to him because I was slow getting to the phone. She told him she had been afraid she was pregnant, but had finally got her period. Bub played dumb, the signifying monkey. When he heard the word pregnant, he blurted out “Pregnant?” Just like he used to do when we were kids. Mom heard him and started in on me.

“Lucy pregnant?” she asked me after I had hung up.

“No.”

Bub disappeared. “What was your brother talkin about?”

I never could really get away with lying to her. Must have been her round, pixie face and quick, snappy eyes she tried to make look hard when she was mad. So in the end, she wheedled it out of me that we had been sleeping together. The cat was out of the bag, as they say.

When the Old Man got home and all situated with his after-dinner paper, he lit into me.

“I understand you and Lucy been havin sex.”

I just shrugged, full of dread but defiant.

“You know I got a reputation in this town, an I can’t afford to have you aroun here livin by your balls instead a your brains. What you do reflects on me. I’ve always said that whenever you git one a these little ole gals pregnant, you gon have to marry her. An I meant that.”

“Lucy’s not pregnant,” I came back.

“No thanks to you,” he snapped. He had a hot temper he was trying to control. He sometimes mentioned in church that he’d had to pray hard and often to manage his anger. “You know I don’t hold with no sex outside of marriage. I’m a minister of the Gospel. How do I look chastisin other people for their sins an my own son goin aroun here jumpin into every little split he can?”

What was I supposed to say to that? I just tightened my guts, looked away, holding on.

“Now I want you to go in there an call Brother an Sister Winston an tell ’em what you did. Then you apologize to them an
tell 'em you’ll stay away from their girl. Then you apologize to yo mama an to me. I can’t tolerate no such behavior long as I’m puttin food in yo belly an clothes on yo back. You hear me?”

I was so mad my ears burned and my head felt like it would explode, but I said only, “Yessir,” and did what I was told. Then I stomped out of the house, threw my few little rags in my car and tore out for the City. I stayed away until late that summer, working at a music camp over in the San Joaquin Valley and calling home only once in awhile. I needed to cool myself down and to let things cool down there too.

Not long after that, Lucy Winston and I went our separate ways. Not because of that beef, but we just sort of drifted apart. She married Johnny Taft from Oakland a couple years later, and I got deeper and deeper into my music. I also met Miss Claudia Meeker and started trying to figure out how to turn her into Mrs. Claudia Hankerson. Yeah, Baby.

None of us ever said much more about the flap around Lucy and me, but that experience somehow characterized much of my dad’s and my relationship. We didn’t always fight. In fact, as I got to be a man, we had a lot of fun hunting and fishing and just being together. He had meant well, but I thought he sure had a hard way of showing it. To be fair about it all, how else could he have responded, him being a holiness preacher and all? I might have acted the same way he did if I had a son like me, but I still felt he had been unnecessarily rigid.

I have to admit that I was pretty stubborn and headstrong back then. That’s what I think Mom was talking about when she would say both my father and I were natural-born proud. Anyway...it’s all over now. What’s the end of that Robert Frost poem about the boy who loses his hand and his life to a power saw? “No more to build on there.” Yeah.