# The Battle Him of the Republic

## by Alston Slatton

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;*
*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;*
*He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:*
*His truth is marching on.*

### I: Him

I grew up at my mom's with my brother and sister and stepdad. But every other weekend I went to my dad's and grew up a lot more.

It's impressive how long I managed to go to my dad's without ever realizing he was my dad.

"Git your clothes together. I gotta take you to Maurice's."

My granny explained it to me one day in the car.

"But I have a daddy."
"Yes, but James is your *step*dad. Maurice is your real dad."

This man, this Maurice was my *real* dad? Of course, we shared the same steely blue eyes, the light brown hair, the mischievous grin, the shrill goofy laugh, our name, but was he my *real* dad?

Perusing through some mail one of the every-other weekends I discover a new name for Maurice—Nicky. Nicky Maurice Slatton.

"Why do you go by Maurice?"
"Because there was a girl in my class named Nicky. It's a girl's name."

So is Maurice.

Maurice. He was called that by Mommy, he was called that by Granny, he was called that by everyone—it only made sense that I do the same.

But something about a five-year-old calling his father by his first (well, middle) name doesn't sit well in the Arkansas heat.

"What'd you call me?"
"Maurice."
"Why do you call me that?"
"Because that's your name. That's what everyone calls you."
"You call me 'Dad.' Or 'Daddy.'"
"But I already call *Daddy* 'Daddy.'"

I'm sure it was as hard to hear this as it was for me to call this man my dad. But whenever I tried it, it felt wrong. Like telling someone *I love you* and thinking *I hope that's enough*. No, I couldn't do it.

"Don't call me Maurice no more."

So what I did—

"What did I just say?"

—is avoided *Maurice* and *Dad* altogether.

"Call me 'Dad.'"

The infrequent direct addresses would require a *you*; but for the most part, my dad became *him*.

## II: Me or The Boy

I cannot begin to unpack and understand our intricate relationship alone, but through the literature I know and love, I can sometimes manage to gloss a kernel of comprehension.

In "Linguistics and Poetics", Roman Jakobson—a well-accomplished linguist and literary theorist—outlines different factors operating in verbal communication. He sets out six primary components inherent in speech: an Addresser, an Addressee, a Message, a Code, a Contact, and a Context. The Addresser and the Addressee are the speaker and the receiver, respectively. The Addresser will give the Addressee a Message. But to convey this Message, these two subjects must share a common Code (i.e. English, Spanish, etc.). The Contact component is "a physical channel or psychological connection" between the two—the way in which the Addressee is able to hear or listen to the Addresser. But for the Addressee to be able to grab hold of the Message, there must be an established Context that the dialogue sits in and answers, *What is this Message referring to?*

*That. This. There.*
*Him.*

We know that there are three persons of speech: first person, second person, and third person, but Jakobson points out that linguistic theory assigns each of these persons with a specific function: The first person (*I*) is *emotive*, the second person (*you*) is *conative*, and the third person (*he/she*) is *referential*.

*I* expresses emotion—not very effective with my dad. *You* denotes directed effort (i.e. *You need to stop.*)—again, futile with him. But *he* is just a gentle acknowledgment—I could get by with that. I could *survive* with that.

With the third person, I could make him merely a reference. I could deal with him in the way that required the least amount of contact. I didn't talk to Maurice, but I talked *about* him. I *referred* to him. I rendered him a Contextual element of my speech rather than the Addressee. It was more comfortable for him to be a byproduct of my language—an afterthought—rather than the recipient of my communication.

This separation was also accomplished with the pronoun *he*, but it was preferable to remove him from my speech a degree further. With the pronoun *he*, Maurice becomes the subject, but as *him*—being the objective pronoun—Maurice becomes the object. With him in the place of the object pronoun, another subject always served as a buffer between him and my speech.

Me (Addresser): *Can you* (subject/Addressee) *make him* (object) *stop?*

But to utilize the third person, an actual third person figure must be present to take on the role of the Addressee.

Johnna was his girlfriend throughout my entire childhood. She became the mediator, taking the full brunt of my language—the sounding board that enabled my uncomfortable *Maurice*s and *Dad*s to become the more subtle *him*. We had an unspoken understanding. It was never *Go wake up your dad*, but rather *Go wake him up*.

While *him* was my lexical preference, I would still have to venture out into the precarious world of

other person pronouns:

He tucks me in every night.
He wants to go hunting.
His dad was hard on him too.
He wants me to play baseball.
He has a drinking problem.
*You* shoved me to the gravel on Christmas morning.
*You* called me a faggot.
*You* didn't love me the way I needed.

But the outcomes of those pronominal adventures were often grim.

I know he loves me, but as he would say, he *has a piss poor way of showin' it*.

"I thought you were gonna take it easy today."
"I am."
"But that's like, your sixth beer."
"Goddamn, boy."

*Boy*. His own deformation of address—not Alston, not son, but *boy*. Everything about the word makes me cringe. The plosive 'b' reeks of chewing tobacco and cheap beer; the elongated drawl of the diphthong, not quite making it to the 'ee' sound but rather a lazy 'uh'; the rising inflection with each repetition—or am I confusing that with the intonation of the ESPN announcer cheering for the Cardinals from the stereo in his room? No, surely if the Cardinals were playing, that would be company enough.

It's difficult to talk about the South without speaking of its affinity for racism. And it's difficult to be called *boy* without hearing the word's derogatorive connotation and tracing its muddied ties back to its historical usage as a weapon of denigration.

There are many seemingly harmless words and phrases thrown about that are unknowingly born from the blood of black slaves and slaver's scathing hate-language. Through time, their sharpness has dulled, and they have become appropriated into eveyday language: "Sold me down the river"—a phrase conveying a betrayal that historically refers to white slave owners selling slaves down the Mississippi river into the harsher conditions of a plantation (as seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); "The peanut gallery"—a phrase denoting one who gives unwanted input that refers to the upper section of theaters that served as segregated seating for blacks in 1920s America; "boy"—something my dad calls me that can be traced back to Frederick Douglass's autobiography as a common way white slave owners would address black slaves.

Chapter Three of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* outlines the word's racially-charged usage: *It is reported of [Colonel Lloyd] that, while riding along the road one day, he met a colored man, and addressed him in the usual manner of speaking to colored people on the public highways of the south: "Well, boy, whom do you belong to?"*

The paragraph goes on to explain how the "boy" was sold down the river to a Georgia trader by the slaver.

In Howell Raines's book *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (a book of oral history), Raines tells Hamilton Holmes's experience of being the first black male student to attend the University of Georgia. At the univesity a band of white fraternity brothers used their vehicles (mostly Ford pickups, I would assume) to block in Holmes's car. Holmes noticed that the vehicles were unlocked,

so he began to open the doors and move them. The white fraternity brothers came outside to confront Holmes as he was moving the second vehicle. Raines transcribes Holmes' oration: *. . . the [ringleader] walked up, backed up by the other guys, and he said, "Say, boy, is that your car?" . . . And I said, "Man, it was obvious that you were tryin' to block me . . . I don't want any trouble. I just wanna leave." And he said, "Well, I think you got trouble boy, 'cause you were in my car and you didn't have any business bein' there."*

But the connotation of this word has persisted well past quasi-integrated America. In 2010, a black man—John Hithon—filed suit against Tyson Foods (headquartered in Arkansas). Hithon was denied a promotion he had applied for, and his supervisor instead brought in two outside white men to fill the positon. Hithon sued the company because the supervisor had previously referred to Hithon as *boy*; Hithon saw this as irrefutable evidence of racial animus. The specific use of the word is said to have occurred during a lunch break when the supervisor told Hithon, *Boy, you better get going.*

In the series of circuits and appeals that followed, Hithon won a $1.75 million settlement only to lose it again in the federal appeals court.

In all of these situations, the white male who calls the black male boy is seen in a position of power over the black recipient of the title: a slaveholder, the ringleader of a threatening gang, and a supervisor. The word is used to maintain this higher position over its intended recipient, to assert their power and reinforce their racial hierarchy, to remind the Addressee of his subordination to the Addresser, to make him feel less-than.

But what does it mean when a white male calls another white male *boy*—more specifically, what does it mean for a father to call his son this?

"Hey boy . . . git me a beer."
"How much longer is the game?"
"They're in the sixth inning."
"So it's almost over?"
"C'mon boy, there are nine innings in a game. You know that."
"We were supposed to go to the park."
"Yeah, we will. Soon as the Cardinals win. Git me a beer first."

During the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968, the city saw protesters led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fighting for safer working conditions. They lined the streets, wielding signs that read *I Am a Man!* in resistance to the oppressive mutilation of the word *boy*.

If I were to hold up this sign to my dad, could he see me? Could he see me as the man I am?

No. Boys are small. Inferior. Less-than. A boy could stand on his tiptoes, raising the sign as high as he could, but he's been weighted down by the word so long that he'll never reach the height of his oppressor's gaze.

Memphis was Dr. King's last march. The National Civil Rights Museum that honors his legacy and marks his assassination is just an hour away from home on the other side of the Mississippi—and that's one river my dad and I never fished.

The Cardinals went into extra innings. I waited for the game and his beer to finish. I packed the tackle box, rigged the fishing poles, and filled his cooler. And we all sat in the cab of his brown Ford pickup on our way to Crowley's Ridge: him, me, and the cooler—which poetically rested between us in the middle seat.

"Hang on to the cooler, boy."

I'm still hanging on.

We casted, we reeled, he drank. We swatted mosquitoes, he drank. We baited, he drank, he pissed, he drank.

He never wore a watch—time was kept by the cooler. When it emptied, it was time to return home, to replenish at the fount. There was a methodical clockwork to the lift of the tab, the hiss of compression, the slurp of the beer, the crush of the can. As he would say, *You could take medicine by it*—but he didn't. He drove us home—me and the empty cooler. But don't worry: he could land a Boeing on a service road after a case of beer.

That's what he thought, anyway.

"I ain't drunk, boy."

He never was.

It didn't stop him from toeing that yellow double-line though—and it certainly didn't stop me from white-knuckling the empty cooler.

## III: Hold My Hand

Mommy was none too pleased to find out that he had been drinking and driving with me. This initiated a long, familial involvement with a group of excessively polite people in a 70s-styled, clinical brick building—Mommy called them *Social Service*. He called them *cocksuckers*.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to have people knockin' on my door, askin' me how I raise my kid?"

In their conversations with Mommy I caught familiar whispers of words like *custody* and *child support*, but new ones like *supervised visitation* and *restraining order*.

"Hey boy, put your mom on the phone."

There were so many different people asking me different questions.

"What happens when you go to your dad's?"

I was tethered to two opposing forces, both drifting apart like two cosmic bodies wildly spun out of a common orbit, each bound to their own galactic trajectory.

"We always had a goodtime, didn't we, boy?"

Hand clasps hand—holding, squeezing, securing. They tighten their grip and begin their divergence, eyes squinted shut, heedless of the child who loves them both. His heart splits asunder like the sweet, wet wedges of a Christmas orange.

"Tell him goodbye."

## IV: Under the Water

This marked the beginning of AA, a focus on father/son bonding, and other broken promises. He sat down a now twelve year-old Alston, told Alston that he is going to cut back drinking because he doesn't want to lose Alston, that there would be a limited amount of alcohol every other weekend, that Alston wouldn't be asked to pour the alcohol, that Alston was more important than the alcohol.

And for a moderate span of time, this was the case—like a New Year's Resolution (with the added stakes

of losing custody of your son). A New Father's Resolution: to *be* a father.

There was a spike in him/me activity—not things that I necessarily wanted to do, but the effort was appreciated where it had previously been absent. He [and I] liked to dare-devilishly ride the four-wheeler in a nearby sandy creek—Sand Creek they called it. He would take us back-roading amid the endless, golden rice fields to pick blackbirds off high-line wires and stain the ditch banks with reptilian blood. He taught me a lot of things: if you shoot a bird right in the head, it'll swing over and hang from the wire; a turtle shot in the shell will sink; if at first you miss, snakes always come back up for air. It was a real-life arcade: birds were low-ticket items; turtles mid-range; snakes earned substantial points; alligator gar proved most difficult to score; great respect was earned for shooting his beer can at the point where the aluminum met the water, sending it flying into the air, and shooting it a second time while airborne!

Wait, he told me that he would cut back on drinking. I must be remembering incorrectly.
I'm more important than the alcohol.

Does emptying a can of beer to provide me with ballistic entertainment outweigh the drink itself? Or was it a ploy to justify him emptying the cooler?

"It sunk. Throw in another one."

Sometimes—when I go home—I return to that ditch bank. I stand at the edge alone, seeing how we've changed—the ditch and I. But under the water, I know there rests a graveyard of skeletal shells and bullet-pierced beer cans.

## V: Like Father Like Son, Like Son . . .

As I grew older, I became curious, asking questions that I desperately needed answered. Questions for me, questions for him: *Do I visit every other weekend by obligation or desire? How does alcoholism of this degree begin? Why do I feel an erotic excitement watching a Hane's commercial? Can he see the yearning, the confusion, the fear flicker in my eyes?*

Yes.

"Hey, I need some money to buy shoes for school."
"Here. Try not to get nothin' too faggoty."

I would ask Granny about when he was a child. With a disappointed sigh, she'd say, *He was the sweetest little kid there ever was. I took him to church every Sunday. When he got bigger than me, well, I couldn't make him go anymore. I don't know what happened.*

It was heartbreaking to hear the guilt in her voice; a mother failing her child, endlessly turning the unanswerable question, *What did I do wrong?*

In the isolated crevices of the rural South, where stones still remain unturned, it's either drugs or Jesus—and he wasn't the church-going type.

She told me that he would get into fights with his dad—Pawpaw. Pawpaw was a truck driver and rarely home.

"He'd go to sleep at night with a baseball bat under his pillow in case Pawpaw came in."

I'd go to sleep with a journal under mine. I guess we each fought back in our own way.

## VI: Her

Johnna and I became very close—much closer than him and me. I remember going to The Hill—the elevated patch of land he owned in Walcott, AR (as referred to by the Slatton family)—on weekends

when he would be at work all day, just so that Johnna and I could spend time together. She picked me up, she dropped me off, she cooked with me, she taught me to drive stick. She made feel safe in that treacherous, tin trailer on a hill.

While Johnna was not "family," she was *family*. As a primary maternal figure in my life for nearly ten years, I would consider her not a stepmother, but a second mother.

"My son's in a talent show, and we need a Sonny Bono costume. Whaddya got?"

*Son* sounds smoother from her than him. Because *son* denotes an unconditional familial bond where *boy* just *others* me.

I remember when things got rough at home—not in the trailer on The Hill but at home. Under the threat of our family's derailment—having nowhere to turn—my mother made the executive decision to draft us all into a new church. It was a cultish Pentecostal establishment—Divine Revelation. Every week was revival, every day was Sunday, every sermon was fire and brimstone. Think *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, only I was breakable.

*The Revelation is coming. The End of Days is coming. The Trumpet is coming.*

*Let it come*, I thought.

*And the Lost will burn in Hell. And the Adulterers will burn in Hell. And the Homosexuals will burn in Hell.*

*Let it come*, I thought.

In a sick twist of events, I found myself looking forward to the every-other weekend. Instead of returning at the usual 4pm on Sunday afternoon, I would stretch the stay into Sunday night so I might not have to endure another homophobic evening service.

*What's going on?* Johnna asked me one Sunday.

Johnna was the one family member I could confide in about issues with either of my parents—the somewhat removed third party who knew how to soothe the burns from both the frying pan and the fire.

I told her, and my dad listened too. He told me that I could always stay as long as I wanted. That if things ever got too bad, I could live on The Hill with him and Johnna.

It meant a lot to hear that from him, to know that there was genuine care behind his glazed-over eyes; but how bad would things have to get for me to find respite on that hill?

Two weeks later he drunkenly made fun of my traumatic situation unfolding at home.

I never told him anything again.

I grew more and more tiresome of his mercurial approach to parenting and the drinking and the bullying. I started hiding cans of beer under the porch; I poured gulps down the drain behind his back. Feeling as if no vice should go unpunished, I even remember packing crushed red pepper into his can of Skoal chewing tobacco—which naturally impelled a fight when his eyes stopped watering from the capsaicin overload.

In an exceptionally nasty argument between him and me, Johnna intervened with a poignant piece of information unearthed when I was not there. I will not forget how she stood between us and screamed into his face, Y*ou told me that you never wanted to be like your dad—to treat your son like he did you! But LOOK at you! You are just the same!*

What did they say in Sunday school?
*And the children shall inherit the sins of the father.*

My greatest fear is that I'll be like "my ol' man".
I think we all share some gradation of that fear.

No, when I raise my children, I'll be like Johnna.
But then don't all parents say that?

Johnna would always be found in the audience of my school plays, next to an empty seat where he might have sat.

"He couldn't make it?"
"He started early."

Started early. Snoot full. Shitfaced.
Fucked-up. Drunk. Messed-up. Belligerent.
Wasted. Plastered. Hammered. Buzzed.
Showin' his ass. In a good one.
*Sorry I wasn't there.*

Love,
Dad

Johnna would always make me laugh, so that he wouldn't see me cry, so that we both might not have to hear him call me a pussy again.

"Johnna, you're a corn-fed . . . piece of shit . . . Yankee. Yeah . . . ain't she, boy?"
"At least I didn't grow up eatin' cabbage through a fuckin' picket fence!"

Johnna would always look out for me, and see the capricious shift in his eyes before I would, or hear him unbuckle a belt before I would.

"Run, Alston! Run!"

*The chasing stomps of feet,*
*The creaking slam of a door,*
*The comforting pulse of cicadas.*
*Safety.*

"Alston, call the police!"

*For me.*

For me, it was only every other weekend.
For her, every day was every other weekend.

In a weird, inverted calendar of repression and relief, the truck would pull up to the top of that hill every other weekend, and I would enter my darkest days; but because I was there sitting in the truck beside her, with her—because we were together: mother and son, bound not by blood but by abuse—those weekends were her brightest nights.

## VII: Natural Light

When I listened to my voicemail and learned that Johnna had died, I walked my numb body outside into the field and sat in the grass. It was evening. It was October. It was senior year. I remember that. I remember being filled with an emptiness. I remember not crying for nearly ten minutes. I remember sitting there, empty and incredibly alone, not crying—and then I remember crying.

*Pussy.*

I lost two parents that year: one I had to let go, and one I had to let go and *let go* and *let go*. While he and I independently recovered from the loss, *we* never recovered. Johnna was the channel that kept our fucked-up father/son relationship alive. Without her, we were just left with *fucked-up*.

Johnna's death signaled the end of the every-other weekend. I haven't spent a night in that trailer on The Hill since. I can barely manage the one-hour-long stay on Christmas. But when I do make the infrequent visit—and I'm shifting in my chair across from him in the hazy, dark living room—I watch him with a Marlboro dangling from his mouth and a beer in hand and cannot help but feel overwhelmed by her absence in a space that was so defined by her presence; I cannot help but wince at the uncomfortable abrasion of an unmediated, direct connection with him. She's not there to make me laugh when he makes me cry, to tuck me in at night when he is passed out clutching a half-empty can of Natural Light, to ask me to brew the sweet tea when he grabs his gun and wants to "make a man out of me," to bridge the broken gap between him and me. Without someone else present there with me, I cannot hide behind the shield of the third person pronoun. Without *her*, there can be no *he*, no *him*—and that's the only way I know him.

I had a dream last night that I was hunting with him—these dreams tend to occur when I reach into the warm Arkansan mud and dredge up my convoluted past. We were walking down a forested gravel road, each with a gun in hand. Further down the path, I could see a deer. I sprinted toward it, slinging my shotgun back and forth with every leap. The deer spotted me and bolted into the woods. I caught up to find the deer running through a gate into an old fenced-in cattle pasture. I shot the deer. It dropped. I walked up to my prize only to discover with dismay that I had killed a doe—it was supposed to be an antlered buck.

It was as if *My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun[:] And now We roam in Sovreign Woods - / And now We hunt the Doe - / And every time I speak for Him / The Mountains straight reply -.* But this was not Emily Dickinson's Amherst landscape; there are no mountains in the Arkansas Delta—only Hills.

Staring at the slain doe, I could feel his familiar look of disapproval. Y*ou don't shoot a doe, boy*. He scolded me for shooting it within the fence. *Where's the sport?* he asked me. You don't shoot a caged animal.

*Faggot.*

## VIII: The Circle

There comes a moment in each child's life when they come to realize what they truly want. While this can be a messy, stressful moment to witness in real-life (my life), it's often a moving moment in the Howard Ashman/Disney VHS tapes that I would watch as a child. And rewind and watch again. And again. And because of this repetitive escape into these fantastical, musical animations, I developed the uncanny ability to quote Disney films like scripture.

In the 1989 animated feature that pioneered the Disney Renaissance, this moment of realization is seen just before the mermaid makes a devilish deal with the Sea Witch. After her father crushes her hopes of going to the shore, Ariel sings in the iconic "I Want" song, *Betcha' on land, they'd understand / Bet they don't reprimand their daughters / Bright young women, sick of swimming / Ready to stand.*

We see a similar moment with Belle in the very first animated film nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards: *I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. / I want it more than I can tell. / And for once it might be grand / To have someone understand. / I want so much more than they've got planned.*

While it can said that the mermaid wants to walk along the shore, and the beauty wants adventure in the great wide somewhere, both characters ultimately want understanding—a common motivator for Ashman characters. Both female characters realize they must relinquish the hope of obtaining fulfillment and understanding from their predetermined environments.

And I did too.

But these songs don't explain who this understanding might come from—they just suggest that it's out there.

Looking back into the Ashman canon before his alliance with the Walt Disney Company, understanding can also be found in the popular duet from his musical *Little Shop of Horrors*: *Suddenly, Seymour is standing beside me. / He don't give me orders, he don't condescend. / Suddenly, Seymour is here to provide me / Sweet understanding. Seymour's my friend.*

So maybe this understanding that Ariel can't get from her father, that Belle can't receive from her neighbors in the village, can be attained through a "Seymour"—an enlightened, male figure who can relate to the Ashman ingenue and love her for who she is. Someone who can *see more* in her.

That's what I discovered in my "I Want" song.

Ashman lyrics have the profound ability to resonate with LGBT youth. It's the reason why you can go to a venue in the West Village and watch a drag queen perform Ashman's songs in an act entitled "Under the C". As a gay lyricist, he was able to channel the feelings of isolation, shame, and inferiority that often accompany the LGBT experience into the voices of characters families grew to know and love and *accept*.

Like these Ashman characters, I too wanted *much more than this provincial life*, to escape my given environment, to be *somewhere that's green, to have someone understand*, to be *part of that world*.

But rather than wanting to escape a submerged oceanic kingdom or the quaint French countryside, my world aligned more closely with Alison Bechdel's hometown in *Fun Home*.

Like Alison, I had grown up watching people live out their lives right where they started. In places like Jonesboro or Bechdel's Beach Creek, people are buried outside the same churches they went to Sunday school in, got married in, raised their children in. You breathe, you breed, you die. And ideally, your kids will breathe, breed, and die in a house right down the road from yours. This was the case for Bruce—the suicidal, closeted father of Alison Bechdel. But this couldn't be the case for me.

I am reminded of Lisa Kron's lyric from the musical adaptation of *Fun Home*: in regard to Bruce's life, Alison sings, *I can draw a circle / You lived your life inside*. And any LGBT writer like Kron, like Bechdel, like Sondheim, like Ashman, like me knows the all too familiar story of that circle closing around a persecuted queer's neck.

I remember telling him that I wanted to leave—that I wanted to move and never come back. He didn't understand why I'd want such a thing. I thought he might act differently, treat me differently, appreciate our time differently, but he didn't. I don't think he really believed me—that I'd grow up to do it. I don't think he believed me until he watched me kiss my mom goodbye.

When I moved 1,173 miles away from home, I thought the distance might allow us to come closer together, that being so far away might dilute the tension and discomfort of our interactions, that maybe if I couldn't smell the alcohol on his breath, the words that rode on it wouldn't press so hard against me.

"So, boy, ya gettin' any pussy?"

I was wrong.

Sondheim writes, *Children need protection / Just the way they need affection / Or they wonder, and they wander / And they run.*

But what every parent inherently knows yet cannot help but to resist is that whether or not we get protection and affection, we will run—eventually. All children must; it's just a matter of how *far* and what we run *to*. New York is a city of children, some running *to* and some running *away*—but all look for the protection and affection they couldn't find elsewhere.

While I felt more empowered as a gay man in New York City versus the closeted homosexual in Jonesboro, Arkansas, I still found myself bound to ideologies and perceptions from home.

Somewhat like Bruce Bechdel during his trips to NYC, I was exploring the city, myself, and others all while tethered to a preconception of how I was *supposed* to be, how ~~I felt~~ others wanted me to be. While I wasn't holding hands with family as Bruce did when he catted down Christopher, I certainly felt an intense, internal tug from mine when I ventured through the Village.

Because it was all I had ever known, all intimate relations had to remain strictly secret, private, behind closed doors—closeted. My new home was New York, but I felt at times like I was still spending my weekends trapped in that trailer on The Hill.

*You can't post that.*
*I'm not that gay.*
*We can keep this between us.*

He had taught me to hate who I was.

He liked teaching me things, and regardless of his crude, sick, and twisted nature, he did teach me a lot—sometimes intentional, sometimes not.

I think *he* felt most like a father when he could teach me something.

"This is how ya drink a beer like a man."

I think he felt most like a father when he was sober.

Johnna would always joke that he was *the poster child of what not to do.*
He taught me a lot of that too. And those lessons are just as valuable to me as any other.

He taught me to tie my shoes.
He taught me to shoot a gun.
He taught me to rig a fishing pole.
He taught me patience,
forgiveness,
humility.

But most importantly,
he taught me to
*do what you love*
*otherwise you'll wake up thirty years later*
*at the same factory*
*doing the same shit you hate*
*everyday.*

I know those are the words he spoke, but it was as if I heard him speaking in my vernacular, truly connecting with me through the Sondheim I know: *Anything you do, / Let it come from you. / Then it will be new. / Give us more to see.*

And in the most spine-splintering city in the county, I cling to that lesson.

Like an empty cooler.

## IX: The Truth Marches on

A boy telling his mom that he's gay is hard—I did that after one semester in New York. But a boy telling his dad that he's gay is excruciating—that took five.

I struggled. I didn't know how to go about it. I couldn't rely on my Ashman model and quote *The Little Mermaid* with Ariel's triumphant, *Daddy, I love him!* No, it'd have to come from *me*.

For someone who feels so disconnected from his father, it was surprisingly difficult to tell him, to face him—one on one—with the truth. It shouldn't have mattered what he might say or how he might feel about it. We weren't particularly close, I'd say—he'd say different. And it's always harder to tell the ones you're close to—because you care all the more.

Perhaps the little boy in me still deeply desired his father's acceptance.
Perhaps—as much as I disillusion myself that it doesn't matter—I still want him to be proud of me.
Perhaps that's my true "I Want" song:

*Someday and soon . . .*

"Hey…umm…so I wanted to tell you something."

*I'll make you proud of your boy.*

"I've wanted to for a while—"

*Though I can't make myself taller . . .*

"But didn't know how . . ."

*Or smarter or handsome or wise . . .*

"So I guess I'll just say it. But . . . umm . . ."

*I'll do my best. What else can I do?*

"I'm gay."

[silence
that lasts somewhere between
a breath
and forever]

"Damn it."

I think we all share some gradation of that wish.

When I heard his response, I almost laughed. You would have thought I had just told him that the Cardinals lost the World Series, that the liquor store was closed, that his truck had a flat, but it was all of these things and more: his son was gay. His son was fundamentally broken, less-than; and something he did or didn't do had an impact on my homosexuality—that's the Sunday school dogma anyway: *And the children shall inherit the sins of the father.*

It's notable how we both strayed from our religious upbringings, yet we're still deeply entrenched in Southern Baptist precepts. If only Arkansas schools could harness this residual force—the impact of Sunday school lessons on impressionable young minds—the state might not have to "thank God for Mississippi". But in the synchronized, adjacent gyres of education and acceptance, the "The Natural State" shames me for my unnaturalness, for being morally lost; and national education rankings shame Arkansas for—not the lost—but the left-behind.

After he asked me *how it happened*, after he wishfully asked, *So, you're never with a woman?*, after he made it clear that he didn't *condone* it, that it is *wrong*, he told me:

*It doesn't change anything between us.*
*I still love you.*

And I guess that's all I could ask for.

*You*. Not *boy*, but *you*. The second person pronoun. A direct address, unmediated.

"I love you too."

I think we both understand now that we don't have to say "I love you, *son*" or "I love you, *Dad*"—"I love *you*" is enough. We don't have to constantly work to address the roles in our relationship as father and son—because we don't have a father/son relationship. We're both in some way just two little boys, working to navigate through the jagged, broken bits of our individual paternal-related anxieties.

We work on getting closer, but we fall a lot. It's not perfect. We don't follow the plot line of a Hallmark Original Movie with its mediocre, "God is good" happy ending. It's not the abbreviated *Into the Woods Jr.* where everyone gets their wish. It's not the cathartic final page of *Fun Home* where Alison says, *But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me as I leapt*, coupled with an image of her jumping off the diving board into her father's arms.

I remember when he shoved me off the diving board when I was little to help me "get over my fear." No, I was tentative, and he was a shover—and there were no open arms as I fell and *fell* and *fell*.

He called me today. I was in Washington Square Park with a friend.

"Hey, I should get off of here. I'm with a friend and don't wanna be rude."
"Okay. I'll let you get back to your . . . *whatever*."

And something about how he said *whatever* let me know that no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try . . .

He will never be proud of me.
Not in *that* way.
Not in the way I need him to be.

But in the perverse, positive light that defines our emaciated story, I haven't been called a faggot in a long time.

## X: I Am a Man!

When you wake up, you never say *I had the worst nightmare, but I can't remember what it was*. You say *I had the best dream, but I can't remember what it was*.

That's because we're designed to remember the fear, the fright, the pain. That's what keeps us alive.

It's hard not to remember only the pain and fear with him. The time when he almost drove us off the

road into a maple, when he threw a rock and hit me in the arm, when he drunkenly shoved me and I bled on the gravel that Christmas morning. It's really hard.

Most people remember the nightmares. But—with dads—you have to remember the laughs over and *over* and *over* again.

"You know what we'd do as kids when we got bored? Some buddies of mine would swallow a live goldfish, and they could feel it swim around in their belly. And that son of a bitch would be jumpin' up, dancin' a jig because that fish tickled like a motherfucker."

It's cruel and disgusting and fucked-up, but I remember I laughed, so that's what we got.

And that's the one sentence that most accurately depicts our relationship.

Whether it's the goldfish story, him drunkenly dancing in the living room, or him pulling over the truck and manically crawling into the backseat when he sees the blue lights at a highway checkpoint, I hang on to these moments of laughter with him.

Like an empty cooler.

Because that's what we got.

And everyone once in a while, I am reminded of one of those memories with him. They rush over me like a crashing wave, overwhelming my sensorium with moments when I laughed, when I smiled—when I felt like his son.

They come to me on the shaded streets of the West Village, where in the summer I find if I pedal my bike hard enough against the breeze with my eyes daringly closed, I can feel myself sitting in the bed of his pickup, gliding my hand on the rush of wind while I watch him watching me in the sideview mirror.

Or walking past Washington Square Park after a rain—and there's that slightly fishy odor of the water—a streetbike will race by, stirring the distinct scent of two-cycle-engine fuel with the lingering piscine smell, and I turn around half expecting to see him revving the throttle of an Evinrude outboard motor, half expecting to see him sitting in the back of our aluminum boat wearing a flannel and a grin.

I'm taken aback when taken back to these moments—by the sheer vividness and clarity of which I see and smell and hear and feel these experiences that took place over 1000 miles and ten years away from where I am now. But when they overtake me, and I allow myself to surrender to these tender treasures of my childhood, I find that it's exactly the way I would leave it on a Sunday afternoon of an every-other weekend: the cooler, the mockingbirds, the garden, the truck, the grapevine out back, Johnna—

In my vision, my memory, my version of The Hill, she's still there. She is an integral part of my every-other weekend, of my experience on that hill, of my relationship with him.

But she's not there.

So *him* can no longer function.

So maybe it's time my *him*s work their way to a *you*. She would have wanted that, I'm sure.

But not *Dad* just quite yet.

That's something you have to earn for yourself. ▲▼▲