

A Wooden Nickel Life

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It's tomorrow and I'm still here. Though I have a hard time accepting I'm alive in the present, my wife does not. She's profoundly religious. Chides me for my lack of faith. Puts all of hers into Jesus and the gospels. But not once has she ever questioned her own life. I've never accepted mine. The way I see things, trusting that you're alive is a bigger leap of faith than believing in the resurrection.

She drops me at the doctor on her way to her weekly meeting of The Daughters of the Gloriously Departed—the support group for women claiming to be descendants of Confederate veterans. I tell her I'm due for a checkup, that I worry about a decline in my virility. This is a lie. I lie often.

Truthfully, I can't stand her war meetings. No one knows what they do to me. Her especially. I feel alive in the past—more than a century ago—riding atop a horse with Quantrill during the struggle and charging in and breaking the Federals' line than I do in this world of digital gossip.

Her girlfriends speak of epic battles.

I participated in none, only in raids.

Of the few men I killed outright in combat, all were shot in the back after we set them to flight. And while she and the other hens serve tea and share sexual fantasies about what it must've been like to own slaves, I remember firing a barn with the family still trapped inside. The taste of ash is still fresh on my tongue.

The doctor is an old fishing buddy of mine. Right off, he asks my quality of life.

So I tell him, "I'm in a middling sort of way, I guess."

He smokes in his office, two packs a day of unfiltered

tobacco. "What ails you?"

I have three children, a son, a daughter, and a third child I will not acknowledge in public save to say he bears my last name.

"I'm nostalgic. I can't stand the past anymore."

"Simple case of melancholy," he says. "No more beer, then. Drink only bourbon." And he writes me a script for two bottles a day. Then the doctor confesses my chances of making a full recovery are in doubt

The last time I drank so much was with Bill Anderson after the raid on Lawrence, Kansas. A hundred of us rode into the town after a dozen of our wives died in a Yankee internment camp. They burned to death, tragically. We expected to meet a full Union garrison to revenge our dead womenfolk, not a town full of old men and young boys. Still, we spared none, not even the livestock. Once the men were dead we turned our lusts to the women. I wound up taking a bony middle-aged gal. She was Mormon, confident in being saved. I think I may have crushed her youngest son's skull when I smashed him over the head with my revolver. I don't recall apologizing. She was a quiet sort. There was only a limp struggle.

Bill and I drank the liquor we stole on the ride back across the border into Missouri. It helped take the heat away from what we did. We drank till we fell off our horses, laughing.

But that was then and I find it too much to bear now. There's too much joy in it.

The funny talking lady behind the pharmacy counter refuses my prescription on grounds of moral turpitude. The lady, a morbidly active sort who corrects her speech like a grammar school teacher, calls me a fool. A drain upon society.

I've worn many names, most of them aliases to mask the truth. Fool was never one of them, though it seems fitting. The slew of names I carried around in my pocket with me when I was a Bushwhacker were mostly Indian, heathen sounding names. The only one I kept and use today is what

my family calls me, the most terrifying alias of them all: Father.

It's a brisk walk to the liquor store up the street where I'm sure no one will decline my medicine. People don't walk around town anymore. They sit in traffic and glare at you from their cars. A few sips of bourbon later and I don't mind being stared at. I'm just so damned afraid of making a spectacle of myself.

This fear comes from my first wife, a lazy feminist who concerned herself more with being socially graceful than properly taking birth control. In this day and age, men are supposed to accept equal responsibility when it comes to conception, but I'll never forgive her. She put me through too many false pregnancies, always drinking at lavish social gatherings till she passed out and forgot to take the pill the next day. Or she waited until she was out of them for a week before she ordered a refill. Frightened the hell out of me. I even made her douche with a bottle of vodka once after we had sex.

But old wives' tales don't work. And after our first child was born, there was no stopping her. We had the next two in quick succession. She never asked me if I wanted children. I believe she knew the answer.

When she was carrying our third child I refused to have sex with her. She accused me of discriminating against pregnant women. Then vainly inquired if I thought the pregnancy ruined her look.

"Don't I turn you on no more?" she asked me during the seventh month, belly swole up like it held a coiled eel.

"I've got gas, that's all."

"Are you pooping good?"

"Now just what does the movement of my bowels have to do with it?"

She flipped open *Cosmopolitan* magazine and expertly narrated an article on how irregularity can affect a man's sex drive. Ever careful and always thoughtful in her ways, even as she gave a very measured description about what she

thought was destroying our marriage.

But she never once fought with me, not even in private. Said it would be rude. I didn't earn so much as a click of her tongue.

Then the baby came. It was our last and I was determined never to have relations with her again.

She tried for twenty years, but I stood firm in my zeal.

My wife's name was Carmine. I abandoned her publicly at one of those socialite functions she so fabulously attended. Suppose it was the bastard in me who knew if I did it there, she'd not make a scene. The only reaction I noted in her was embarrassment, a slight reddening of the cheeks, like they had been freshly slapped. It's hell being right.

I finish the first bottle of bourbon and move to a bench in front of the doctor's office. Soon, the only people on in the street will be those from my distant past.

There were other wives a century ago, though Carmine was my first divorce. I can still recall the years directly following the war and the passion I shared with my homestead wife. Even though I've forgotten her name, I cannot forget the pain of losing our child to scarlet fever, the disease brought on by chronic malnutrition. She passed of sorrow shortly thereafter. I was only able to survive because I had lived through the same illness after our sides' dreadful defeat outside of Springfield.

The focus of my life used to be as keen as a knife. Now it takes everything to not let the past smoother me. Oh, God. This liquor isn't enough to keep it from screaming out of mind and coloring everything.

Some men hold their present depends entirely upon their past. This makes me feel good to think about, but it's only true if a man can measure the balance of his life against his legacy. And I know all those memories about the war don't make sense. It's not my job to make sense out of them. Go on and judge me and my questionable past. I've no future.

Three children are my legacy.

My oldest is a graduate of Washington University. His

education was paid for by me, exclusively. Recompense was doled out when he stuck a metal rod through his nose during his first semester, then announced to the family at Thanksgiving his sexual partners run from male to female given his mood. Carmine wouldn't let me stop payment on his tuition. She argued upon his behalf eloquently. When he chose to make money on the side as a male escort, Carmine told me it was our parental duty to support him. The last I heard, he's living in a motel in East St. Louis, servicing the occasional truck driver during the day so he can afford his habit of gorging in the particular affections of large Negro women come evening.

The middle child is my daughter. She will not go to college. Gifted only in having a bleak and charmless personality blacker than a starless night sky. Only carnal pleasure with men, any men, can fill such a void. How many she's been with must range into the hundreds.

One evening I returned with Carmine from an engagement with her high society friends to find our daughter unconscious on our front lawn. She was fifteen, surrounded by the varsity football team, the JV squad, and the marching band from a neighboring school who'd just been trounced by our boys. The band belted out an awkward version of Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries."

It was an inspired score.

They were all nude and ran as soon as I pulled my car in the drive. Carmine and I walked through the piles of discarded jerseys and balled up jock straps until we came upon our naked daughter lying atop an altar of shoulder pads, spread eagle.

Upon closer inspection I found evidence of a lightning bolt shaved into her private hair.

Her lusts cannot be satisfied.

What's more, a gynecologist found she cannot bear children. I only tell you this so you sympathize with her. It's important you do because I no longer can.

I won't say I haven't considered renting a young bull

from a neighboring farm and tying her beneath it so she can get it out of her system, but I'm afraid she'd drain all the worldly essence from the animal before it could calm her heated desire. And it would be a social faux pas for Carmine to find her only daughter crushed mid-coitus beneath an exhausted bull.

I refuse to have any children with my new wife.

She arrives directly from her DGD meeting, face fully flustered when she finds her husband intoxicated on the street. Unlike Carmine, this wife and I fight daily. It's a beautiful feeling. I no more set foot in the car, and we're at each other's throats. And she may be high on the religion, but there's nothing socially graceful in the words she uses on me.

"What a shiftless, indigent old man I've married."

I love her more than anything for saying things like this to me. "But, honey," says I, raising the bottle so the light passes through it. "The doctor told me its medicine. Even wrote me a note to prove it."

"I never," she says, putting the car into drive and starting home. "Well, I just never."

Her name is Mary. When we arrive home she leaves all talk of religion at the door. We find ourselves making up often. She gives me free reign in the bedroom. As she undresses, I admire her body still tight with youth, reminding me Mary isn't much older than my children.

She sits me on the bed, then calls me daddy and tells me she's going to fuck me. I have no say in the matter. She retires to the bathroom to prepare her body.

My third child is the youngest and my greatest disappointment. He is the only one I have disowned. His profession utterly disgusts me. He is a priest. We speak but once a year on my birthday. Our conversation was brief this year, as it is always. It began when he asked my health. I'm sure he wants me to die, so I humored him and said the end was in sight. Then I asked him if he had anyone in his life.

"Only God," was his answer.

“Really? Nothing on the side?”

“No, pop,” he says. “I’ve kept my vow in Christ.”

“Not even one of them little boys?”

The trouble began when he asked for my confession. He wanted to save my soul, to salvage our relationship, but I refused to ask absolution from a twenty-something virgin.

I hate him the most of all my children because he will never have any of his own now that he’s taken to the priesthood. This makes him the smartest of the bunch. Brilliant compared to me.

Mary returns from the bathroom, perfumed and trimmed around her pelvis. She lies on the bed and waits for me to perform my husbandly duties.

Now I know she wants a baby with me. But I tell this woman that won’t do, yet she refuses birth control, calling it profane. Yet she knows I can’t refuse her body. She doesn’t understand the pain children can cause. How could she?

I manage to finish first. I always do. And she lets loose a series of mournful sighs, wanting a release of her own. So I move between her legs—as I do every night at the end of our marital encounters—my tongue lashing the insides of her thighs with the promise of fulfilling her need.

Kinky is what she calls this. But a kink is something found in a hose. What I’m about to commit is an act of social responsibility.

I put my lips over her labia and suck out the wad I just shot in.

Children are the future and I want no part in this inevitable moral calamity other than what I’m already guilty of with my three offspring.

And you, you voyeurs want me to tell you what it tastes like. Well I won’t do it. I still have some measure of decency.

Go out and eat your own salvation.