

Little Man

WES BROWN

THE PROSPECT OF SPENDING THE SUMMER at my father's mining operation brings indescribable joy. I'm nine years old and this is the first time my dad has taken me on one of his many trips back and forth to Oregon. For the past couple of years my father has been gone for three, sometimes six, months at a time, getting everything running at the mine. We as a family have learned to adjust to my father's absence, but he is still missed.

After fourteen hours in my dad's truck, we get there. Our camp is nestled in the middle of a valley decorated by rust-colored oval shaped rocks containing black ore that somehow mean gold. No running water means no bathroom, so my father constructs an outhouse out of two by four's and a big blue tarp. The actual "commode" is a toilet seat settled on top of four rusty pieces of metal, salvaged from who knows where, with a bucket underneath to catch the you-know-what. Summer heat causes an aroma to emanate from the outhouse the likes of which I have never smelled before. Still it's far better than going into the woods to take care of business.

Over the next two months I meet the strangest people I have ever had the pleasure of coming in contact with. Upon questioning my father about the inhabitants of this town of Cave Junction, I am told that this was where all the old bikers and hippies and Vietnam Vets who never quite made it out of the jungle, came to settle down and grow pot. Marijuana, as I later come to learn, is the cash crop of that area. My father stands out completely among this crowd. He is a handsome, proud looking man, with a slick southern drawl that possesses the power to make you feel as if you were on a plantation in the

antebellum South. Unlike my stately father, who is arrayed in the best in cowboy hats and boots all tied together by pressed shirts and blue jeans, everyone else is dressed in overalls and flip-flops and is sort of bent and gray, missing various parts like teeth and fingers. At our home in Salt Lake no one would have given us a second glance, but here we are looked upon as aristocracy. He seems a great man and I am his little man.

A definite highlight of the summer is the amount that I am allowed to shoot guns. Back home in Salt Lake it's illegal to fire a gun in the area we live, but out here there are no such laws to prohibit one of my favorite types of recreation. My dad's current collection of armament includes a Mossberg 12 gauge that I really come to think of as mine. It is all black with a heat guard over the barrel that makes it look evil, like something out of a sci-fi movie. A friend of my dad's, who is ex-military, teaches me how to fire from virtually every spot on my body. The first time my father sees me going through my gun drills is magic, a look that seems to be a mixture of joy, pride, and completion rises on his face and I can tell he is pleased. I shoot from my inner thigh then my groin then my abdomen then my right shoulder and then over to the left side and down again. My father is so proud he even takes a picture of me standing out in front of our living quarters, which is an old WWII mess hall tent, posing in my army boots, camouflage pants, and holding the gun that I had, in my mind, come to master. Snakes are abundant in Southern Oregon so I am required to carry a .22 with me at all times. The .22 is cool and all, but it really can't compare to the Mossberg. Walking around the campsite with my father, guns strapped to our legs, he with a 44 magnum and I with a .22, he seems a great man and I am his little man.

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I have now transformed from a gentle child into a rage of adolescence. My view of the world and of my father has changed due to an unfortunate mixture of pubescent hormones and various illegal intoxicants. At sixteen my anger has a broad range, but he is the center. Violence fills my thoughts and I can hardly contain the fury that lies within. Physical violence occurs between my father and me when for unpredictable reasons my simmering rage boils over from time to time.

One such occasion finds me tripping on acid and my dad quite inebriated on wine. I am having a nice “trip” with my then girlfriend. We walk into the living room and he notices I don’t have any shoes on. He actually starts to lay into me because I’m not wearing shoes! This is not to say my dad is unreasonable but more of a testament to the unpredictability that alcohol can create in an otherwise rational human being. My frame of mind while on LSD is very fragile and subject to severe and drastic change at the slightest negative stimuli, which in this case is a drunken, angry, 250 pound gorilla of a man. To be honest, his provocation of me is something that I have secretly hoped for for some time now and maybe even subtly worked towards. All I need is for him to lose his cool one good time and I’ll have an excuse to completely let go and kill the motherfucker. He jumps up from his chair and comes at me. His fists are clenched and there is a snarling sort of animal-esque look to his face that makes me question if violence is what I want after all. Since I really don’t know how to throw a punch, I lunge at him with all my weight. My “jump-punch” knocks him off balance and we fall over the love seat and onto the floor. My advantage doesn’t last long against this veteran of many a bar fight, and I am soon on my belly, arms pinned behind me. Mom breaks up the fight and my dad storms off to the garage.

His name, which was Hero ever since I could remember, has changed into Enemy seemingly overnight. Our house is a war zone except for one small piece of neutral territory, Blue Monday. Blue Monday, named after a radio show, is the time when we sit in the garage, just the two of us, listen to Blues on the radio, drink beer, and simply talk about nothing and everything. No matter what has transpired in the course of the previous week we always have Blue Monday to look forward to. For some reason the promise of time with my father, to just sit and hold his attention, still has value to me, even if I do not openly acknowledge it.

The first time we have Blue Monday begins with my father calling me to come from the house out to the garage. The thought crosses my mind, “What did I do now?” I just know he’s going to ream me out for something. When I arrive in the garage he smiles at me and says, “Sit down a minute, I want you to listen to something.” On the radio I hear guys like Smokey Wiener and the Hotlinks, Robert Johnson, SRV, and others. I love the blues and so I am

interested even if it means being in the same room with him. Sitting there in the old retired recliner rocking back and forth in the dusty garage that was cramped with various acquisitions from the past, my father says three little words that will stay with me forever: “Want a beer?” I can hardly believe it! This means something, but what? My desire to be acknowledged as a grown man has been present for some time, but was this it? My veins are rushing with excitement as I gladly take him up on his offer. Cold, foamy mouthfuls of acceptance are flowing down my throat when something strange happens — we become civil. We begin to talk and joke and laugh and smile, it’s wonderful! I tell him about the music I’ve been making and what’s been going on in my life and he tells me about what’s going on with him. We go over our favorite government conspiracies and talk about UFO’s and the end of the world. All the hatred I have felt for him melts away like the frosty residue on the side of my mug. When I finish my beer he pulls out another glass. He didn’t keep mugs in the freezer. This could only mean one thing and that was he planned this! He wanted to be with me! By the end of the night our cease-fire is a considerable success. He retires to his room and me to mine, but I know this is not a permanent situation. The sun will come up and along with it my rage, but for now he seems a great man and I am once more his little man.

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For the past two years my wife and I have been making our way across the country with her job as a travel nurse. We stay in a city for three to six months at a time and then move on to take a new assignment. I am now twenty-five and much has changed in me since we left South Carolina. Insecurity has been replaced by confidence and I am surer of myself than ever. Not only have mental and emotional changes transpired, but at 100 pounds lighter I am physically different as well. Coming back home, while a calculated decision, is a scary one. There is this persistent, nagging feeling that the personal and spiritual growth of two years will somehow be taken from me at the South Carolina border. A recurring thought plagues my mind: Will I be able to be me, the man I’ve become in my father’s absence, in his presence, or will I revert to my old ways? I will find out soon enough.

Not long after my wife and I arrive at my parent’s house, I am motioned to come and join my father outside. I know the deal; we’re leaving behind the

womenfolk (who stay inside because of the heat) to talk, listen to music, and drink the requisite beer. Our conversation is wonderful and we have a great time except for when I go to leave. Failure fills my mind because I have drunk too much and relapsed into an old pattern of excess. Around him I smoke even though I don't really smoke. I drink even though I don't really drink. The image of Marlboros and alcohol equaling manliness still has a hold on me. Around my wife I am different, evolved, a man of wisdom beyond my years, but somehow around him I regress into the teenager who is only content in the garage on Blue Mondays. This becomes the pattern of our next few visits: into the house and out to the porch with Pop. He seems too great a man; I am just a little man.

A few weeks have passed since we have been to see the folks. This time I am focused on spending some time with my mom but I know what will eventually come. I'm at the dinner table laughing with my mom and sister, when my dad motions me from the kitchen to come outside. This was it! Would today be the day I resist, or simply become a child again? Something rises up inside of me and I blurt out, "I demand you stay inside with us!" I'm half-joking because who really talks like that? "I'm only here for tonight and you can go outside to smoke tomorrow! Come in here and sit down!" This creates an awkward tension in the room and all attention is now on my father's next move. He pauses for a moment, smiles at me and slowly swaggers over to sit down in his chair at the head of the table. I passed the test! He came to me and I did not have to go to him. Truly, he seems a great man and I no little man.