

Tending to Fires

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My father has taken to saying “Yee-haw” when I visit. He says it at confusing moments. As he refills his coffee. When he’s lacing his shoes. As he tucks his polo shirt into belted khakis, highlighting a slender man’s aging belly. Yee-haw.

He must say it as filler, as though he doesn’t know what else to say, or what to do with silences. Being around me has become a performance for him. I understand because it’s the same for me. It’s why for years I’d make a show of hating puns and country music, and he’d duly crack puns and play Ralph Stanley in the car. This is how we bond.

Now, because we live at opposite corners of the country, I see him once a year or so, and it’s yee-haw. Yee-haw when standing up after dinner. Yee-haw when he loads a YouTube video to show me.

Recently I asked my sister, the one who still lives at home, if he always says it that much or only because I’m around. She affirms what I suspected. These words he reserves for me.

These days, he works out to Jillian Michaels. He used to run, but after an injury, he found a used workout DVD. He's watched it enough now that he no longer needs sound. Last time I visited, I wandered into the kitchen for coffee in the morning, threw bread in the toaster, and tried to ignore him in the adjacent living room: Jillian Michaels on the TV in a sports bra, her hair in a high ponytail. Tried to ignore my father in shorts and a T-shirt, clutching five-pound dumbbells in his fists, panting. Lunging. Lifting.

When I was little, he was as real to me as Davy Crockett. As Leatherstocking. I lived in a household where men were mythic, mysteries, and the only one in my house was always out of reach, too busy for his seven daughters' girlish games. It was unspoken that his spaces—bedroom, home office—were off limits. Sometimes we knew we were being too loud when we'd hear white noise from his office, a radio dialed all the way right and turned up. My father is a preacher. Greek translation and exegesis requires concentration, which for my father means obsession. Each sermon was memorized. Each week a new sermon.

In photos from my parents' honeymoon, there is no trace of bookishness. My father is naked in a canyon in Arizona, reclining in the bed of a stream that rushes white across his lap. His mustache is thick and long. He is wild. Relaxed. Photos were just learning color back then, and they are awash in a red glow. Photos like these build legends.

When I was a teenager, my father joined the volunteer fire department.

It was the first "recreational" he'd done in a while. The first physical thing. He doesn't even watch sports. It was the first dominantly male environment he'd entered for years. After all, he worked from home. Mother said he needed it.

For months, those men, their stories, the training, the emergencies they responded to—this was all he talked about, and just talking was enough to send

adrenaline through him. He told the same stories over and over, and I didn't have the heart to say when I'd heard one before.

I went from only seeing him at mealtimes and when he'd go into the kitchen to get a coffee refill to seeing him respond to the crackle of his new pager. A voice would say ". . . motor vehicle accident, southbound . . ." and he'd fling his office door wide, run upstairs, slam the kitchen door, his car door, off to the fire department. All would be quiet in his absence.

The year my father joined the fire department, Quint became one of his favorites. I knew Quint because he was a regular at the bagel shop where I worked in Bushnell's Basin along the Erie Canal. Quint came in two or three times a day, House Blend in the morning and Diet Coke in the afternoon. He was a policeman, did freelance construction, put out fires.

Quint took my father under his wing. Didn't mock his scholarliness, his naïve excitement, his perfectionism, his beanpole body, his religion. My father spoke of him with awe and pride. Quint, when he leaned against my counter, and it was just the two of us in the bagel shop trading gossip at four in the afternoon, spoke of my father with amused affection, as though telling me about a new pet.

For almost ten years now, my father has had the image of a fire at night as his desktop's background. A glowing menace profiles men in thick suits, masks, with ropes over their shoulders. A holy brotherhood. A team. Here to rescue others at the risk of their own safety. Here to master something with courage and determination.

Perhaps this is his own department at work or perhaps this is an image he pulled off the internet. A basic Google search reveals a number of variations on this image. Dark night. Orange burn. Suited men silhouetted, masks aglow. When I lived at home, sometimes I'd hear him watching firefighting compilation videos on YouTube set to rock music. To me they seemed a bit corny, but I think he wanted to see himself as the kind of man who might be in such a video.

Paul Harvey once delivered a radio segment about being a firefighter, and he said no one knows why firemen are firemen, not even themselves. But I'd posit that the firefighter represents a modern version of an American Myth. Recently, at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, I stopped to look at a sculpture of a bronco wrestling in order to throw a wiry body from his back. The bronco was propped on one front leg with his head to the ground. His body was twisted, back legs in the air. Those sculpted muscles spoke rage, frustration. The man was portrayed hips forward, arching back, legs straddling the horse's neck. It seemed that man had always been riding that horse. It seemed that horse had always been fighting. My father would almost certainly not understand if I told him I thought of him when I saw it.

In July, at four in the afternoon, there's only one other employee and me at the bagel shop. I'm cleaning the kettle. It's as tall as my armpits, and to scrub it out, to brush at gritty cornmeal and chunks of dough cooked on the bottom, I stand on a stool and dip my torso down into the still-steaming basin.

I look up, and Quint has been there, waiting, watching. I push damp hair from my face. He says it's OK I didn't see him there. He was enjoying the view. It was nice, he says, watching my ass move all around like that. He looks me in the eye.

I'm not quite eighteen, and startled. I tell my manager about the exchange later. I pass it off like no big deal. Her anger surprises me. She tells the district manager, who tells Quint he's not allowed in the Bushnell's store anymore. He could go to the other ones, but not mine. She threatens a restraining order.

Behind my embarrassment, I am emboldened.

I tell my father matter-of-factly. I think it was dinner time. In passing, I say, *Quint isn't allowed into my store anymore. He made a comment. I was bent over. He made a comment.*

My father is briefly confused. He might have scooped himself more fried potatoes. Might have asked what exactly Quint said. I might have told him, or given him a cleaner version. I can't remember now.

But I know the two of them talked about it. It's not that my father confronted Quint. I think Quint brought it up.

My father characterized the conversation this way: Quint hadn't known I'd be offended; it was an innocent comment, and he didn't mean nothing by it. Then Quint said something like: *Anyway, the district manager is a lesbian*. It became a joke for him and my father to share.

So my father still brought Quint's name home. His jokes, his comments. After all, he seemed to specially look out for my father. My father appreciated that. So I learned how he and Quint had a good laugh about how he got banned from the Bushnell's Basin store. Then the pager went off. He was out the door. Out the driveway. Yee-haw.

My parents later moved across the country, and years have passed, but my father still mentions Quint now and again, and in such moments, I wonder if in some way his need for Quint, even his memory, is greater than his need for me.

Yee-haw. Yee-haw when we buckle our seat belts in the car. Yee-haw to grinding coffee beans. To zipping our jackets. To fishing. To throwing hatchets in the backyard. To getting the mail. Yee-haw. Yee-haw.

When my dad hugs me—those rare times when I come to visit, when we're saying goodbye—his arms go over my shoulders, and mine go up under his arms. He hugs so tightly I can't breathe, so tightly that my neck is pushed into his shoulder, and I feel like I'm choking. I don't tell him this because I'm afraid it will hurt his feelings. I don't tell him this because when he hugs me that tight, I feel like he's trying to make up for the months of no phone calls—the years of simultaneous presence and absence. It's as though the tighter he squeezes, the more sure he can be that I understand: he loves me, don't I know? I always hold my breath, tensing the muscles in my neck against the pressure, and wait the fifteen seconds the embrace will last.

