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How I Came to Exist

Josh Wagner

Sitting across from me in the semi-lucid state of looming nap he refers to as the white stage of awareness, is my father—my real father—though my mom will never admit it, will never relinquish the words: “Donald Victoria Estringi is in fact your biological father.” When he perks up he asks me about school and what kind of grades I’m getting and whether I have any boyfriends yet, and always he phrases this more like whether I’ve been knocked up, and then he asks whether there’s any chance I’ll make my move before his rigamortis flares up or, at least, like, in this century.

Donald Victoria Estringi, confined to a wheelchair, was once a military man. He yells things like “Report,” “At ease,” and “Fucksack,” at more or less random intervals. He keeps his seventeen medals in a dark oak case on the wall. He wears a bolo tie and American flag cufflinks. A different belt buckle every day. He despises gambling and hates to eat anything without utensils. He spends a lot of time talking about the importance of rooting out communism. A wandering hematoma plagues his face. His remaining hair is blinding white, parted on the left side and combed over to the right with laser precision. Glasses hang like a rocking chair on the edge of his nose, and he prefers not to look through them. He could smell worse for his age.

A couple years ago doctors diagnosed him with Guillain-Barre Syndrome on account of his sudden paralysis, but the symptoms never spread beyond his legs. His personal psychiatrist suspects psychosomatic hysteria or a very crafty will to death.

I can tell he’s my father just by looking at him, the way you can sometimes tell a person is lying just by looking at them. Sometimes he looks back at me like he knows. Sometimes he looks at me like he knows I know.

I try to hang out with Donald as much as I can. Sometimes it’s just to avoid having to deal with all the other old people who aren’t nearly as much fun, but mostly it’s for quality time. He’s really old, and I have no idea how much longer I’ll have him around.
We usually sit in his little room and play the Chinese version of chess with pieces like elephants and cannons that you won’t find in normal chess. The games start out serious and then digress into whatever daily rules fly off the top of my father’s head. Sometimes he gets inspiration from the white stage of awareness. His moves take up to a half hour when the meditation consumes him.

“A true soldier only strikes betimes,” he explains. So I take these opportunities to help myself to the mini-fridge and read the actual god’s-honest-truth newspaper, which may or may not make me cool in certain hipster circles.

Today, my father is particularly spunky. He laughs when he makes a move. He takes one of my elephants with a cannon by jumping off a pawn and crossing the river. I’m pretty sure this is a real rule.

“Walked right into that one,” he says, “the master returns without leaving.”

My sigh is pointed, bitchy I guess. I scan the board. There’s this question I’ve been meaning to ask him for an hour. It’s a lead-in question on my way to my real question—the question I swear I’m going to ask every time I come to the home, but never do. This isn’t the first time I’ve used this particular technique. It almost worked last time. I try to sound off-handed, aloof.

“What were the nineties like?”

“A long and tortured decade,” he says, scooting his glass of chocolate milk closer to the edge of the table so that his face can reach the straw.

“How about, say, 1996? Was that a good year?” I know that I am not smooth, but he is old and I am desperate.

He takes a long, palsied slurp from his milk. “‘96… That’s the year the Ruskies and the Chechnians really got into it. Operation Desert Strike… Taliban took Kabul… eh… Clinton re-elected.”

“Where were you?”

“Sitting on my fat ass, that’s where!” He laughs; he sneers; he surveys the board. I know exactly where he was in 1996. The year I was conceived.

My dad says, “It was right after my discharge. They gave me this little shit room in ‘Pest while I underwent six months evaluation
and waited for a plane home.”

“How about in April? Were you still living there in April?”

“April? Christ in a deep dark well, how the hell am I supposed to remember April?”

I pick up a chariot and rub it between my fingers. My pieces are black and my chariot’s symbol looks like the kind of flag-on-a-stick thing armies once carried into war. My father’s eyes follow my hand and then drop back to the board, trying to anticipate what I’m up to.

“Well, it was the start of spring,” I say, “Sunshine, flowers, girls in short skirts—”

“Helen of Troy!”

“—birds chirping, baseball season, high rivers.”

“There’s nothing like spring in Bavaria.” He digs something out of his left ear. Stares at it for a while.

“But I guess like, what I’m asking is, what were you doing at the time?”

“I was stationed in Bavaria in the spring of ’93. Something intoxicating about those years.”

“1996, specifically, is my interest.”

“Communism already a ghost of the past. The internet was learning to crawl.”

“And, like, how you spent your time.”

“There was this feeling in the air like anything was possible.”

“Any, you know, special ladies?”

“Talk of eradicating all borders, creating a world currency, microscopic explorations hitherto unimagined. Inner space!”

“Was Viagra around at the time?”

“Was what what?”

“Viagra.”

My father points at the board. “You gonna move that chariot or are you waiting for its value to depreciate?”

“I’m thinking.”

My favorite rule is, when the last chariot gets captured from the board, all remaining advisor pieces undergo a crisis of faith. Being from the old school and expecting technology to solve all the world’s problems, this ends in heart attacks and death unless
one of us can sing every verse to the Battle Hymn of the Old Republic without error, which happens, like, never.

My mother literally screams when I refer to Donald Victoria Estringi as my father. She says, “I’ll tell you who your father is,” and then gives me some bullshit story about a trip to Cinque Terre and an Italian businessman who fucked her and split. She tells it like it’s the hottest soap opera ever. Why does every woman in this town fall to pieces over men who don’t exist?

“Ah, the nineties,” says Donald, drifting into the opiate grin of old-farts. Excellent teeth for his age, though. “Optimism was in the air. The dawn of a new era. If I could freeze time, I’d freeze it in ‘91. I was still in Berlin, helping rebuild.”

There are days I can get him to talk about the dark side of his time in Europe, the two years before he left for the states. The two years before I was born. When he’s in the mood he’ll say things that give me the creeps, but he lets go only in fragments and gasps. Some seriously crazy shit about the Slovakian forests. Talking trees. An underground network of root systems and human mind control. He worked on a base in West Germany through most of the eighties until the Wall came down. Then, he took part in some of the original diplomatic missions through the old Bloc countries. Eventually, they stationed him in East Berlin. I guess sometime around ‘94 he was moved to Budapest on secret intelligence missions where he ran into something that messed him up for good. I’ve heard from multiple sources that in ‘Pest there’s a hole dug all the way down to the center of the earth. The Nazis started it and the Commies finished it. Donald says its somewhere below a pre-fabricated seventies housing project on Szigony Street. Who knows what kind of crazy Area 51 shit they brought back up, but my father must’ve dipped into whatever it was because he left the army a sixty-two-year-old fountain of fertility.

Eventually, he got back to the States and ended up here, living on the streets. He spent seven or eight months taking handouts and drinking himself, and everyone else, crazy. I guess he used to sing old German songs at the top of his lungs and run around telling people’s fortunes, offering to give away high-level government secrets for the price of a bottle. According to some other old timers
I’ve interrogated, three federal sedans pulled into town and tracked him down in an alley and had a nice long chat with him. After that, the checks started coming in and he moved into a condo until he lost the use of his limbs. His other daughter, who I have never met and who was going to move out from Virginia to help him, eventually decided it would be easier to just put him in the home.

The point is he was in Budapest in ’96. And so was my mother.

“My mom must’ve been pretty back then.” I nibble on my lip. “In the nineties, I mean.”

“Have I met your mother?”

Evasive, Mr. Estringi. Very evasive. I watch his hands. A man’s lies slip out through his fingers.

I don’t know what really happened, but Brooks and I have talked about it a lot. Brooks used to live down the street from Donald’s condo. Brooks says he’s pretty sure the old man is my dad, and Brooks knows secrets like that. I’ve put a lot of thought into it and I’ve finally got a story I like. It’s a little bit of what my mother says, a little more of what I know, and mostly what I made up because it sounds right. Brooks says the stuff I make up is more important than the stuff I know.

So it’s like this. My mom was single, stupid, recently divorced, and on some sort of mid-life crisis bullshit backpacking through Europe thing, wrestling cultural crisis and a biological Big Ben when she and her girlfriends rented a place in Budapest. My father was fresh off his mind-altering experience with the evil experiments of the enemy. While waiting for the army to decide his fate, Donald Victoria Estringi wandered into local church confessionals several times a week, looking for some peace of mind. What he had to tell drove two priests out of town. The Church of St. Margaret is where they met. Neither had come for the services. She was walking with a friend. He was planning to shoot himself in the head and splatter as many dendrites, glial cells, and myelinated axons as possible over the stained glass.

He brought his issue side arm along and wore his stripes. He pulled his cap low on his brow and placed the barrel against the patch of the United States flag. My father intended to pass that bullet not only through his brain, but also through the state that
drove him mad and the church that could not repair him. He knelt in the grass. Both hands held the gun upside-down, thumbs folded as in prayer across the trigger. The angle of trajectory would shatter the glass on the east side of the nave, piercing Christ’s side, tear through the chapel, and finally exit out the eye of St. George’s Dragon.

My mother walked back across the street for a second time just as Donald was finishing his sidearm drills. The friend she’d left at the door had forgotten her wallet in my mom’s purse. Mom went all the way up to the front doors but was too intimidated to open them. She crept around the side, thinking maybe she could see her friend through a window and signal her. Donald was praying out loud: “To the principalities that swarm the throne of the Most High, obscuring the threefold face, the tri-part blade, the blender of consciousness, the hole at the center of the galaxy, the flesh around which this tiny shroud of the universe drapes. To the cocksucker who stole my marbles, to the first and the last, to the tooth and the scapula, to the purity of love which can by no means find further expression—not with his creation devouring him like a goddamn pack of wolves—oh, infinite spirit of the holy intractable neon mainframe, I release thee from this chamber of blood and pulp into which thou hast haphazardly submerged thyself. This tomb of a head, this labyrinth of a body, this rotten cage of meat.” And then he closed his eyes. He snapped off the safety and kinesthetically estimated the angle most likely to bind both Holy Son and Dragon in 9x19mm of cosmic wedlock.

My mother, who had heard it all, said, “Excuse me,” but she didn’t say it right away. First, she took a step backward. She squelched the impulse to take three more and pretend she’d been around the corner when the shot went off. But something in her overcame this instinct. She reached out a hand.

“Excuse me. Don’t do that.”

Donald Victoria Estringi neither lowered the gun nor squeezed the trigger as he caught my mother’s eye. Her hair a mess, her fashion sense less than spectacular, her eyes starting to sag a bit, same as her breasts—such an angel she must’ve seemed to him, to whatever part of him thought suicide an inescapable recourse
to the demons of his mind. Still on his knees, he turned trembling
toward her. She came to him and took the gun from his hands. She
crouched down to embrace his ancient frame, the great sobbing
hulk in his uniform—such a synthesis of masculine and feminine.
Did they do it right there on the church lawn? No, that’s probably
taking it way too far. They walked back to her place or took a tram
to get a drink and talk it out.

My mother knew what she was doing. A man returning from
the brink of death is not something to waste, and she soaked up
every drop of emanating life force that old Donald intended to
launch out the back of his skull, but which he now redirected into
a physical, mental, and emotional flowering, not unlike the rapture
of the Buddha or the resurrection of Christ. He unleashed his own
fiery dragon and hurled it deep into my mother’s womb.

Some people hate that part of the story, but it’s my conception
and I’ll describe it however I want, thank you very much.