Coons, Possums, Yugoslavia

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COONS, POSSUMS, YUGOSLAVIA

Daddy’s carrying a load of shit in his pants and Mama’s going around acting like it’s all my fault. She says it’s the beer we drink whenever I visit that’s what confuses him, he’s never this bad when I’m not here. Mama’s about half out the door when she starts in with the tongue lashing. I laugh and that sets her off some more. I laugh because it’s always been like this when we fight—Mama rushing out the door in a hurry to get someplace, then stopping and turning around like she forgot her keys or something.

“I don’t have time to argue with you,” she says, “you been trying to get me to argue since you drove up. I’ll be late for my Bingo if I stand here with you. And you better keep an eye on him, see that he don’t walk off.”

“Mama,” I say, “he done walked off in his mind a long time ago.”

Her face turns red like it always does when she’s mad. She takes a step toward me and the screen door slams in back of her. “Don’t talk about your father like that,” she says. “You’ll be old one day your own self.”

Then she’s out the door and I’m yelling after her, “What do you want me to do, put him on a goddamn leash?” I should of let it ride, but we’ve never been able to do that with each other.

Daddy don’t hear any of this because he’s busy washing out his drawers in the bathroom sink; that’s what Mama told him to do, and he’s been scrubbing at them for two hours now. I guess he just don’t remember how long he’s been at it. That’s how he is with the newspaper. Mama says he reads the Knoxville paper front to back, spends three or four hours with it all folded up in his lap. And he don’t remember a word of what he’s read, not according to Mama. Except for the obituary page, and she thinks he makes that up.

Over coffee this morning she says, “He reads that obituary page like your grandmother used to read the bible. And he
makes things up. They say that’s a sign it’s getting worse. He’s always telling me so and so died, he read it in the paper. Travis Campbell, you remember old Travis Campbell, he used to claim they named the county after him. Your father had him dead of a heart attack and I saw him in the Piggly Wiggly the very day he was supposed to of died. I told your father I’d seen him, said he looked fine to me. You know your father, he gives me that what-do-you-know-about-anything look and says, ‘You might be the last one to of seen him alive.’ ”

Mama goes into Knoxville for her Bingo; it’s to get away from Daddy, but she won’t admit it. She thinks she ought to be able to fix the Alzheimer’s with prayer and watching over him 24 hours a day. Nothing works, and not getting away makes her short with him. Every time she goes out of the house, she has to make sure the neighbors keep an eye on him. Used to be their kids were over to the house all the time, listening to his stories. Now they stay away. Mama thinks he scares them. She says he’s okay for a couple hours, but she’s afraid he’d burn the house down if she was gone any longer. One time she come home and all the burners on the stove were going and he was out back wandering around. He don’t know what day it is, he don’t know what time it is. The last time he mowed the lawn, it didn’t get half done; the mower ended up down the hill almost to this little creek that fills up when it rains.

It’s always been best when Daddy and I can just sit and look at things. After Mama drives off I go out on the porch, call for him to come and join me. He walks in carrying those scrubbed-up drawers like he don’t know how they come to be in his hand or what exactly he’s supposed to do with them. He stands there in the doorway looking out at the yard, says, “Something’s eating my wrens.” Then he cuts a long, lingering fart that has a kind of music to it. I say, “Daddy, you better be careful. You’re gonna have you another accident.” He says, “A good fart never hurt anybody.” And laughs that good laugh of his. I don’t know if it’s at the fart or his comment. Then he says, “Where’d your mother go?” I have to tell him about a hundred times in the next hour how she went to play Bingo.
Daddy's always been fond of wrens, and he must have six houses out back where they nest in the spring. I bought him this hand crafted wren house when I was up near Lexington a few years ago. It's supposed to be an outhouse and it's made of old wood and has a crescent moon on it, even leans a little to one side. It was his favorite from the day I showed up with it. The only thing he didn't like about it was the hole where the wrens were supposed to go in. He said it was too big, they might not go in there on account of the hole was too big. I guess he could see I was disappointed I'd got him a wren house with the wrong size hole. "What the hell," he said to me, "if the wrens don't like it I can fuck the damn thing."

He never used to talk like that around me, but since he's gotten older he cusses like I was one of the boys he used to go coon hunting with. I guess getting older don't mean much unless it means you're just becoming more of what you already are, and maybe you just care less about hiding it from anybody, even your own son.

"Daddy," I ask, "what do you think it is that's killing the wrens?"

It's like he's forgot all about the wrens. "What?" he says. "The wrens. What's killing them?"

"How do I know? Old age. If I knew I'd set out here with my shotgun." Then he looks at me like I'm some kind of stupid that's new to the human race and he's trying to figure out how to describe it, the kind of stupid I am, or how it is I got that way, where the damn chicken coop fox come from. He's always looked at me like that, and when he does I know I'm about to hear one of his famous Campbell County comments on life.

"I got growin' wild on my ass what you're cultivatin' there on your face," that's what he says. He ain't ever got used to my beard, and I guess it's like the first time whenever he sees it.

I go into the kitchen to get us a couple beers, and he's dozed off in the rocker when I come back. His drawers are in a puddle on the floor, and I notice there's blood and shit under his fingernails. Mama says she's thinking about making him wear gloves to bed—if he ain't up prowling he's scratching at himself. She says it's part of the Alzheimer's, calls it a reverse
clock—he sleeps in the day and walks around like a zombie at night. It was a long time before she’d even talk about it, and she seemed to hold it against me that I was always wanting to know how he was doing with it. I was only kidding about the leash thing, but I shouldn’t of said it. It’s Mama that’s on the leash, the way she has to wait on him hand and foot. Whenever she talks about it she’ll say she can’t breathe her own air, that he follows her around the house like a puppy. That leash thing ain’t nothing to joke about. It was in the paper last time I visited how somebody over in Maynardville actually had put their own father on a rope and tied him up in the back yard. They took his food out to him and hosed him down when he got to stinking too bad. People around here can’t afford a nursing home and everyone is quick to raise their eyebrows, but not many know what to do about it when it happens in their own family, the Alzheimer’s.

Daddy wakes up and looks over at me like he don’t know who I am. I wave to him, he says, “Who the hell you supposed to be?” I give him what’s left of his beer, and he starts in with his Yugoslavia story. I’ve heard it a hundred times, and whenever he tells the damn thing it’s like we’ve been sitting there talking about it for hours.

“The war was almost over,” he says, “it was my job to carry whores to the troops that was out in the field. They hadn’t seen a woman in so long the colonel was beginning to worry about his own ass. It was a full bird colonel. He called me cracker, he was from some place up north. I don’t think he ever met anybody like me.”

“There probably wasn’t nobody like you in the entire army, Daddy.”

“I drove all over Yugoslavia with those whores bouncing around in back of that five ton. I was tenderizing the meat. They got them some black and blue asses on those roads. There weren’t a good road in all of Yugoslavia.”

“There ain’t no Yugoslavia no more. Do you know that, Daddy?”

“What’s that you say?”

“There ain’t no Yugoslavia. They broke it up.”

“Well there was then. They had the sorriest roads you’d
ever want to see. Now get me another beer and shave your damn face while you’re gone.”

I pick up his drawers on the way out, carry them with me into the kitchen. I figure if I stay gone long enough, maybe he’ll fall back asleep and forget the Yugoslavia story. It’s always like this when I go back, I mean the way I have to struggle with the Alzheimer’s, come to terms with it. And the way Mama has to struggle with me busting up her routine. You can get used to just about anything, long as you don’t go around thinking you can fix it. Then you got yourself some real trouble.

When I first seen how bad he had got, I went into my room and cried. This must be five years ago now. I took a bottle of Jack Daniel’s in there with me and drank and cried, drank and cried till Mama knocked on the door about noon the next day wanting to know if I was still alive. I remember sitting there propped up in the bed thinking whiskey was about like getting old—Daddy used to say he took it one day at a time whenever you asked how he was doing. Whiskey is one sip at a time, and it don’t make you into anything you ain’t already been most of your life. It don’t fix nothing, whiskey don’t. And if you can’t fix it, you just got to live with it broken. I decided that night to quit feeling sorry for myself, to concentrate on what was left and not worry so much about how far gone Daddy was with the Alzheimer’s.

In the kitchen I make us a couple of baloney sandwiches—nothing but white bread and baloney and mayonnaise, a little bit of lettuce. I sit at the table, figuring I must of eaten at least 2000 baloney sandwiches for lunch when I was a kid. I don’t know exactly why Mama and I don’t get along. My sister says we flat don’t like each other but we think we should. Whenever we’re apart we forget we don’t like each other, and that makes it worse when we do get together. She lives in Knoxville, Sister does, with an engineer for the TVA. She married out of the holler, I just drove out. She’s a good girl and I wouldn’t say nothing against her. I know I get to looking forward to seeing Mama whenever it’s been awhile, and that first night back home is usually okay.
Then I can’t do anything right and it’s like I’m a little kid again. It’s like there was shit in my britches instead of Daddy’s.

Even when I was little, Mama was always fussing with me. Sister says it might have something to do with all the miscarriages; she says Mama and Daddy wanted to have a whole holler full of kids, like in the old days when there wasn’t no one in the holler but your own kin. But she never did have another baby after me. They was all born dead. Daddy used to say I was a hard act to follow.

When I go back out with his beer and sandwich, I try to get him off the Yugoslavia and on to something else. He’s sitting in the rocker studying his sandwich, holding on with both hands like he’s afraid it might run off on him. “Daddy,” I say, “something woke me up last night rooting around the grill. What do you think it was?”

He says, “Possums, what do you think. If you barbecue, you have to leave them the grease. They’ll tear the damn grill up if you don’t. Your mother is too quick to clean things, she’s always forgetting to leave the drippings.” Then he shuts up and eats his sandwich. It takes about fifteen minutes, and there’s pieces of baloney and bread and lettuce in his lap when he’s finished. He picks at the pieces of sandwich like he don’t know where it come from, like it’s lint he’s pulling off his pants.

“It was a full bird colonel,” he says. “Said he was doing it for the men, the morale. But he had some of those Yugoslav whores himself, that colonel did. There was this one he favored used to ride up front with me. Now don’t you be telling your mother any of this. That colonel thought he was smart. He was in some ways, but he was dumb with women.”

“You never told me this part before, Daddy. I thought it was laundry and supplies you drove all over Yugoslavia.”

“Depends on who I’m talking to what it was I was carrying,” he says. “If you shut up and listen, I’ll tell you about the whores. It wasn’t no regular thing when I first started driving the truck—you come by your truck driving natural, it’s in the blood. It was laundry at first. Then it came a rain like I ain’t ever seen.
The rivers was up, most of the roads washed out. Whenever the boys had liberty they’d go to the village. Take up with the whores. They weren’t whores actually, not real whores. It was the war made them whores. I had the five ton so loaded up with whores that first time we come into compound we got stuck in the mud. There was mud up over the axles. I look up and here come all these boys runnin’ out to the truck. Some of them did it right there on the ground. Those whores had mud all over everything they had. The rain smeared the makeup on their faces; it looked like some kid had got loose with his crayons and done a job on them.”

Daddy’s always drank his beer real fast. I watch him chug the can, put it down, pick it up and chug it again. Mama’s always after him to slow down with the drinking. It seems like he takes a drink and then don’t remember he took it.

“Daddy,” I ask, “what happened to the colonel’s whore?”

“What?”

“The colonel’s whore.”

“What about her?”

“What happened to her?”

“It was a full bird colonel.”

“I know that. What happened to his whore riding up front with you in the truck?”

“Get me another beer,” he says, “and quit looking like you swallowed something too big to shit back out.”

When Mama comes back from Knoxville the crickets and frogs have started up, and Daddy’s sleeping in his rocker. Every once in a while he lets out a snore that’s more like a bark of an elephant seal, and when he does there’s a hush out back, the music stops. That’s how loud his snore is. Mama’s got this look on her face I’ve seen before, a look that says she disapproves highly of something. When she sits down with her glass of iced tea, she looks over at Daddy, looks at the beer cans like they’re something from outside that snuck in under the door. “I see you two been drinking the beer while I was gone,” she says. “He’s going to wake up confused again tonight, you wait and see if
don't. I ought to make you clean out his drawers. He thinks I
don't know how much he drinks, he's always hiding the beer cans
on me. If you ask me, it's the drinking makes the Alzheimer's so
bad. Maybe it's even the cause of it. Sister says for you to be sure
and come and see her before you leave. I stopped over there
after my Bingo."

Daddy lets off a few snorts in a row. It's got kind of a
machine gun effect, and it's quiet again for a second. "The crick­
ets don't like your Daddy's snoring none, do they. You ain't going
to ask me why we don't sleep together I hope. So what did the
two of you talk about all day?"

"Yugoslavia, possums, coons, that's about it, Mama. And
wrens. He thinks something is eating his wrens."

"There's as many wrens out there as there ever was. I
think his eyesight is failing him. Maybe that's part of the
Alzheimer's."

"He still hears pretty good though. There was some­
boby coon hunting across the lake, and Daddy was naming the
dogs for me, said he knew them by the sounds they made."

"I think he hears that when it ain't even there," she says.
"Oh I hear it sometimes myself, but it don't sound like nothing
but a bunch of howling to me. I'd rather watch the TV than
listen to that."

Daddy don't go coon hunting no more. It's been years.
He couldn't keep up. But we've always sat out on the porch lis­
tening to the sounds of the dogs, whenever there was a hunt
going on. Like Mama, it was just a bunch of crazy howling to
me—I never did do any coon hunting myself. But Daddy can tell
you which dog has the scent and which is pretending, which sound
is a dog actually following a coon and which is the dogs follow­
ing that dog that has got the coon in his nose. He can tell you
when the coon has been treed and when the coon has outsmarted
the dogs, just from the sound of the barking.

Mama and I don't say nothing for a spell, just sit there
listening to the summer sounds. It's dark on the porch, but we
don't bother turning on the light. "I bet you heard the Yugosla­
via story till you was blue in the face," she says. "What did he tell
you about possums? He thinks he's some kind of expert on
possums. He won't let me put down poison, says they're here for a reason, got just as much right to be here as we do. He gets all windy with his possum stories he does. Even tried to get me to eat a possum once, and then he laughed so hard I thought he was going to have a stroke. Because I wouldn't go near his possum. He had cooked it up himself, that's how long ago this was. Remember how he used to cook when you was little? I wouldn't talk to him for a week laughing at me like that."

"He says they're good eating, Mama."

"I know what he says. I've been hearing it for years."

"Mama, he says possum tastes just like chicken."

"That's what they say about everything no one wants to eat. If it's disgusting and they're wanting you to eat it, then they say it tastes just like chicken. If I want to eat chicken, I'll cook me up a chicken. You can count on it tasting like chicken. Now quit arguing with me. Did you two eat?"

In the morning I'm sitting out back with my coffee looking for the mysterious disappearing wrens. I don't see any, but then I never have seen any wrens, not even those years when they were supposed to be all over the place. There's some open land stretches out to what Daddy calls Do Nothing Creek. Used to be about a hundred yards of jack-in-the-pulpit, poison ivy, blackberries, the usual assortment of weeds. Seems houses been creeping closer every year and that suits Mama just fine. Daddy says he expects to get up some morning and hear his neighbor fart they're getting so close.

There's a patch of early morning summer fog, so thick in spots it seems to be dripping from things. And there's some kind of dead critter down at the end of the open stretch, just before it drops off down to Daddy's Do Nothing. It's big, whatever it is, and there's a bunch of crows raising hell and hopping around like they do. I know it ain't no deer unless it just now died. You don't see dead deer much around here. The hide and legs and feet you might see, but not the whole body. It ain't the right color for a deer anyway. It's too damn dark, probably a big old dog. I walk outside to see what it is and why the crows are so upset.
I get up closer to it, then stop. It's a big dog all right, a mastiff, something like that, ain't seen many dogs bigger. There is a red smear along the side and it appears to be moving, just a mass of guts and all those crows hopping and fussing. I don't know what it is that dog ate but it's still alive. There's a tiny rat-like tail sticking out from the dog's belly, and that tail is moving along, slow moving but moving. Like a little tug boat. I'm thinking what the fuck is this. You eat something and it don't agree with you and it kills you on the way down, and it's still alive even after you're dead. The crows ain't scared of it so much, it's more like they're mad at it, whatever this thing with the skinny tail is. I can't tell how big it is. There's just a moving mass of red guts and this tail, like some kind of teased up ribbon on a package the way it curls.

I'm up close enough to see better but it's foggy and I can't see shit. One minute I'm about to see it clear as day, the next minute the picture blurs. I'm only a few yards away and I'm a little nervous. There's even more crows now that I'm close up to it, but that ain't really surprising. It's hard to run off a scavenger. They're pretty single minded about the business at hand. I'm about to get seasick there's so god damn many hopping crows.

I get to thinking about when I was a kid and Daddy had bought me a 4-10. It was a beautiful gun, and I think the first thing I ever did shoot was a buzzard. Shot at it anyway. It was standing there in the middle of the road eating at a dead rabbit. That buzzard had its wings spread while it was eating. It was like it didn't want anything else to get a good look at what it was doing, and those wings gave it privacy. I fired my shotgun at that buzzard and nothing happened, it didn't move an inch. I've tried to run over them in the road and it's like playing chicken with a tree. They just won't stop what they're doing.

Daddy is so quiet coming up in back of me, I almost jump when he starts talking. Then it feels like we've been standing there forever, studying what's in front of us.

"They something ain't they," he says. "A possum will eat its way in and eat its way back out. That's what it's got that long nose for. Don't like nothing but the guts, a possum don't. Uses that nose like a compass."
We stand there studying and figuring like it's some kind of jigsaw puzzle and Daddy's got all the pieces we need, all the pieces I can't find.

"This is some serious shit here, ain't it Daddy."
"What's that?"
"This possum and its business."
"Got the god damnedest pecker you'd ever want to see, a possum does. It's forked. Don't make no sense to me to have equipment like that possum got. What are you going to do with a forked pecker?"

"How is it you know so much about possums?"
"What?"
"Possums, how do you know so much about possums?"
"I live here don't I. That tail is the way it is so they can hang upside down from trees. That's how they sleep. You kill a possum while it's hanging from a tree limb and you'll have to cook that limb with it when you throw it in the pot. What kind of dog you think that is?"

"I don't know."
"You don't know."
"Maybe it's a mastiff."
"A what?"
"A mastiff. Maybe it's a mastiff. I'm not sure. I don't really know."
"What good are you?"
"It's a dead dog, Daddy, that's what it is."
"Hell, a blind man can see that."

Then Mama's voice breaks the early morning quiet. "You boys wanting to eat or are you going to chew the fat all day?"

"Let's go inside and eat, Daddy."
"It's the old ones you don't ever get close to," he says, making a fist of his hand and working one eye, then the other. A little boy just out of bed rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"I wouldn't know, Daddy. I never have had the pleasure."

"The pleasure."
"Right. I never did meet an old possum."
"We're talking possums are we?"
"It's breakfast time, we—"
"Thinks she's got me treed don't she."
"She just wants us to come eat, she—"
"It's how they fool you. Blue tick, blue ribbon—"
"That ain't no coon hound, Daddy."
"—blue in the face from howling, it don't matter. They know the only way you can see them is their eyes, the light bouncing off. That's why they cover their eyes like they do, with their paws."

Now he's laughing and I'm seeing a posse of armed and dangerous drunks, a tree full of senior citizen raccoons with their paws over their eyes. I'm asking Daddy how smart they are and do they communicate and he looks at me like why am I asking such stupid questions.

"I don't reckon I know," he says. "I guess they're about as smart as they need to be."