

On the Way to Get Lumber, Two Months before their Divorce

Robert Layman

“And the times weren’t all bad.” – Jerry Ewen, 54th Dustoff

I got strep throat a lot when I was a kid. Probably like eleven times or more. I didn’t have tonsillitis. I didn’t need to have tonsillitis. I didn’t need my tonsils taken out -- that would take too much tax money away from the doctor if he diagnosed me with such an expensive condition. When a kid came in with federal health insurance, our conditions were always underestimated, always reduced. Appendicitis was always indigestion, a fever was always just a faulty thermometer. Asthma was just a cold. A broken wrist was always just a minor sprain.

No cast. No setting. No more deficit. No more taxes.

But tonsillitis was just another case of strep at eight in the morning, it never mattered what time you went. No matter what time, no matter how sure you were of your symptoms, they’d always prod the dry popsicle stick in your mouth and make you gag, tear up a little in front of mom. Then they’d make you wait to tell you about something you already *know* you have. Sitting in there, with the plastic tie-dyed triceratops wreaking havoc over the THOMAS train tracks that only ran in a frisbee-sized circle. The boredom usually lead to exploration, snooping around after the assistant left. The findings in the second waiting room were always tempting --

outsmarting the childproof lock on the drawer full of syringes. Finding the questionable finger condoms, banging your knee with that rubber triangle, wondering why it never kicked the pediatrician when you needed it to, wondering if she noticed half her stack of post-it notes were missing and taped to my mother's back.

Hi, My Name's Barbara.

THIS IS BARBARA'S BACK.

Kick Me!

They'd never notice, never say anything. Just smile out the same sentence. "It's strep, again. He'll need amoxicillin." Amoxicillin usually meant I got chewable candy-like goodness for medication, or the cough-syrup form that tasted like bubble-gum. This is what I thought about as a kid. Psychologists would call it positive re-framing, I'd call it working the system.

"I don't have time to get your medicine," my mother would say. "You're going to have to go with your father."

I loved going out with my father. He always had a much more interesting life than my mother. Her day (at most) consisted of waking up. Making coffee. Complaining about the coffee. Making more coffee. Yelling at me for being on top of the refrigerator, eating cereal out of the box in my underwear, watching her make coffee. Napping. Waking up. Making more coffee.

It was a real struggle for her. My sickness was too much to handle. Last time I had a sick day with my father, he taught me how to use the nail gun and drill press. The drill press was my favorite thing to use until I sanded off the tips of my fingers with a gritted bit. I ended up with scabby, peeled finger tips for years because I'd constantly pick at them, eat at them until they bled. I don't remember when they finally went away. Onychophagia was an expensive condition to diagnose— the

DSMV took too long to look through so my fingers were just classified as 'dry skin,' and I was prescribed lotion – not as fun as bubble gum cough syrup or psychiatry.

But back at the shop, I eventually learned how to take the safety off the pneumatic nail gun and use it like an uzi. My father was more impressed than he was mad when he stumbled upon the shooting range I set up underneath the table saw.

Positive re-framing.

“I can't take him today, Barb. I have to go to Asheville,” my dad told her.

“Well the school can't take him, won't take him – he's contagious.”

He'd look at me with a furrowed brow. I was some complex problem, too complex for their December morning.

“Has he ate?”

“No,” she'd say.

“Alright, I'll take him to get some breakfast and then to Asheville, then you can take him after this, I really have to be in the shop today. The lady up in Connestee needs these moldings done by next week.”

During the early years my father was a cabinet maker and wood finisher. He'd do specialty work for all the up and coming, gated housing developments that'd fail a decade later. But they'd fail magnificently with his cabinets. Everyone would always lament into the foreclosures with their sentimental eulogies of the nine bedroom home used only three months out of the year.

My, my. I do not know what the homeowner was thinking with the tile, the counters, the window placement – but sweet baby Jesus! These cabinets! They're the only thing giving the home value.

After my parents settled it in the parking lot, I went into the shop.

“Strep again? There’s gotta be something wrong.” After he felt the sides of my throat, he began cussing about my mother not giving me a jacket. He salvaged some of his spare painting shirts and dressed me in them. They were spotted with half-dried varnish and caked in eighties muted tones of teal and magenta. The arms overhung past my hands and almost to my knees. He wrapped them up like a straitjacket so I’d stay warm, colorful, and slightly buzzed and complacent by the drying fumes.

“Jeet?” he said to me.

Jeet was an inside joke my father and I had. When he first came down to the south from Connecticut, the first question he was ever asked was *Jeet*? He had no idea what it meant. The man asking him almost got offended my father said ‘What?’ so many times. He eventually learned *Jeet* was just a quick illiterate southern short for “Have you eaten yet?”

“No,” I rasped.

“We’ll get something on the way. Carolyn is out of MDF at Builder’s Choice so we have to hop on 280 into Asheville.”

I didn’t know what any of that meant, so I just nodded. He told me the van was ready outside so we locked up and headed on our way. The mornings with my father were always full of his old stories. Stories that were too mature for me to handle. He underestimated my innocence and memory many times but never regretted it. Unless it’d get him in trouble with my mother, of course. But then too – it was always the best way to get caught, the funniest way.

“One time, me and Dave – we’d call him ‘The Great White Fool.’ – we were out partying (back then I thought ‘partying’ meant blowing out candles, eating cakes,

wearing uncomfortable cone hats) one night in Hartford. Dave was about six-five, goofy as all hell (I thought being six-five meant sixty-five years old). He drank too much (back then I thought 'drinking too much' just meant you were tired and burped a lot), and got into it with someone. We were up, grooving (carving wood) to a Jethro Tull vinyl (a man that sang the scary song about a park bench, played the flute on one foot), and we heard this beating at the door."

"All of a sudden an arm came through and grabbed Dave by the collar. It was our landlord (landlords were angels who watched over houses), and *man* was he pissed."

I knew what pissed meant.

"Well Dave was so drunk (sixty-five years old, really tired, loud, burping up cake, wearing a cone hat, carving wood, singing about angry park benches) and big, that when the landlord pulled him to his face, Dave kept going. He fell into the landlord (the sacred apartment's guardian angel) and took him down the stairs together," (in golden, ethereal light, harps playing, gospel singing, slow motion probably, Jesus somewhere in the background).

"Ah man, we got kicked out of that place a week later. Didn't even pay the last month's rent," my dad said laughing.

I laughed too, as much as I could that morning. It wasn't the content of his stories that were funny, it was my father's reenactments along with my severely warped interpretations of what was actually happening. Every tale was complete with high-strung impressions and body motions. Elbows flailing up and down as his hands held onto the steering wheel, making it part of the story too. So much a part, the right side of the van was caught caressing the road's shoulder from time to time. He could talk for a while, almost an hour and have three streams of forgotten narration

that eventually melded back into the original one – and there still would be no plot, no denouement, just a bunch of sentences connected to lost time.

But 'rent' was always that ambiguous concept I never understood. Something that was argued about when the cabinets weren't being made, cereal wasn't on the refrigerator, coffee wasn't poured. We apparently did something to make our guardian angel mad, possessed. Rent always meant yelling, throwing plates and answering machines, gallons of milk at the bay window. And I never knew why.

"So, how's scouts been?"

"It's ok," I said. The warmth from the air vents made it easier to talk.

"Have the scouts been able to use the wood I donated?"

"Yeah. We can't saw or use a drill with it though."

"Well, you're only in third grade. They didn't start letting us use that stuff until we were a lot older, you're lucky!" I was actually in second, but these slip ups were common – next week I'd be in fourth as far as he was concerned so it was all relative, still positive reinforcement.

"Yeah, but I wanna carve and make Smokey's like you do."

My dad cringed when I said that.

He had recently signed contracts with the National Forest Service. Around town, he became noticed for making totem poles for small businesses. Daggie's, a quick burger joint right on the entrance to Pisgah National was where his most famous one stood. Majestically grounded at twenty-six feet tall, carved from an old cedar and ornamented at the top with a bald eagle splaying an eight foot wingspan – it was one of his greatest pieces. A park ranger saw it one day and began asking questions, thinking that if my father was able to make a 'Smokey the Bear' statue for

the forest, people from Florida would set it on fire less because they'd spend all their time out in front of it posing and taking pictures, not causing forest fires.

Before he made the lifelike Smokey statues, he started small with wood blocks the size of soda cans. He made a few for my bedside table until he got the proportions right. Some were overweight, while others just looked like bigfoot with a shovel. Once he finally got Smokey to scale, he chainsawed out some statues and outside the steps into the ranger station they stood. Their big condemning wooden fingers pointing at all the obese Floridiots making their mecca to our mountains, warning that if they set them ablaze they better take themselves too. If not, the big anamagous Smokey would come to life and beat the shit out of him with his shovel and they'd never make it back to their summer home with its beautiful cabinets.

But after the Smokey contracts ran their course, people started coming by the shop and asking for statues of their own -- so my dad fulfilled their wishes. However, Smokey the Bear was apparently copyrighted and only allowed to live on federal property. When the cease and desist orders threatened his business, he became fed up with the feds and turned against the National Park Service. He decided to craft a wooden bear statue of his own and copyright *that*.

So 'Bubba the Bear' was born. Bubba was a mockery of all the forest rangers that behooved the cabinet shop with their threatening letters and loyalty to Smokey. The statue was fat, more of a dirty, mud-brown fur and had an evergreen baseball hat that read 'BUBBA' in all white capital letters. Instead of carrying a shovel, he carried a fly-rod and a bucket with dead fish, some with their heads cut off. Bubba had half his teeth missing from his goofy smile, half-stoned looking with a lazy left eye. Bubba wore no shirt so his overhanging beer-gut was exposed and accentuated. With what he had for a tush was flat and lopsided, showcasing a can of dip in the back left pocket. My dad patented his invention as 'Bubba, Smokey's first cousin.'

And to my father's surprise, the National Forest wanted one of those too. As a matter of fact – none of his other customers wanted anything to do with Bubba, they simply wanted more Smokey contraband. The poacher wants what the poacher can't get.

Can you make a Smokey mailbox? What about a Smokey chimney? That's ironic, right? Oh, no, I don't want that Bubba. My ex-husband's name is Bubba, I want a Smokey. What about a Smokey family? Does Smokey not have a wife? Smokey nesting dolls? No little Smokey cubs? Is Smokey divorced? Are you insinuating Bubba and Smokey are more than just 'cousins'?

The southern ignorance and infatuation with Smokey the Bear eventually became too much for my father to handle, and he swore after the year was over he would never again make a Smokey statue. For anyone. For any price. The rebuttal Bubba statue sold to the park service was the only one ever made. After it served its time in the magically subsidized wooden bear sanctuary with his cousins, Bubba eventually migrated to the Smithsonian in the nation's capital, as a questionable exhibit on 'southern art' a decade later.

At Bubba's feet there was an art critic's plaque with words branded onto it. It was an overdrawn statement on an underdrawn subject, elevated in the fancy manner that those art critics always do:

“Deep in the nestled Sylvan Valley of North Carolina, local cabinet maker M. T. Layman cultivates this southern exposé with his fine art carpentry skills. Layman's acute attention to replication of the southern condition is apparent through the colloquial demeanor of 'Bubba.' The name, in itself, is a genius encouragement for a simplistic allegory that is contained in modesty. The *avant-garde* pose Bubba stands with, is an honest statement of southern stature, the Appalachian resistance – and shows the emulsion between heritage and postmodernity – a dead pan fearlessness we can all enter the millennium with.”

It would be fifteen years later when my father discovered one of his art pieces made it big (When he'd finally move away to Charlotte, his prospective neighbors did a speculative identity search on him finding nothing except a Smithsonian article about his exhibit, then broke the news to him one night over a game of pool, realizing he was actually a decent person and not a criminal). Shortly after the Smokey craze was over, he took up a job refinishing a summer house for the governor of Florida. He would be up high on a rickety ladder, painting the moldings white when a hive of bees would attack him. He battled it out with his paint rollers but unfortunately lost and plummeted onto the hard cobblestone patio, shattering his arm in nineteen places. A guy he was working for named Andrew was an 'environmentalist.' The bees at this time had been a problem for the entire work crew and my dad had a kill-or-be-killed mentality. Andrew thought differently. He was the kind of guy that lived in a tent, slept with a Chihuahua that he contracted worms from, and wrote poetry to R&B radio, discussing how the bees deserve to sting freely.

He thought *very* differently.

My dad swears that as he was swatting them, Andrew kicked the bottom of the ladder out and sent my father to the ground. As he was there, withering, flailing, swearing anti-liberal semantics at the worm infested Andrew, Fred (the other painter, long white hair, stoned, drove a Chevrolet) looked at my dad and said, "Damn Layman! That looks bad. Looks like you're gonna have to go to the ER."

So on to the hospital Fred, Andrew, his Chihuahua and my father went. He had to get three pins into his wrist and was forced to quit the business. A couple months later, Sylvan Valley Cabinetry became a pawn shop right across the street from North Carolina's largest Chinese buffet, then a computer repair shop, then a

pawn shop again where you could buy official letters from the Smithsonian -- sent to the mysterious M.T. Layman.

We invite you to the National Exhibit of Southern Art, please reply back promptly with the number in your party. Travel expenditure will be covered by us. We hope to see you there!

"I think you can do more than carve Smokey the Bear," my dad said.

"But everyone in scouts has been carving deers, rabbits, and ugly Pokémons with their soap bars. I carved R2-D2 and everyone laughed at me." My dad knew as much about Star Wars as I did drunken nights in Hartford so he didn't quite understand.

"Well maybe we can make a statue of it?"

I almost leaped out of my straitjacket onto the five lane.

"REALLY?" I said.

"Maybe not as big as Smokey, but we can try. What does Arty Deeto look like?"

"He's round, silver and beeps at C-3PO, like *beep-beep-bop-beep-boop.*"

"I think I can handle that," my dad said.

On the way to get lumber, swerving in the December frost and the midday sun we made beeping and bopping noises all the way down twenty-five south. Ben Orbison was on the radio singing *Pretty Woman*. It was one of my father's favorite songs. He'd almost sing it like him and I'd sing like R2-D2.

"Naked woman, walking down the street."

“Beep-beep-bop-beep, beep-beep-bop-beep-beep.”

“Naked woman, is she coming back to me?”

“Beep-beep-bop-beep, beep-beep-bop-beep-beep.”

“Yeah she’s coming back to me.”

return to prose