

"Between States"
by
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I was three when they got divorced. I don't even remember living with him, actually. There are flashes: a dog biting a paperboy; a dog's funeral in some desert community somewhere; me and a girl drinking Vick's Formula 44 and being made to vomit. That's about it.

They made a pact to never say anything bad about each other, a pact they lived up to, especially her, when I would come home from the summers that I got to spend with him in the paradise I knew as Santa Barbara, crying that I wanted to live with my dad.

Christmas break, when I was in third grade, she got her second divorce. From a guy named Mike. We lived in a development community outside of Tucson. Everyone had cats because they would tease the scorpions into stinging themselves. There were dead scorpions and dead cats everywhere. We had a puppy.

No one had grass in the desert. The entire community had front yards of gravel. When my puppy pissed on the gravel, Mike would make me go out with paper towels and clean each individual piece of gravel. It didn't make sense to me then. It doesn't make sense to me now. I don't think it made sense to her, either, but she would just give me this look that said "do what he says... for me." She wanted to keep Mike, I suppose.

Until Christmas break of third grade.

THE MATTERHORN

I was waiting in line for the Matterhorn. An eye on him where he stood at the phone. Waving hands. I've never seen him mad since then.

He would take me to Disneyland every summer and every Christmas break that I visited. This time, at Disneyland, he kept stopping to use the phone. I always knew when my flight was. We would have just enough time to watch the Main Street Electrical Parade, buy some magic tricks, and then speed off to LAX and, amid much fanfare about someone so young flying alone, I would just make my flight.

If it was a particularly profitable year, we would spend the night in a hotel. This year wasn't a profitable one.

There was a family from Alberta in line in front of me. The mother looked so pretty. She had her head on her husband's shoulder. The girl was my age. They talked to me. Helping me ignore him.

I was an expert on Disneyland. I had been there every summer and every Christmas break since I could remember. I told them all of the best rides. How the guy at the Autopia this year let me drive my own car, even though I didn't reach the red height line.

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"You can't keep dragging him around the country like this!"

"I'm not dragging him. Get him on the plane."

"We'll see..."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'We'll see'?"

"The line's moving, I'll call you later."

"What a sec, Burt. 'We'll see'?"

"Well, Sea World just opened this exhibit with a Killer Whale, I was thinking of taking him to that tomorrow."

"His flight is tonight, Burt. How are you going to take him to see the killer whale tomorrow if his flight is tonight?"

"The line's moving... I'll call you after the Matterhorn."

"Goddamnit, Burt!"

## **ARKANSAS**

He liked movie stars and Hollywood and James Dean. He had all of the magazines. The kids at school would tease him because he was fat. I could never reconcile the pictures of him when he was in high school with the dad I knew. A buzz cut. Chubby cheeks. Hands tucked into the big pockets of his suit. A big grin trying to make the best of it.

Somewhere or other, he learned to tap dance, and would sing and play guitar and tap dance in the bed of a truck at the county fairs. The kids at school, again, would tease "Fat Burt" mercilessly, but he had pockets full of change to spend on ice cream sodas and movie magazines. They didn't.

He wet the bed. This is how they got him to stop: When he came home from school, his mother would wrap him in the wet sheets and wrap a belt around it so he couldn't move. When his father came home, he would get beaten with the belt.

## UTAH

Mike moved us from Santa Barbara to Utah. We were Catholics, I guess. I don't know anything about it. Other Catholics keep talking about the guilt. I just remember the long ceremonies and the presents I got for learning some prayers.

She made peanut butter and honey sandwiches for me for lunch. Sometimes she made two of them. If she bought the right kind of bread, the honey would soak through the bread just the right way and it would be crunchy.

I walked from our apartment to school through a graveyard. There was a grave for a girl who was born the same month and year that I was born. I passed her every day.

I always looked forward to seeing her.

Charlie Brown's mom used to put notes in his lunch. So did mine. "Study hard, and someday you could be president. - Mom"

I would sit on the edge of the blacktop, watching everyone play foursquare, eat my sandwiches and think of going to East Beach with him during the summers.

He bought me the soundtrack to "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," and I knew all the words. He even took me to see it in Hollywood one year. He was living there, trying to be an actor. I got to meet the people on "Laugh-In." I even got Ruth Buzzi's autograph.

A few years ago, Ruth Buzzi and I were on a TV show together. She remembered me and my dad.

"I found a nice place in Tucson. Downtown. I'll stay there until the school year is up and then we're moving to Oklahoma City. Uncle Buzz is gonna send me some money."

"What about Barkie?"

"Blackie. Blackie."

"Blackie. Can he stay in the new place? Dogs are important to kids."

"Don't tell me what's fucking important to kids, okay. I know what's important to kids. A mother is important to a kid!"

"So is a father."

"Spare me."

"I'm just saying..."

"I know what you're saying. Quit it."

"Can he keep the dog?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Kay?"

"Don't worry about it. I like that dog, too."

"He's happy here."

"Goddamnit!"

"He loves it here. Did he make any friends there?"

"Goddamnit, Burt!"

"He's so shy."

"I'm looking at a clock here. I figure you've got two hours left at Disneyland. Half hour to the airport. Don't say anything about Mike. Let me tell him."

"Why don't you let him stay with me until you finish the year at Arizona State?"

"What are you trying to say, Burt?"

"Adam is his best friend here. His best friend anywhere."

"What are you trying to say to me, Burt?"

"This can't be good for him; moving around like this all the time."

"I swear, once we get to Oklahoma, we're going to stay there."

"What are you going to do in Oklahoma?"

"I'm thinking of going to law school."

"You're going to be a lawyer now?"

"Don't even think about it, Burt."

"You dropped out of high school. You're going to be a lawyer?"

"I'm about to graduate college. Women can be lawyers, for your information. Goddamnit. Goddamnit."

"Do you talk like that..."

"Okay, Burt. This conversation is over. He's on the plane in two and one half hours, right?"

"I don't know."

"He is on the plane in two and one half hours. He is going to come home to his mother. You put him on the goddamned plane."

## OKLAHOMA

She grew up with Oklahoma oil money. Her younger brother was raised as an experiment: No Rules. None. Not even the one that is so popular now of not hurting anyone else or yourself. There were just no rules. Her brother had a .22. He could shoot it in the house. His walls were covered with bullet holes.

She had one rule. She had to read a book every week and give some kind of report to her mother. That was the condition they agreed on. Other than that, anything was okay.

Her mother was an English professor and she would go to classes. A free-spirited 16 year old girl with oil money and a groovy English professor mom.

They didn't make them like this in Arkansas. She had been to Europe with her family. Sailing to Greece. A summer on the Queen Elizabeth. Ponies. Four months in jail in Hines County Mississippi on the "Freedom Ride."

She smoked. She told dirty jokes. She swore. She drank. Her little brother had a motorcycle that he kept in his bullet hole riddled room, apparently.

She had never been wrapped up in sheets.

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The hotel in California was nice. He took me out to have Mexican food. Then we had ice cream from 31 Flavors.

We watched TV that night. I asked him if they were going to show "A Charlie Brown Christmas" again. I kept asking him if he was going to be on each show. He would just shake his head.

He said that since the Main Street Electrical Parade was late, I missed my flight and that there was one the same time the next night.

I got to pick out two magic tricks at Disneyland this year. One was a mini-guillotine that cut a cigarette in half, but not your finger. The other one was a little red magic lantern that made a ball disappear. Since he didn't smoke, we worked on making the ball disappear for a while.

I talked on the phone to my friend, Adam. Adam thought it was cool that I got to go to Disneyland and Sea World before I left.

He bought swimsuits for us at the giftshop and we snuck over the fence and went swimming in the pool. Some teenagers were there, too. I hid behind him.

"I called Buzz. You can go to jail for this. Did you know that?"

"I think it would be best if we did what we talked about."

"What did we talk about, Burt?"

"You know. Him staying with me until you get settled in Oklahoma."

"We didn't talk about that, Burt. You talked about that. I never said anything about that."

"I just think it's best."

"I don't."

"Well then, we have a problem, don't we."

"You're kidnapping my son."

"No I'm not."

"It's kidnapping Burt. That's the law. I have custody. You were there, weren't you? You signed the papers."

"How are you going to support him?"

"I have tenure at Santa Barbara High."

"What about this acting thing?"

"My son is important enough to make sacrifices for."

"Don't ever say something like that again."

"I..."

"Don't. 'My son? My son?' Are you kidding me?"

"I'm sorry..."

"He's not..."

"I said I'm sorry, okay?"

"Goddamn. Goddamn you, Burt."

"I talked to a lawyer, too."

"Goddamnit."

"Do you really want to do this to him?"

"Let me talk to him."

"He's out by the pool."

"Alone?"

"No. I can see him. He's a good swimmer."

"Is he alone?"

"There are some hippies there. They look like your brother."

"He's alone by the pool?"

"I can see him. He's not alone."

"Let me talk to him."

"He's by the pool."

"Where are you?"

"At a hotel. He likes hotels."

"I know that. I know quite a bit about him. He's my son."

"I think he should stay until you get settled."

"Where are you, Burt?"

"I told you."

"Goddamn. Goddamn you for this, Burt."

"Mother and Daddy think it's a great idea, him staying with me."

"Of course they do. They can teach him how to say nigger and how to be a good little Christian and how to be an ignorant, illiterate Jew-hater from Arkansas. You think I want your fucking mom brainwashing my son? It's bad enough you taking him there for the summers. He comes home after that saying yes ma'am and no ma'am."

"It's just good for him to be around family."

"I am his family, Burt. I am his mother. How many times do I have to say that?"

AUSTRIA

She said that she could feel the conception. That she knew immediately that she was going to be a mother.

He spoke enough English to get by in a bar and ask for a cigarette. He was studying engineering at the University of Austria. All of the smart Turkish kids were sent there by their parents after their mandatory summer in the military.

They met on a midnight horseback ride. She was the only one who could ride a horse drunk. Everyone else ended up walking theirs.

He asked her for a cigarette every chance he could. Smiling at her. Doing an impression of John Wayne with his Turkish accent. Clowning around.

He kissed her that night for the first time.

The second time he kissed her, it was two weeks later and they were in his dorm room.

The last time he kissed her, her mother was taking her back to a place called Oklahoma.

KANSAS CITY

Dear mother,

Thank you for the twenty dollars. I will pay it back at the first of next month. The move to Kansas was more expensive than I suspected as the cost of Ray's tire cut into my budget, as I explained in my last letter.

I will be teaching English and Drama in a small high school here in Kansas City. It is an integrated school, but there are many openings for new teachers there. Two days a week, I'll be assistant teaching Geometry, of all things, at Kansas State University. I know nothing of geometry, but I somehow managed to wrangle a slot anyway. Hopefully, I can move at some point to the theater department.

How is daddy? Tell him thank you for the money as well. I'll be living in student housing at KSU until I find another place that's either the same rent or less. I don't think I will find something that cheap, but one never knows.

I'm going to try to come visit over Christmas. But I have several resumes out across the country and that may be the best time to go look at schools.

Something else has come up as well.

You remember Kay, of course. She and I are going to be married. Her mother was teaching in Austria last semester and they are coming back. We are going to have a child. He or she is expected to arrive late October.

I know you don't think much of Kay, but I have always loved her and missed her terribly when she was gone. She has settled down quite a bit since you met her on your visit to Oklahoma and is going to take her exams to get her diploma. She eventually would like to go to college, although that would involve us borrowing the tuition either from her family or some sort of student loan.

There are other details that I will explain either by another letter or perhaps even a telephone call.

I hope that you can grow to love her as much as I already do. I feel that I have a purpose in my life with this child that is being given to us. And Kay is a blessing to me.

Again, thank you so much for the money.

Your son,

Burton

SEA WORLD

There weren't any rides at Sea World. There might be now, I don't know, I don't think I'll ever go back. I scuba dive, so that's my Sea World. I liked seeing the new Killer Whale that they had. Shamu. Shamu. Shamu, the Killer Whale.

Shamu was like a bigger black and white dolphin. Shamu did tricks with the dolphins and sea lions that they had.

There is a lot of blue at Sea World.

I think he was disappointed in Sea World, too. We left early and found a spot on the coast and hiked down to a beach and had a picnic.

The week before, on Christmas, he took me to the beach and we had pepperoni sticks and he had forgotten to get me a juice so I got to drink one of his beers. He said it was another birthday present. I think that he always felt sorry for me that I was born on Christmas and was constantly trying to make up for it somehow. I always got a lot of attention though; being born on Christmas. The "present trade off" was worth it; getting one present for your birthday and Christmas versus the attention.

We left our shoes in the car and walked to the beach with the pepperoni and beer. He held my hand. He usually didn't hold my hand.

We sat in the sand and he cut off slices from the pepperoni and didn't really say anything about Sea World. He brought down the disappearing ball trick, too, and coached me through the "patter" that came with the instructions.

He asked me a few questions about Arizona and Mike. I said I liked Arizona better than Utah. Their pact must've asserted itself, because he never asked me if I liked California better than Arizona (which, obviously, I did) or if I liked him better than Mike (again, no contest).

I was worried about missing my plane flight again. I told him I missed her. He asked me if I wanted to go swimming in the ocean and went back to the car and got my suit before I could answer. I waited between the two cliffs in the sand as he hiked up the hill to get my suit. I watched him as he went up the trail. He would pause every now and then and bend over, hands on his knees. I thought then that he was out of breath.

I was so proud of my dad for being an actor and living in Hollywood. I would brag to any kid at school who would listen about him and show them the autographed Chief O'Hara picture he got for me.

He never looked more like a movie star to me as he did that day from the surf. Shirt off, corduroys rolled up, walking up and down the beach, pointing out big waves for

me to catch. I'd get smashed onto the beach and he'd wade out and help clean the sand off and send me back, laughing and screaming, to the ocean.

He finally jumped in with me. His clothes were soaked anyway from continually pulling me from the freezing January surf.

That summer, we had been at East Beach around four o'clock, bodysurfing, and a little sand-shark swam by us. It scared the shit out of me and, to this day, if I'm in any sort of water in the late afternoon, I get the willies. I could tell it was getting later. The water was getting to be a darker green and I was getting tired from the big surf. He could tell I was scanning the water for more sand-sharks and told me not to worry, the water was too cold for sharks.

I sort of believed him, but I was tired anyway. After we hiked back up the path, we sat on the hood of his car and watched as larger sets of waves began rolling in.

He said "I wish I had my camera."

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"I can't do it, Kay."

"You're at the airport, for God's sake."

"It doesn't seem right. He loves it out here. How can you take him away from that?"

"How can you take him away from me?"

"He'll see you. We could reverse the visitation rights."

"Goddamn you."

"I'm moving back to Santa Barbara. This acting thing isn't ever going to work out. I decided today."

"Goddamn you."

"He's so happy here, Kay."

"He is so happy there because it's just summer vacation or Christmas vacation. Of course he's going to be happy. Don't be stupid. You take him to Disneyland, the beach, Sea Land, you get to be there when he opens his birthday and Christmas presents. Of course he's happy there. Jesus. I can't believe you're doing this."

"We've already missed one flight tonight."

"There had better be another one."

"I'm not sure."

"There had better be another flight tonight. I mean it, Burt."

"I'll have to check. Are you crying?"

"No."

"Okay."

"You haven't said anything to him, have you?"

"No."

"Good."

"He should..."

"Don't. Don't. I mean it."

"I know that you're going to think that I'm out of line, but I'll say it anyway. I don't think that you're able to be a good mother to him right now."

"You have got to be shitting me."

"I think that if we were to go to court over this, I would win."

"Let me say this."

"And I think that, deep down, you know it too. We've got to do what's best for him."

"Shut up! Shut up! I am looking at a TWA schedule right now. You can get him on the 8:30 flight. It arrives here..."

"Did you.."

"I heard every fucking word. Listen. You are not going to be able to see any judge because you will be dead. I mean that. I will come out there and kill you. You will not take my son away from me. Do you understand?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes. I will say it again. I will kill you, Burt."

"I can't believe you just said that."

"If you want to do what's best for him, put him on that fucking plane, because he will not have any father, anywhere, because he will be dead, and his mother will be in jail for killing you. Does that make sense to you, Goddamnit?"

"Kay?"

"The flight leaves at 8:30. Put him on the flight, Burt. I can't take this. I cannot take this."

"Kay?"

"I have to get away from Mike. I have got to get out of this shit. I want my son with me. He needs his mother. Do you understand me?"

"I'm..."

"Burt. 8:30."

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I have this thing about missing flights. A friend of mine is terrified of flying in planes. I'm terrified of missing them.

We ran through the airport. Actually, he ran through the airport. His clothes were still soaking and he carried me and my bag from one end of LAX to the other, running full speed.

Adults have this way of taking care of everything. I was nearly stranded in France a couple of years ago and kept wishing he was there to carry me across Paris to the correct airport. I ended up finding a taxi driver who was insane and got to the right airport in time. But the combination of being in a car with a madman behind the wheel and the utter dread of missing a plane flight has twisted me in some irreversible way, I'm afraid.

I always got a window seat whenever I left so I could turn my head towards the window so no one could see me crying. He was there, soaking wet, both hands up on the huge window waiting for the plane to taxi out. I was usually able to keep from crying until the plane took off.

His hands were cupped on either side of his face, his nose pressed against the glass, trying to find which seat I was in. I thought about knocking on my window, but realized that it would be pointless.

There's always that feeling of accomplishment when someone spots you in an airplane. He lit up and waved at me. I waved back, my other arm up so the stewardess couldn't see my eyes. I don't think he could see either.

SAMBO'S

The first thing I noticed was that Mike wasn't with her. I was relieved. The second thing I noticed was how hard she hugged me and that it lasted a long time. For an 8 year old kid that was pretty embarrassing. The stewardess who was in charge of me was hovering around, telling her what a good kid I was. She kept saying "Yes he is. The best. He's the best kid."

My dog, Blackie, was in the car. And after cleaning up the mess in the back seat, she took me to Sambo's.

She ordered two chocolate shakes. One for each of us. She chain-smoked her Pall Mall's while I told her about my Christmas vacation, my friend Adam, Disneyland, Sea World, everything. I fumbled through the disappearing ball trick and she laughed and clapped loudly.

She asked if I wanted anything else. I looked over the menu, trying not to look at the deserts.

"You want another chocolate shake?"

I always felt this responsibility to be a good kid with her. There seemed to be a challenge to not fuck up like other kids who were a hassle to their parents. A second chocolate shake. It was like "free swim." I sort of hedged and before I could say anything, she ordered me another chocolate shake.

I wasn't even finished with the other one. She poured the remains from the first from the metal cup into my big glass.

"What's the occasion?" asked the waitress.

"He's a good kid, that's all."

The waitress smiled at me and put the other shake and metal cup down in front of me.

I was halfway done with it by the time she finished telling me that we weren't going to live with Mike anymore. We were going to move to Oklahoma to be near Uncle Buzz in two months and I would finish third grade there.

Blackie would be able to come with us. That was the important thing. She kept smiling at me. Telling me how happy she was that I was back. I couldn't figure out the cigarette guillotine trick, so she read the directions and showed me how to do it. She didn't coach me through the "patter" like he had, but it was still a successful trick.

"You want anything else?"

I opened the menu. She lit another Pall Mall. The first hot fudge sundae was good; the second one was even better. "You should have some real food."

I didn't even eat all of the banana in the banana split. But it was enough to satisfy the "food" requirement.

We split the last chocolate shake and a plate of fries which were, I suppose, another attempt at "real food."

I told her about meeting the lady from "Laugh-In" and showed her the autograph. I didn't tell her that he got it for me because I got too shy to talk.

There were some kids at the next table complaining that I got to have four chocolate shakes and two deserts. The mother asked if it was my birthday.

She just smiled at the mother and told her that I was a good kid. She moved around the booth and sat down next to me and stroked my hair while I freed the last bits of shake from the big metal cup.

She asked me to do the disappearing ball trick again. I was more than happy to, even though all of the magic books said to never repeat a trick. The secret to the illusion was a false top. You put the ball in. Put the lid on and hold the lamp thing a certain way and the false top would stay in place. Part of the patter was talking about how the mysterious forces of the Orient were present in the lamp and that by saying a few magic words, anything inside would be transported to another dimension. You give the lamp a couple of shakes and sure enough, another dimension.

I shook the lamp really hard and put it down on the table next to the plate of fries.

"Alakazam."

I opened the top.

Sand.

HOME

"He's in bed. He's had diarrhea for the last day or so."

"I'm sorry about the plane thing."

"I understand. It is hard for him. He cries every time he comes back. He misses you."

"He misses you when he's here."

"He does?"

"Yes, very much. He talks about you all the time."

"I didn't know that."

"He does, believe me."

"Sometimes..."

"Are you there?"

"Yes."

"What were you saying? Sometimes what?"

"It's just hard, that's all."

"Yes."

"Yes."