
AARON GWYN

Parricide Blues

On the tracks of the Frisco Railroad, Mark Gwyn in a borrowed pickup, March of '74. He's my father and he's helping a newlywed couple move across Tulsa when his engine dies and the truck begins to coast. They roll toward the train tracks and the front tires pop the first rail, pop over the second, hit the next set of tracks and they come to a stop. He pumps the foot feed and keys the ignition. The motor sputters and fails to turn over and he looks at his friend sitting there on the benchseat and gives him a crooked grin.

I'm on my grandparents' ranch at the moment.

I've been alive for eighteen months.

My father is a lean six-two. Dark eyebrows and moustache and a dark head of hair. He has broad shoulders. He hunches them and turns the key.

"Don't gas it," says Bill.

"I'm not gassing it."

"Gas it too much, we'll never get it started."

"Gas yourself," my father says.

He's a runaway, my father. He plays in a blues band—saxophone and guitar. When he needs money, he deals marijuana. He left home at the age of fifteen, fleeing his father, a Baptist minister in the state of New York. He met my mother six years later on an ashram where she was living. They didn't have much to work with, but they

thought they had each other, and then they got married, and next they had me.

Right now, my father has the smell of burning metal in his nostrils as he continues to grind the engine.

"You're going to flood it," Bill tells him.

"It's already flooded."

"You'll flood it worse."

"It's flooded or it isn't," says my father. "There's no such thing as flooding it worse."

They shake their heads and snigger. The longer they sit here, the funnier all of it seems. He thinks it'll make a great story, though he'll never tell another soul.

The day is bright and cloudless. A pigeon flits between street signs and disappears behind a building. My father lets the motor rest a second and looks into the mirror. Horns begin honking. What do they expect him to do?

Bill pokes his head out the passenger window.

"We're in a kind of furrow," he finally says.

"Can we push it?"

"I think we need a tow truck," is Bill's suggestion.

My father opens his mouth to respond, but before words can come to him, he hears the noise of bells. He glances up to see the boom gate

lowering, glances in the rearview to see another coming down behind, long steel bars painted black and white.

He looks out the driver-side window and squints into the distance. Three hundred yards, but it's definitely coming.

"You got to be shitting me," he hears Bill say.

My father sits there. Something very cold inches up the base of his spine. He pumps the accelerator and grinds the ignition. "C'mon," he tells it, trying to stay patient, but Bill says they maybe need to just leave the pickup and walk.

"Leave it sitting here?"

"Yeah," Bill tells him.

"You're out of your mind," my father says.

He cranks the starter. He can't tell how fast the train is moving, but he thinks it's pretty fast.

The bells ring like sledgehammers against an aluminum plate.

"Mark," Bill tells him, "we aren't going to get it started."

"I'll get it started," says my father.

"It's *not* starting."

"It'll start."

"Listen," Bill tries to tell him, but my father refuses. He's not leaving the truck here. It's not even his.

"We're going to have to leave it."

"And tell Robert what? 'Left your pickup on the tracks and got it crushed like a can'?"

"Mark," says Bill, "I'm getting out of this truck."

"Get out," my father says.

Bill studies him a moment. Then he reaches

and grabs hold of my father's arm. My father is stronger and he jerks it away.

"The fuck off me," he says. "If you're getting out, go."

Bills says, "You better get your ass out of here," but my father's grinding the ignition. The train is within a hundred yards now. Its horn begins to blare.

Then Bill is out of the truck, crossing the tracks, walking to a little patch of saw grass where he turns and plants his hands on his hips and calls for my father to join him.

My father doesn't join him. The bells are still dinging, but he no longer hears. He's pumping the foot feed and turning the key: back and forth, on and off. The horn is louder. Hot sunlight on his face, the blank blue sky. The motor almost catches and it almost catches and it almost catches. The cab smells strongly of gas. He looks over at Bill. He lets off the foot feed. The engine sputters a moment and dies. He's just about got it. Bill's face is a red screaming mask and my father lifts his left hand, palm out, fingers spread—a gesture that's not quite a wave. It means, *Hold on a second*. It means, *Don't worry so goddamn much*. He can feel the shudder of something down in the seat and thinks, in the story he'll tell, this will be the moment where everyone congratulates him, everyone begins to laugh.

I have no memory of my father and only one photograph. I won't see it till I'm 39. It's a grainy black and white taken by my mother. The story of how I got my hands on it is a story to itself.

There's snow on the limbs of the trees behind him. The background has a white icy glow. He wears bottle-thick glasses and a knit stocking cap, long hair and a moustache. He's dark and slender and very handsome. He looks intelligent. Nothing like a man who will sit on the train tracks until he's run over and killed.

I'll be raised by my grandparents, my mother's mom and dad. After the accident, my mother will begin to come apart. She'll be in and out of relationships, in and out of hospitals, addicted to narcotics and, by the age of fifty, homeless. As I write this, I don't know where or how to reach her. I cannot be certain she is even alive.

I recall my grandmother repeatedly telling me that my mother had been possessed by devils. A hell of a thing to say about your daughter, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily false. My tendency is to think of these kinds of things in terms of metaphor, but my grandmother, when she said this, wasn't speaking metaphorically. It's part of the reason my mother left home at seventeen, my grandmother's religiosity, what my mother will call "fanaticism." Before my mother goes completely under, before the court takes custody away from her and awards it to my grandparents, before she tries to kidnap me from school and ends up handcuffed in the back of a cop car, there will be a series of arguments about religion. You could call them "arguments." They turn into physical fights.

I see her sitting there at the dinner table, my mother beside an open window with the smoke of her cigarette drifting toward the screen. Blonde

and very fair. For a while the drugs will preserve her, like a specimen inside a jar. She taps her ash into her coffee cup, exhales the smoke from her lungs as if it's something she wishes to flee.

"Mama," she says, "just because I don't walk around with a Bible doesn't mean I don't believe in things."

"What things do you believe in?"

"I believe in love."

"Love," my grandmother says, blankly.

"What?" my mother says, her voice a little shrill. "Is there something wrong with love?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, Kathy."

My mother shakes her head. She grinds out her cigarette in the bottom of the coffee cup. She immediately lights another.

"Do you have to?" my grandmother asks. "With Aaron in the room?"

My mother's head snaps toward me. There's a kind of murder in her eyes.

"Don't," she tells my grandmother, "bring him into this."

"He has asthma," my grandmother says.

"The smoke isn't anywhere near him."

My grandmother clears her throat. She smooths her dress over her thighs. She picks up her coffee and takes a long sip.

"Jesus," says my grandmother. "Dear God, help me."

My mother's face looks like it's carved out of chalk. She says: "If I hear you say 'Jesus' one more time with that weepy thing in your voice, I swear to Christ I'll lose my fucking mind."

My grandmother studies her. In ten seconds

they'll be striking each other with their fists.

She reaches out and takes hold of the local newspaper and rolls it into a tight baton. Something in the house settles and the walls seem to snap.

"There's something very wrong with you," my grandmother says.

That "weepy thing" in her voice: it's cruel for my mother to say, but I admit I know what she means. It enters my grandmother's voice when she talks about Jesus. It enters her voice whenever she sings. She sings beautifully—sings and plays the organ—but her voice often sounds like it's on the verge of breaking, as if any moment it will collapse from sweet soprano into tears.

The correct term for this weepy thing is *gospel*. I'm not talking about the synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I'm talking about the musical genre—southern gospel, especially. It's no coincidence that the three men who created rock n' roll—Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard—grew up Pentecostal. Presley and Lewis were even raised in the same domination as me and my grandmother: Assemblies of God. I don't need to go into the well-documented connections between blues and rock n' roll, their debt to gospel, and vice-versa, but I would like to make a distinction.

The kind of gospel I was raised hearing—the kind of gospel my grandmother sings and plays—attempts to remove a person's spiritual pain. And sometimes it does this—at least for a while. That's a beautiful thing about the music,

and it's potentially very dangerous. Because often, instead of removing the pain, it merely masks the pain, in much the same way as my mother's Percodan, all my mother's little pills. Make no mistake, the pain is still there, but you don't notice it because you're high. Very different from the blues that southern gospel grew out of. The blues are fundamentally *about* the pain. They're partly a celebration of it. What gospel celebrates is that pain's removal: its promises to take the pain away.

And this is key to the story I'm telling: the Pentecostal experience is so intoxicating—the music, the worship, the bright, burning emotions—that its practitioners can come to believe they're no longer in pain. No longer in trouble. They've been washed and cleansed of their own human frailty. Their past has been erased. Their history wiped clean.

In other words, these believers confuse gospel with *the* Gospel, good feelings with actual good news.

And if you can't feel the pain, you don't know how bad you're really hurting.

You forget the hurt you're liable to cause.

I start telling the story very young, my father's death on the tracks in Tulsa, my father sitting there in the pickup, waiting for the train. There's no emotion for me in the telling. There's a sort of numbness where emotion should be. I mostly tell it to see people's reaction—other kids at school, teachers, the parents of various friends. It's as though I'm trying the story out. As though, in

telling it, I'm trying to determine if the story's actually true. For me it's just a story.

Then, as the years pass, the story alters. I get new details. New facts come to light. I'm a teenager before I learn there was someone in the pickup with him, my father's friend, Bill. I'd always pictured him alone for some reason and there's something about Bill leaving the truck, just getting out and walking fifty feet away, that causes me to feel a kind of cold sensation down in my sternum. It makes my father's death palpable and painful and somehow unnecessary.

Then I learn, a little later, that the pickup was borrowed. I'd thought it belonged to my father and I connect with why he stayed in the truck: it wasn't even his. I imagine the shame involved in going and telling the man you borrowed a pickup from that'd you let it get hit by a train. I realize, in my father's situation, I might have done the same.

I start feeling embarrassed about the story and the older I get, the less I tell it. It starts to lose its novelty. It starts to actually hurt. I don't tell it unless someone asks about my father, and even then I say he passed away when I was young.

Some say they're sorry, but there are others who can't let it go.

Some just shake their heads at the story. I can tell others don't believe me. They think I'm exaggerating. Or even making it up.

My response to their unbelief is fury and their response to this fury is a kind of amusement. It seems entertaining for them, as if, having caught a liar, they now get to watch him implode.

One man who thinks that at first I'm kidding, gets embarrassed himself.

Then he gets irritated, defensive, afraid of how he's come off.

"I didn't know," he protests.

"How could you?" I say, and tell him it's all right, but he seems a little angry. He looks to another person who's been standing there and gives this self-justifying shrug.

"Whose father *dies* like that?" he says.

It's a valid question, I suppose.

But I'd just told him whose.

August of '79. In my grandmother's kitchen on the ranch outside Little. I walk in and seat myself on a yellow stepstool.

She's become, by this point, my surrogate. It doesn't feel right to use the word *grandmother*. To me she is *Mema*. Her family arrived in Virginia in the mid-1600s, fleeing King Billy on his stolen Stuart throne. They moved to North Carolina. They moved farther west to Tennessee. When Tennessee became too settled, they fled to Missouri, and after the Civil War, to Oklahoma Territory, the lawless frontier. They were sharecroppers and murderers, bootleggers and preachers. Everything they did they did to violent extremes. My grandmother's love for me can only be described as fierce.

Her parents had been Pentecostal evangelists and though she ran from her faith as a young woman, that is where she returned. She speaks in tongues. She claims to hear the voice of angels. She's at the stove right now, stirring a pot of chili

with a long wooden spoon. Sometimes she whips me with it. Sometimes she uses a switch. I recall bleeding below my left nipple when she whipped a willow branch around my trunk. She's five-two with dark hair, very beautiful and young for a grandmother, forty-seven, forty-eight.

My age is seven. I'm in the second grade. It's taken a while to germinate, but I have a question blooming.

"You're my grandmother," I begin.

"Yes," she says.

"You're my mom's mom," I say.

"I'm your mother's mother," she says, nodding.

"And Poppie is my mother's dad."

"Mm-hmm."

"He's my granddad."

"That's right," she says.

I sit for a moment.

Then I say: "My father would have had a dad."

She stops stirring the chili. Her expression goes blank.

"He would've had a mother," I continue.

She just stands there.

"That's right," she finally says.

My next question is what happened to them. Where they are.

She taps the spoon twice against the side of the blue enamel pot. She reaches and dials back the flame, pauses a moment, then dials it completely out. She lays the spoon very quietly on a square of paper towel and then she walks past me, rounds the corner by the refrigerator, and walks out of the kitchen. I can hear her creaking down the hall toward her bedroom. After a second or two

I follow. I hear her rummaging around in the closet. I walk down the hall, enter her room and climb onto her bed—a high bed, thick mattresses and box springs.

The closet door is open and she's standing just inside it with her back to me, her arms reaching toward the top shelf, moving things aside. Then she turns and steps over and places a shoebox on the bedspread. She still hasn't said anything. She pulls off the lid and I crawl across to look.

Stacks of rubber-banded envelopes addressed to *Aaron Christopher*. I've never seen it before, but somehow I recognize the hand. Inside the envelopes there are birthday cards, Christmas cards, Valentine's Day cards, cards connected to no Hallmark holiday. All from my father's mother. My other grandmother.

I sit there flipping through them. Birthdays. Easters. Notes and letters to say she's thinking of me. Some of them begin with her guessing my age—I *believe you'd be about six now*—others say how she hopes one day to see me.

"I didn't know what to tell you," Mema says. "I decided to wait until you asked." She resists the urge to shake her head. Her mouth tightens.

The cards go back to my second birthday, second Christmas. They grow more insistent as the years pass.

My grandmother tells me that she knows how to get in touch with them. She has their phone number, their address in Endicott. She gets out the atlas and lays it on the dining room table and shows me where it is.

"Aaron," she tells me, "it's whatever you want

to do. You take your time with it. There's no burning rush. Anytime you want to call them, we can call them. If you want to send a letter, I'll help you write it. I'm sure they'd love to hear from you. If you decide at some point you want to go visit, we can take you up there to visit. They're your grandparents but they're also strangers."

I look up at her and nod. It's the first thing she's told me about any of this that makes sense, that reflects how I'm feeling.

Which is mostly just curious. I want to know about these new grandparents, but what I really want to know about is my father. Who in most ways is the biggest stranger of all. I haven't, at this point, even seen his picture. I'll never hear the sound of his voice. I can tell when I ask my grandparents, they didn't actually like him. All they'll say was that he was really young and I hear the polite coded tone in their voices that the living use to discuss the dead. They're good people, my grandparents. They're not about to lie.

I sit there for several minutes, thumbing through the cards. I should be thinking of my father, but it's my mother who comes to mind. Her doll-blank eyes. The rage that erupts onto her face like a mask, slipping. I have a full-color memory of her in her underwear on the front lawn of a house where we were living, kicking my grandmother in the shins.

I ask if I can I wait until tomorrow.

"Of course you can."

"Can I wait until next week?"

"You can wait until whenever."

"I'll be ready next week," I tell her.

"Be ready when you're ready," is what she says.

I'm not ready the next week.

I'm not ready *any* week.

I never contact my father's parents. Never write them or call. Never make an attempt to get in touch, go see them—nothing.

I think about it, though. For a long time it's something I tell myself I'll do when I get older. Like Mema says, there's no burning rush.

"You should start with a letter," she advises.

So it gets in my mind like a challenge. It's something you build up to, something for which you train.

But what it really comes down to is family, and considering what I go through in my childhood—the death of my father, abuse and abandonment at the hands of my mother, being raised in the high-octane world of my grandmother's ferocious Pentecostal faith—I'm not willing to take on any more of that.

I don't believe I could survive more family.

I barely survived the family that I had.

There's this idea that what our fathers truly bequeath to us is their deaths. That, in destroying the father, a man becomes himself. Patricide as personal growth. Parricide as identity. Kill the family to make yourself your own. If this is every son's patrimony, you might say I was robbed of mine. That I didn't get to reject my father. I never got to run away. I've plotted his death a thousand times, and now I've done it a thousand

and one. Did the manner of his leaving the world deprive me of what I was owed? Did he steal my inheritance and bestow it on a train?

I'm well-acquainted with this line of thinking.
Not only is it damaging.

It will get you killed.

Consider my father, sitting there on the tracks. What really kept him there? Was it stubbornness? Was it merely pride?

That's definitely part of it, but the biggest part is shame. He was ashamed of the man his father was, which is why he ran away. He didn't want that to *be* his father. He denied the reality of the man who conceived him, fled the man, his home, everything familiar, became something else. You could say that in doing so he became his own man, but the humiliation of where he was from pursued him as doggedly as any Fury. He made himself into the opposite of his father: a blues musician, a drug dealer, a criminal. He couldn't find a way of incorporating the embarrassment into his life and he couldn't even conceive of the shame involved in telling the man he'd borrowed the pickup from that he'd stalled it on the tracks and got the vehicle demolished. It wasn't his fault, but that doesn't matter. He refused to live with the shame.

Another was to say it is that he refused to live.

The shame not only causes us to run—to commit parricide and kill our fathers and families—it causes us to deny where we are, deny we're even hurting. We don't believe we're on the train tracks. We don't even hear the train.

And, this is the real point of all this, I used to

be *so* ashamed. Ashamed of my father and of the way he died. I didn't want to tell his story. Didn't want it to be mine. When I was introduced to people, I dreaded the question that inevitably came: *What about your father?*

Sometimes, when I told them, people would actually laugh. Then apologize vociferously when they realized I wasn't joking.

That man I told you about, embarrassed at the awkwardness, who asked whose father dies like that?

Exactly, is what I'd thought.

Then I thought, *Mine*.

To me it seemed like a bad country song.

But I realize that isn't the truth.

It isn't a country song. The story is the blues. I can't speak to its merits, but it's got that high and lonesome sound. It's been sung countless times in the past and it will be sung in the future.

This is where the music can swell for people, the guitar fades out, the violins enter, and they hear a sour note. The audience can always tell. Nothing's more off-key than a lie.

People will tell you that when you accept you're hurting, accept the pain, accept the situation, that you're redeemed from all the hurt and purged of it. That's just as false as the shame, and probably just as lethal.

Because it never goes away. It's always right there. You can recognize where you are and deal with it but you always have to *deal* with it. The blues don't purge you: they're what you get to sing.

And the blues are rarely pleasant. What they

are is a kind of a voicing, an articulation of the hurt and pain and sadness. They can be beautiful; they can be moving. But they're always painful.

They break your heart to pieces. They hurt to hear and they hurt to sing.

You hurt and sing and live.

