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The Transportation of Rodents

"He's starting to worry now, just a little, that the people he loves most, the ones he can't remember not having, won't be here forever. It isn't a revelation, a brand new, packaged in plastic though, but it's the most afraid Billy's ever been."

The last time I saw my father alive his chest was being pounded on by the hands of a doctor whose name I'll never know. When I was twenty, the two of us drove for ten days across the country in a green Ford Taurus. He spent the three days before we left cramming every material item we owned into a U-haul which we dragged behind us. Anyone who's seen a taurus knows how dumb that sounds. They'd probably also note that the U-haul couldn't have been very big.

It was September and I had just finished up with my summer job. My parents were renting a small but attractive house in Loch Sheldrake, New York, and I split my nights between there and work. If I'm being honest, I hardly saw my parents that summer. I was working at the Forestburgh Playhouse, a summerstock theater a few towns over and lodging was provided for the actors. I mainly worked in the bar, but slept there three or four nights a week. My father was on disability and the Community College that my mother was employed at cut the early childhood development program of which she was the head teacher. That meant I had the car for most of the week, while they used it in the early mornings and on the rare occasion when I didn't have work. I get real guilty when I think about that sometimes.

I'm not entirely sure how the decision to move to California was finalized. It didn't even seem like we took the time to think about it, as is evident by us moving all of our shit via the

Ford Tortoise. I blinked and in an instant the move transformed from a possibility to a certainty. I had convinced myself I was unhappy at Lasell, the small college I attended in Newton Massachussets. My mother's newfound unemployment and my dad's deep seeded hatred of the snow in Sullivan County became the catalysts for our relocation. I'd made my own decision to withdraw from Lasell and move to San Diego at the beginning of my sophomore year's second semester. I was going to stay with my sister until I found a place of my own and acquired residency. It didn't take long for the move to turn into a family affair.

I know why my mother wanted to leave: She was bored. Sullivan County is the butthole of New York. If you were to search this location on Urban Dictionary, a hysterically accurate website, the words associated with the county include: "Backwoods," "Boonies," "Hell," and the tastefully pungent: "Shithole." A sentence following these words states: "Everyone's either pregnant, slow, in jail, or smells like bad soup." Well, that about does it. Aesthetically it is a most beautiful place, located in the heart the Catskill Mountains, but my mother never learned how to harness her inner mountain-woman when she moved upstate after having me. Having said that, she loved watching the seasons change and appreciated the aesthetics. Hated the people. Same for my dad, only he hated the seasons, too. He wanted to leave because I was leaving.

Grumpy Mark. That's how all my friends knew him. Approximately 5'5, round, with grey hair he'd donned since his twenties. He bought new shoes every three years, if that, and wore the same silver glasses day in and day out, as blind as a mole without them. He'd be bitching at us for smoking or playing music too loud one second and then make us breakfast at 11pm in his underwear a minute later. You couldn't touch that man's bacon egg and cheese. He was like a portly wizard with a fuckin skillet. The man made me breakfast every morning and packed a

lunch for me throughout my entire grade school experience. He never missed a game or a performance and somehow put up with my two older sisters and I for over thirty years in total. He also watched a ton of T.V and took long day naps. He'd be awake when I came home though. If I went out late, he'd stay up watching Law and Order in the living room until I got back. When he yelled at me over the barking of our dogs and woke my mom up, I knew he loved me. It was a strangling love, but valid nonetheless. Some people just get strangled. I complained that none of my friends' parents gave that much of a shit. I'd trade all my teeth to hear him bitch me out right now.

We made a plan. My mom would fly out to my oldest sister, Denise, and the two of them would go apartment hunting for us. Denise was living in a beautiful neighborhood in Encinitas, San Diego with her boyfriend, a professional skateboarder. I feel stupid calling him both of those things because A) they've been together for almost a decade, and B) I refuse to truly acknowledge that the words professional and skateboarding are used in certain areas of the world in serious conversation. Also fuck you, Pierre, if you ever read this. But I digress, profusely and with malice.

My father and I were to take our time. If one were to drive straight through the states, stopping minimally for rest, you could complete the trip in a few days. I have no idea why we rushed it so much (not the driving, the actual move), because as I mentioned before we didn't even have a place lined up. Not really, anyway. We finished loading every piece of our material lives into the car and U-Haul, including our two Chihuahuas. If there was an Anti-Christ and he sat on top of a horrid throne made out of human clavicle bones, these two ankle-biting dogs would be strategically positioned on either arm, cloaked in fire. We even took my mom's pet rats she brought home from work when the childcare center closed. No one else wanted them, so

naturally she did. The dogs would've gone ape shit in the back seat if they were near the cage and so we put it at the very back of the U-Haul, closest to the door, and braced it against the other bits of cargo. We planned on stopping every so often to feed them, and even snuck their cage into the side door of every motel we stayed at. I remember I'd just finished reading the grape's of wrath and kept joking around making references to it. If I'd known I would've shut my mouth.

The night before my mom flew out I asked my parents to come into the living room so I could read them something. I have no idea why I did this, but I'm glad I did. The only explanation I can possibly give is that I had a feeling, like an icicle of apprehension stabbing my mind. The something that I read them was a short story entitled "A House Made of Windows," by Kate LaDew. I won't summarize this piece, but the quote at the beginning of these pages is from that story.

"A House Made of Windows" belonged to a collection of works published through Sarah-Lawrence College, and one of my professor's had given me a copy; He has his own piece in there somewhere. But that story. That story said everything relative to my parents that I had ever thought and feared and loved as a child. It was on paper in front of me in a manner that I could understand. I remember how sad my father looked while I was reading it, leaning on a door frame in the living room while my mom sat near me. I barely made it through the entire piece. It's been two years, and I still haven't sobbed as hard as when I was reading that story. At least I got that. I remember the relief I had felt after reading it to them. They hugged me and retired to their respective rooms and I hoped with everything in me that he heard those words. I knew she did.

My mom took off and my dad and I spent the next day preparing to jump ship as well.

Anyone who would have seen the ways in which we maneuvered the taurus that first day would've laughed. I was embarrassed when our neighbor came outside and looked at us like we were children. Neither of us had ever hauled anything before, and instead of putting much time at all into learning how to correctly, we simply agreed that no matter where we went on the entire trip, we would park in a manner that wouldn't require us to put the car in reverse. Every time we tried to back up that first day the car almost hit the large container we were dragging. We just didn't get the physics.

We agreed to split the time spent driving as evenly as possible. Getting him to give up the wheel was hell. He might as well have driven the entire way given how often he cordially informed me that I was "driving like an asshole." We had to keep the RPM's at no more than three thousand and keep our speed under sixty or the car would likely overwork itself. I can't imagine how white his knuckles were from gripping his arm rest.

Pennsylvania was a bitch. If you're looking for nothing, it's in PA. I wanted to see the Midwest, which I knew also contained nothing but was foreign and mysterious to me nonetheless. I was impatient. I packed a bowl for myself every time we stopped. I remember asking him countless times if he was excited for our new life. His answer was the same every time. He was scared about getting there, and still scared about not having an apartment locked up yet. I knew the beach would mellow him out. I knew it would be worth it.

We stopped that first night in Columbus Ohio. I had convinced my dad to detour slightly out of the way of our intended path so I could stay with a girl from the summer that I thought I was in love with. She was an actress at the Playhouse and went to school at Otterbein University. While I stayed with her he took a room at a nearby hotel with the animals. I helped

him sneak the rats into the room before I met up with the girl. Why didn't I invite him to dinner?

I am haunted by questions such as these.

My father surprised me the next day by asking if I wanted to spend another night.

"I want to give your mother time to find something. Like I said we're not in a rush."

I was so thankful. I saw the dress rehearsal of a show she was about to perform in. My dad stayed with the rats again.

After Ohio the trip is largely a blur to me. If I look at a map of the U.S I can recall which states we traveled through, but only specific moments stand out. In Illinois I talked rugby with a traveling team that was heading from California to New York, essentially taking the exact opposite route.

"How popular is the sport out west?" I remember asking.

A bald, bearded monster responded, probably a forward given his height and weight.

"It's getting there. Not like in New England but getting there."

Somewhere a little further along, maybe Missouri or Kansas, we stopped for the night and gorged ourselves on steak and Stella Artois from the restaurant next to the hotel. I had a young face for twenty but waiters never card a kid that's with their parent. I never did, at least. It seemed to be the first time he'd smiled the whole trip.

When I think of meals with my father I get this weird sensation of anxiety. It coincides with my feelings about why I felt I had to read that story to my parents. I don't know how these two things are related, but they are. It's relevant to the story to state that my father was not a healthy man. As I mentioned, he was big but not tall. He also had diabetes, and belonged to a body that had betrayed him more than once-multiple knee surgeries, a replaced hip, slipped disks etc. When we'd eat Macdonalds twice a week when I was little and had zero knowledge of

nutritional concepts I didn't feel anxious. By the time I was seventeen and would see him wolf down a burger in no time at all, my heart pounded for him. We made various deals that we would eat cleaner once we reached the agricultural oasis of California.

We were both in awe of Kansas. I've never seen anything as green as Flint County, the one and only place we traveled through that I remember by name. I grew up with the knowledge that there existed four oceans on planet earth. In 2000, a fifth was recognized by the International Hydrographic Organization: the Southern Antarctic. Both summations are false. Anyone who's traveled through Flint County knows there is a sixth in the form of those pastorally flawless rolling hills. It was as though our car was a tugboat and we were pulling our lives through a sea of green. I'd like to visit Kansas again one day. I'll get out of the car when I do.

On the way into New Mexico the headlights on the car began to dim considerably as it got dark. We panicked at the prospect of being swallowed by the blackened highway and crashing as a result. With no intended stopping point for the evening we aimed for a series of lights we assumed belonged to a city. I didn't know where we were, just that we were north of Albuquerque. We made it to a dingy Super 8 Motel in New Mexico and took turns checking the parking lot to make sure the Taurus hadn't been broken into. We agreed to travel by daylight for the remainder of the trip, like oxymoronic vampires.

At some point in the night the fire alarm went off and everyone was asked to vacate their rooms and wait outside. We sat in the parking lot for over an hour holding the two Chiououas as they snapped at children that stepped within five feet of us. We opted to leave the rats to their fates in the room. A user malfunction error had been committed by a genius in possession of tin foil and a microwave. My dad was fuming, but he had this funny way of making friends with

people over situations like these. The people in the slow lines at grocery stores loved his dark, complaining humor and the DMV should have paid him to make people laugh at their expense. A jester of squalor.

All I remember about Arizona is something my father said which haunted me for months after. It will again after I put this to paper. We were exhausted from the trip and my mother still hadn't found an apartment for us, despite us being only a day's drive away. Stupidly I asked him once again whether or not he was excited for California despite our bad luck.

"At this point I'm just praying for a heart attack."

He said that.

I told my family this in the weeks after his death and they couldn't believe it. The fucked up part is that I know he was only partially kidding.

After nine days of driving we crossed the border of Arizona into California by means of the Sonoran dessert. The desolation of this leg of the journey astounded us both. It is the type of geography you only picture belonging in old Westerns on AMC. We stopped at the first gas station we spotted and were told by a skittish and acne riddled girl that the next one wasn't for at least another seventy miles down highway ten. My father was angered by this fact, as if it was the attendant's fault.

After an hour of driving panic set in for both of us. We hadn't seen another vehicle the entire time, the dogs were panting in the back seat, and the possibility of breaking down here was more than unsettling. To make matters worse, our cellphone reception cut out. There were landlines attached to poles every few miles and I contemplated the fact that I would have to jog to one of them in the blistering heat should anything go wrong with the car. We knew absolutely nothing about the borders of California. Had we done our research we would have looked to

enter the state from a different angle.

We didn't die, and eventually made it to Anza Valley which proved to be even more hellish in its nature than the desert we'd just dragged ourselves through. The few times I've explained to anyone what happened to my father and I in Anza valley I would worry that they'd think I was exaggerating somehow, but I am not kidding when I say that a group of approximately ten bikers tried to run us off of the road. To set the stage, the journey to Anza valley involves inclines through mountains taller than any I'd ever seen that last for dozens of miles, and there are virtually no guard rails to prevent anyone from rolling over the sides. It is a beautifully dangerous area, but given our situation, we could only acknowledge the latter of those two attributes. With the weight of the U-haul and general lousiness of the vehicle itself, we could barely do twenty five miles an hour up inclines whose degrees were more than that of our speed. As a result, the people in the line of twenty or so vehicles behind us were fucking pissed.

When we finally got to a stretch which contained a passing lane, we didn't move over. We should have, but we were so enormously scared of doing anything other than driving straight that we failed to be courteous. After several cars passed us, a long line of bikers proceeded to do the same. One of them towards the back of the pack pulled right in front of car and began to scream at us, turning his body and flipping us off while periodically checking forward to avoid crashing.

"Move the fuck over, motherfuckers! Move over!" He repeated again and again.

We couldn't, at that point; so many people were driving around us. I, being young, dumb, and confident proceeded to stick my own middle digit out of the window and yell back. My father screamed at me, in turn. After a minute or two of this mindlessness the man accelerated after his group, taking with him his shitty handlebar mustache and sleeveless leather jacket. My

father and I were so on edge we hardly spoke, and continued to crawl up the mountains.

Near the summit of Anza Valley we passed a restaurant/bar in the middle of literal nowhere, and outside of it were countless motorcycles. I wondered if the bikers from earlier were in there, and also about how the hell anyone could deliver food and supplies to that place. After some amount of time we drove relatively flatly through the county and passed several small towns, relaxing at having made it so high in the air. Our eased dispositions were quickly erased on the descent.

We continued to take it pretty slow, doing maybe fifty five down the backside of Anza, the inclines just as steep but half as unnerving due to our new orientation. Then something straight out a movie happened. We heard the obnoxious revving of Harley Davidsons behind us and were immediately passed by about five or six bikers. Imagine our shock when the same man from earlier pulled about three feet in front our bumper and smiled maniacally back at us. This time one or two of them tailgated us closely from behind while he taunted us, and the rest drove perilously close to my side as they passed. I was on fire at this point. I smiled back and stuck half of my body out the window, beckoning at him with my arm and taking my seatbelt off.

He yelled back, still smiling, for us to pull over, and my father pleaded with me to stop. I was around 175 pounds at the time, standing five foot nine. I had played rugby all through college and was in great shape, but realistically this ghoul had some weight on me, was clearly deranged, and more than likely would have beat me bloody. I begged my father to pull over regardless and when we got to the bottom of the incline the road went left and right, each turn at 90 degree angles. The bikers went left, and our taunter stopped twenty yards down the road to see if we would as well. We were going right, however, and we didn't. I was so pissed at my dad, and for all I know he saved my life.

Quietly and unmotivated we made our way into San Diego. If I don't include something here I will feel terrible about having left it out. We were approaching an intersection and my dad didn't check his blind spot, almost hitting someone who then beeped profusely.

"Are you retarded?" I asked him, so angrily.

I actually asked my father that, and he was pretty hurt.

"I know that was dumb, Matt, but did you have to ask that?"

I felt like an asshole then, I do right now, and I probably always will. Moving on.

We called my mother as soon as we got to the hotel we'd be staying at for the night-we didn't want overburden my sister with animals and extra bodies-and they came right out to meet us. My sister took us out for lunch and my mother told us had booked an appointment to go view an apartment for the following day. On the back from the restaurant my dad was hit with a dark realization.

"Oh my God, Debby" he said to my mother, "I think we left the rats in the car."

None of us really knew what to say, so of course I made a terrible jab.

Something to the effect of: "Baked rat for leftovers, guys."

My sister and mother found this hysterical, my father did not. Let me state that I did not really think the rats would be dead, at least I sincerely hoped they wouldn't be-but they were. I will never forget my father stepping away from us and the tears I saw in his eyes. The three of us followed to console him, and I saw my father clearer in that moment than I probably ever have. How many grown men do you know that would cry over a pair of dead rats? Personally, I'd like to think that the best kind would.

The following morning my parents and I went to meet someone about the apartment. The place was a few exits from my sister, in a gated neighborhood. It wasn't anything glamorous

but would suit us well. Our credit was bad and since my mother was currently unemployed my sister begged her boyfriend to cosign our loan. I hated that, but the upside was that we'd be moving in after a few days.

We left the meeting and went out for cheap sushi. I obviously had no idea that this would be the last meal I would share with my father. If I'd known I would have eaten slower. We finished and went back to my sister's house to relax. I was on my way upstairs to use the computer and glanced over as my father wrestled with my sister's two french bulldogs on an armchair. It was the first time I'd seen him smile so completely in over a week.

Approximately fifteen minutes later I heard our names being called from downstairs. I thought I imagined it at first, and then I heard the urgency in my father's voice. My sister and I ran downstairs to find him on the floor, laying on his side.

When the paramedics came they sat my father in a chair and asked him standard questions. He answered coherently and the three men believed he had a case of angina but wanted to transport him, just in case.

"Don't worry, Mark. Only the good die young." My mother joked. She truly meant this comfortingly. Dark humor in our blood, I suppose.

As they were loading my father onto a stretcher I sat myself on a staircase overlooking the front hallway and put my head in my hands. Hot tears formed at the corners of my eyes as he was wheeled past me. I thought consciously about calling down that I loved him. And I didn't. I didn't. I didn't.

The nurse at the hospital had my mother and I wait for ten minutes before coming over and telling us that his condition had worsened, and that we could see him, but it wouldn't be pretty. Those words. My sister was traveling behind us with her boyfriend and hadn't arrived yet.

I walked through a pair of unremarkable double doors and entered a room to the left loud with commotion. He was face up on a table, and they were working on him.

"Come on, Mark. Give me something."

My mother yelled for me to leave the room and I wish I didn't. I should have rushed to his ear and told him something. Instead I knelt into the wall outside. I will never forget the feeling of the hand on my back belonging to the nurse who knelt with me the entire time I sobbed. I have no idea what her name was, what she looked like, or even what she said to me. But I remember her hand, and she is an angel for owning it.

Denise found me there, and by this time a doctor had already informed me that my father had officially died. I transferred the knowledge through a cracked, hoarse voice, and she joined me on the floor.

My mother called to inform my other sister, Stephanie, and Denise said her wails could be heard through the phone's speaker from across the room, sounding like a dying animal. She flew out the next day, and on the day after that the five of us viewed my father's body in a dark room with tall, soft candles. He was cremated after, and my mother canceled the lease on the apartment.

That's what happened. There's hardly ever glory in death.

I live once again in Massachusetts, finishing up my undergraduate degree. He would've wanted that and maybe I'll use it for something. In the past two years I have been dragged to my feet countless times by the women in my life. Psychiatric counseling, housing, financial advice, love-the list continues to grow. I am the only one in my family who never talks about my father when we are all together, and I would be lying if I stated that I've stopped blaming myself at this point. I wasn't the reason my father was overweight, but I still firmly believe that although he

was unhealthy, the stress of the trip was the killing blow. He wouldn't have left New York if not for my boredom in Massachusetts, and nothing anyone says will ever be able to convince me otherwise.

I can't consciously end this piece so morbidly so I'll say this straight: I'm alright. I've got oxygen, love for more than one person in my life, and most importantly, pain. The pain of slamming my fingers in the car door, of dislocated bones and bloody noses. I have the pain of memory. I can sleep on the floor and I can love without money. I can drink on rooftops without falling off of them and I can remain in motion until old age comes for me. I'm not done here yet. I must keep moving even if I do not have a set destination in mind.

I see my father in my dreams sometimes. There is one I remember so particularly in which my sister, Stephanie, and I are seated on a red motorcycle with my father. I am steering and he is on the back, the anchor. We are in some sort of urban setting with heavy traffic, and in order for us to get to where we need to we must drive on to a steep ramp and go airborne. We agree as a group, quickly that it must be done and hit the ramp, flying in turn above an intersection. Gravity takes us rapidly then and the motorcycle slams onto the pavement, shattering beneath our bodies. We are shaken, but after a moment the three of us laugh fully as my sister and I help my father off of the ground. We start to walk, leaving the pieces of the machine behind, and the dream ends. I know what it means, and I think of it often.

I don't think I believe in a traditional heaven. But I'd like to think that my father is hunched over a stove top right now, cooking breakfast in his underwear. He's got a large rat on either shoulder and he is waiting for me to come home so he can feed me. I have a few things to do first, but I'll be there before dark. He will yell at me for being late.