

## Faith

The first hot week we lost Old Harry. The city was burning under a wet heat that lay like water in the canyons between the buildings, pressing you, molding you into the pavement. Old Harry had found himself a bench in the little park between Eye Street and Penn, and he just never got up. Some guy, none of us knew stole his boots before the cops found him. We hated that guy, and hated ourselves too for not thinking to do it first. Old Harry was always telling anybody who would listen that he'd been born in 1893 and that he'd live to be 100. And we mostly believed him too. The bastard let us down. The poor old bastard.

They say there are thousands of us here in Washington. They say it's a national disgrace. These things may or may not be true. All I know for sure is that there are millions of people who aren't living on the streets, and it's hard to watch them, it's hard to see them with their clean suits and their shopping bags. That's a *personal* disgrace.

There are signs above the sinks in the shitters down at Constitution Gardens that say "No Bathing." Those signs are meant for us.

When I was a kid, I really liked to read. Reading made me someone else for awhile, and I'd read anything. Like the cereal boxes in the morning before school. I read the Percentage of U.S. RDA panel on every box that came through our house. Once, my parents let me order a Camaro model from the back of a cereal box. I got the checkbook from my mother's purse and wrote one out for \$2.95 in cramped, smeary ballpoint for Mom to sign.

I thought that Camaro would never come, but it finally did. It took seven of the six-to-eight weeks, and only one week for me to ruin it in the sandbox. I've never forgiven myself for that.

But it was the coupons that made me think of this, the ones on the cereal boxes. Fifteen cents off your next purchase of Cheerios. And at the bottom of each coupon it always said, "Cash value equals 1/20 of a cent." Or 1/50 or 1/100. One hundred coupons to the penny. And every time I read that, I'd swear that I was going to save those damn coupons until I had enough to cash in. Every morning I'd gaze over my bowl at that Cherrios box and picture myself plopping a bread wrapper plump with coupons down on the counter at Kroger's and demanding my cash.

Of course I never collected more than two or three before my mother threw them out, so I never got my cash value. But I wish I had, because then I believed it would work. Then, I had faith.

When I was ten -- it would have been in '71 -- the family went on vacation to D.C. We left Chicago on a muggy July morning, so early that the crickets

were still chirping. Dad had just installed a new electric garage door opener, and I still remember him letting me push the button on the controller as he swung the station wagon out of the drive. I remember holding my breath, because I couldn't quite believe that the door would close like it was supposed to just from me pushing a button.

But of course it did close, and for about the next two years, I told everybody I wanted to be a scientist when I grew up. I think that made my parents really happy for those two years, but I never told them it was because garage door openers were just so hard to believe.

My sister and I played the license plate game across the breadth of Indiana, and across Ohio too, while Mom and Dad talked about the William A. Louis account and perennials in the side yard and my cousin Connie marrying a 'Spanic. It was only much later that I came to really understand anything about my parents' world.

"Ontario," Julie said, and made another tick mark on her scorecard.

"That's not a state," I protested. I didn't know what Ontario was, but I'd just learned my states and I knew it wasn't one of them. I also knew that Julie was ahead twenty-three states to twenty and that we had been on the road for a long time.

"Well, if it's not a state, then how come they have license plates?" From her advanced age of thirteen, Julie took great delight in demonstrating her superior logic and sophistication. In this case she was just toying with me though, because she continued, "It's a province, which is a state in Canada."

"Well, that's not fair," I squawked. "We're going to America, not Canada."

"We're already *in* America, you dumbshit," hissed my sister. She never even saw my mother's hand whip around from behind the headrest and smack her on the cheek.

That night -- which was also muggy -- we set up the pop-up trailer in a Pennsylvania KOA. I lay awake half the night, listening to their crickets and thinking about garage door openers, 'Spanics, and Ontario.

The next night, we arrived at the Stogsdill's, who were college friends of my mother's living someplace in Maryland. I think now that it might have been Hyattsville, because when we came into the city the next day, we passed through some neighborhoods that scared me with their poverty and filth. I think they scared my parents too, because they kept nervously comparing what we saw to the South Side of Chicago, which I knew from things I'd heard them say before was where all the Negroes lived. And Negroes, as I also knew from my folks, were tolerable as long as they *stayed* on the South Side, but if you gave them an inch, you could be damn sure they'd take a mile.

I think I was really too young to get out of our day excursions into Washington what my folks thought I should have. There are really only two things that I remember very clearly.

The first of these was when we went to the Jefferson Memorial. The thing I remember -- because it was so odd -- was that after we couldn't talk Dad into letting us rent a paddleboat on the Tidal Basin, he bought Julie and me these fake brass medallions at the memorial's gift shop. It was so remarkable because we hadn't even asked him and he never bought souvenirs anywhere. These medals had the likeness of Nixon in relief on one side and the inscription "Richard M. Nixon -- Statesman" on the other. He presented them to us as if they were something extremely valuable. I think my medallion got sold at the patrol garage sale the next fall when I joined Boy Scouts.

The other thing I remember was the day we went to see the White House. We left Maryland at 6:00 in the morning so that we could get in line for tickets when they went on sale at 8:00. I remember parts of that day as clearly as I remember yesterday.

It was horribly hot and humid, like it's been these last few days, and we should have left the Stogsdill's much earlier. It was a Saturday, and the traffic was thick. Dad started swearing and Mom was trying to shut him up because Julie and I were listening. We couldn't find parking anywhere near the Elipse where the ticket booth was, and we ended up several blocks down the Mall.

We were walking down Constitution toward the ticket booth.

"This goddamn foreign piece of shit." Dad had just gotten a new Pentax from a friend who had been in Japan on business, and he'd gotten the film stuck while trying to change rolls.

"Don, the children," cautioned my mother in an exasperated undertone.

"Foreign piece of shit," repeated Dad. He had stopped, wedged the camera between his knees, and was pulling the exposed film out hand over hand.

We stood in line a long time to get our tickets while the pavement set fire to our soles, and then we went to the Museum of American History. I remember we spent a lot of time at the display of the First Ladies' gowns.

"Don, my mother had a dress like that one," Mom said, pointing at a plaster Eleanor Roosevelt. "She wore it to functions at the O-Club when Daddy was in the service. Although I have to say, I think Mom had a better figure," she giggled.

"Hmm," replied Dad. He was fiddling with his flash attachment.

"How come all these dummies have such weird boobs, Mom," asked Julie. "Real ladies don't have such weird . . ."

The unseen hand, again, cracked my sister across the mouth.

"We say *bust*, Julie, when we're in public," whispered my mother tersely.

Dad's flash went off in his face. "Shit," he spat, squinting his eyes.

After the gowns, we ate orange push-ups from a vendor's cart outside the museum and then began making our way to the White House.

"This will probably be the most important stop we make on our whole trip, kids," said Dad with gravity. "The President is the leader of the whole nation."

“But he can’t make any laws without Congress,” said Julie. She was challenging Dad more and more at that time.

“No, but he’s still the leader. He sets the pace, and you two are lucky to be growing up with as fine a president as Mr. Nixon at the helm.”

I remember feeling my chest swell with pride at that moment, the same way it did at school on Tuesdays when we wore our Cub Scout uniforms and saluted with two fingers during the Pledge instead of putting our hands over our hearts.

We were walking up 17th Street, next to the Old Executive Office Building. The sun was drenching us with its sodden heat, and the somber gray and blue Victorian building looming over us seemed cool and incongruous.

As we turned the corner onto Pennsylvania, we saw this crowd of people milling around in front of the White House fence. Some of them had picket signs and they all had long hair and were chanting things I couldn’t understand. We had stopped walking and I could see my dad’s jaw tighten.

“Who are those people, Dad?”

“Never mind, Donny. They’re people who don’t realize how good they’ve got it.”

“They’re protesting the war,” said Julie, “and I think they’re right.”

“And you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, young lady, so you’ll do well to keep your mouth shut on the subject. Now let’s turn around and get out of here.”

“What about the White House?” I asked.

“We’ll go another time,” said my mother. “Now come on.”

My mother grabbed my hand and began to march me back along Penn the way we had come, but I kept looking over my shoulder at the protestors. I just had to keep looking. We were almost to the corner of 17th when four or five squad cars screamed up to Lafayette Park across the street. The chants of the hippies seemed to get louder as four cops tumbled out of each of the cruisers. All the cops had sunglasses on and leather gloves, and as they ran across the street toward the protestors, they pulled their night sticks out of their belts. I could hear their boots clicking on the pavement as they ran.

I felt like I was being wrenched apart because my mother was still pulling me down the street, but I couldn’t stop looking over my shoulder. I couldn’t. We had turned on to 17th and were about to lose sight of the demonstration behind the Old Exec Building. Julie was talking about something she had read in the *Stone* and my father was calling it a communist rag when the leading cop swung his night stick full into the stomach of the first hippy, and then, as the hippy hunched over, clutching his gut, the cop swung the stick again, down on the back of his neck. And the hippy just fell right down on the concrete and didn’t move.

I was the only one of us who saw it happen and I wanted to cry out, to scream, but my throat had contracted, my mouth was full of cotton. Just as I lost sight

of the cop behind the building, he looked up from the body and turned his head slightly toward us, half a block down the street, and the afternoon sun caught his sunglasses and his whole head exploded in blinding shards of light.

I wet my bed that night in Hyattsville, and I couldn't tell anybody why.

That demonstration, that hippy, that cop. It's all I remember about Vietnam. I don't remember any pictures on TV. I don't remember Walter Cronkite doing the body counts. I don't remember anybody we knew going away.

I guess a few years later, when it was finally over, I saw the TV footage of the Americans leaving. I remember the jets taking off with their back ramp doors still open and the Vietnamese running along behind, trying desperately to climb on. And then when the planes were airborne, I remember the GIs shoving people backwards through that opening so that they could close the doors. I also remember the report about the Vietnamese kid that climbed into the wheel well of one of the jets before it took off and froze to death during the flight, and how the ground crew found his body, still clinging to the strut when the plane landed in Manila or someplace.

But before that, there's nothing. No recollection at all. It's like I was in a bubble or something, totally isolated. I was old enough, wasn't I?

On the sidewalk near the corner of 19th and G, by one of the World Bank buildings, somebody wrote "Zappa" in the cement when it was still wet. I pass by that spot a lot -- it's my part of town -- and I've come to hate that name in the concrete. It reminds me of the inscription on a headstone. It reminds me of "Richard M. Nixon - Statesman." It reminds me of that hippy. I've passed in front of the White House a thousand times, and every time I look at the spot where that guy went down to see if anybody has scratched *his* name in the cement. Zappa never got clubbed.

I guess from now on that inscription will probably remind me of Old Harry too. The poor old bastard.

— Craig O'Neill