

NICHOLAS POLUHOFF

At The Wall

I watched him, in profile, nibbling on a stale muffin. I knew the muffin was stale because a chunk cracked off the moment he touched a tooth to it; also, I knew the man happened to store stale muffins in his car. This was my grandfather: waiting outside the Newark train station in his shitty old Volkswagen at nine on a Saturday morning, salivating at the chance to sink his teeth into me, to have me sealed inside his stink mobile, a captive audience for another day's worth of ranting. Even through the darkened glass of the station and the filthy glass of his passenger window, I knew it was him, knew what he was doing, thinking, feeling. My grandfather, especially when eating, had a ratlike appearance: a face of twitching whiskers and sharpened incisors, jaw working methodically, nose poised to sniff. Yet my revulsion was always shot through with pity, and a vein of terror: I too have a weak jaw and sniffly nose, a predilection for reading the paper as I stuff food into my face. We were different versions of the same person (we even have the same name!) and every day together, every interaction, was a battle in which he tried to turn me into him and I tried to resist.

Yet when he invited me on one of his crazy errands, I usually agreed. While most of my college friends were launching exciting careers, I was working at my grandfather's ball-bearing warehouse, answering phones and packing boxes. While the friends I'd been out late drinking with the night before were still warm in their beds, I was up bright and early for a drive to D.C. Why? I was like an optimistic young general convinced that every fresh battle would bring complete victory.

Today, any day, might be the day where he'd bend to my will, praise me, underwrite my future. He lured me with promises of a fat inheritance, he wriggled that bait under my nose, one rat using cheese on a hook to catch another, and no matter how many times he yanked the cheese away, still I followed.

But today's errand came with a specific reward. We were driving down to see a customer who'd be exchanging gold coins for a few cases of premium ball bearings. My grandfather had promised me a one-ounce gold coin if I agreed to accompany him. So I exited the bleak and grimy Newark train station, fighting off a churning stomach, steeling myself for the relentless verbal battering I was about to endure. There'd be rants about the history of ball bearings and their crucial, foolishly underappreciated role in the global economy; about those bastards Nixon and Kissinger and how they'd been no match for the great genius Fidel Castro; about my future and how perfectly it would turn out if I just listened to him, did everything he said. Just keep your eyes on the prize, I said to myself. A gold coin.

I took a deep breath and opened the passenger door.

"Good morning, sir," I said brightly.

"Morning, Billy!"

Billy was my father. My grandfather is *Bill*. I like to think I'm more of a *William*—Mr. William Tushnik III—but my grandfather was never too concerned with my preferences.

Getting into his car was like crawling inside a garbage can. There were stacks of yellow newspapers and political pamphlets scattered across the seats, bruised bananas, remnants of lunches past poking from plastic bags, cans of cat food stacked in towers—plus a stench I've never smelled before or since, part spoiled flesh, part overflowing litter box. Even the car itself resembled a hunk of garbage: washed only by the rain, handles and knobs broken or missing, a crooked coat hanger for an antenna.

But this was all a ruse, a Potemkin poverty. The chicken-skinned geezer in the plastic shoes and dime-store fedora was actually a successful businessman, with Swiss bank accounts, expensive real estate, and hidden stockpiles of gold and foreign currencies. He wanted everyone he met (especially prospective clients, dupes, muggers) to think he had nothing, was nothing. But the obsessive frugality, the pathological stinginess, these weren't faked; they were his most authentic traits, the precise expression of his personality. The man had a crimped and tiny heart and I always knew this, even when I was a boy. A Depression childhood, the death of his young son, had deformed his soul, and even when hating him I still felt sympathy for this broken creature.

I just didn't want to be him. Never having to be him would be my victory.

"Excited for a trip to our nation's capital?" he asked. "Maybe we'll rub shoulders with some plutocrats, get a look at those crooks up close. It's still our country, right?"

"Please, just not the Smithsonian."

"I was thinking that once we drop off the boxes we could maybe stop and see a monument or two."

"You promised I'd be back by dinnertime."

"You know what I'd like to do with that place, Billy. Steamroll it flat. Fumigate it. Turn the Pentagon into an animal shelter. The Capitol into a greenhouse."

"As long as we're back by dinner."

We crept down the highway at geriatric speed. If there was one place he talked about more than his warehouse it was Washington, the Pentagon, America's wicked, monstrous heart. My grandfather was not just the owner of a ball-bearing distributorship, he was an aspiring Robespierre, a militant communist revolutionary. One side of his brain constantly hatched moneymaking schemes while the other half imagined explosive scenarios in which he played a crucial role in overthrowing the capitalist system. These two halves lived side by side without any sign of conflict or contradiction.

His way to relax was to turn on some obnoxious radio talk show and bark counterarguments into the dashboard. I'd seen him unleash political tirades on baffled (possibly non-English-speaking) busboys, on doormen and delivery men, even tollbooth collectors if they made the mistake of asking how he was. This was another front in our lifelong war: it was the afflicted of faraway continents who truly touched his heart, and if he'd been able to choose his family, they would have been displaced peasants and jungle guerrillas. But I ignored politics, daydreamed his absence the moment he began railing against the government, always tried (and always failed) to make my life his central concern.

"You hear those lies they made up about Iraqi soldiers ripping babies out of incubators?" he started.

"You know, I'd like to have a baby someday. A wife, a family."

"We're in Iraq, bombing hospitals, schools. Why? Because God mistakenly put our oil under their desert. That's why."

"I was thinking I'd like to go back to school, get a graduate degree. I have a friend in the journalism program at Columbia."

"Colombia! What we did there was unforgivable. Whole villages wiped out..."

He was always a raving lunatic, that's undeniable. But my grandmother had died the previous winter and this had severed his deepest human connection. For fifty

years she'd not only washed his clothes and cooked his meals, she reminded him of birthdays and holidays, insisted he send me a check every Christmas, made him at least pretend to remember his family. At her funeral when he wasn't scowling at the priest he was touching the coffin, whispering to it, almost trying to hug it. When they lowered it into the ground, he threw his balled fists into the air and howled with ferocious animal pain. Then he wiped his eyes, blew his nose, and asked me to come back to the warehouse with him to pack boxes.

This was the same year as the Gulf War and all the rage he felt at losing his wife was transferred to more familiar terrain. Now the radio at work was blasting all the time, every report of an American victory was met with a derisive cheer. Customers stopped coming by or calling, some wouldn't even pick up their orders, knowing that if the old man caught them they'd be trapped. I called it Gulf War Derangement Syndrome. The war filled him with such fury you would have thought George Bush had dropped a missile on my grandmother. I was relieved when it ended quickly, but worse than the war itself was the explosion of patriotism it inspired. My grandfather's suburban New Jersey neighborhood was draped in flags, every spare tree wore a bright yellow ribbon, there was even a victory parade for returning veterans. Pulling out of his driveway in the morning, he felt assaulted, mocked.

On the radio, an angry blowhard was complaining about a possible nuclear missile treaty with Russia. I braced myself.

"They're complaining about scrapping a few hundred missiles! A few hundred when there are thousands ringing the planet! And don't forget: it wasn't the Russians who dropped the atom bomb. Only the United States has that honor. These are bloodthirsty maniacs who run this country. Don't they see they're going to blow up the whole world?"

When he got like this all you could do was maintain a strict policy of appeasement. My grandfather firmly believed that destruction was imminent, that the world would soon be obliterated. I agreed that something terrible loomed up ahead, but it wasn't the prospect of a nuclear holocaust that kept me awake at night. In my nightmare vision of the future, the world was the same, not blackened but bright and bursting with light and laughter, yet still we sat in the warehouse, filling orders, counting ball bearings.

Just the two of us, a pair of rats in our hole, alone together forever.

My grandfather loved D.C. like a gambler loves a casino, like a glutton loves a buffet—here’s where the action was, where the life and death of every living creature was decided, whether they knew it or not. His father took him here as a child and he’d taken my father here when he was a child; his personal history and American history were branches in the same tree. Yet personal history meant talking about mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, any sap could do that; real History was a mountain to be climbed, a problem to be solved, the endless raging war waiting for the bold and brilliant to engage.

But there would be time for all this later. First we had some ball bearings to deliver.

The radio was off, History was history, my grandfather a serious businessman again. Our appointment was at a trucking company on the edge of the city. We found the address, pulled inside a gravel lot, parked near a squat brick building that had metal grates over its windows. The owner appeared, smiled and waved from the doorway, invited us inside. He was a thick trucker with a salt-and-pepper beard, wearing a black satin jacket with yellow stitching, and a baseball cap that read: VIETNAM VETERAN.

My stomach sank.

The office was a small square room with a single desk, cluttered with junk, grease stains on the floors. It reminded me of my grandfather’s office, except for a crucial difference: an American flag at least five feet wide covered one wall and a silky black POW/MIA flag (reading YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN) covered another. There was also a miniature replica of the Iwo Jima flag-raising, and, of course, a yellow ribbon wrapped around a lamp.

“Hit any traffic?” the trucker asked in a friendly baritone. “There’s a lot of people in town at the Wall today.”

“The Wall?” my grandfather asked.

“There’s a ceremony today at the Vietnam Memorial.”

“You were there? In Vietnam?”

“Yes, sir.” He lowered the brim of his cap for us to read.

“Kill any gooks?”

The man winced slightly, smiled politely.

“I’d rather not get into any of that.”

“It’s not you’re fault. Kennedy and Johnson, that’s who I blame. They knew it was a lost cause. You think they cared about how many kids they killed?”

“You’re right, sir,” said the trucker, frowning. “You’re absolutely right.”

“Why don’t we get down to business?” I said.

While I went out to the car and started hauling cases of bearings inside, my grandfather launched into another of his greatest hits, expounding on the gold standard and the coming dark age when the dollar would be worthless and gold the only reliable currency. The trucker sliced open the boxes as I laid them on his desk, examined his order. Once all was confirmed, he reached into a drawer and pulled out a plastic cylinder the size of his fist. He loosened its top and a pile of gold coins slid out, clanging in a metallic cascade, each one a tiny, sparkling sun. My grandfather hunkered over them, counting, sniffing. I stayed glued to his side.

“Want yours now, Billy?” he asked.

Of course I grabbed it. There was always a chance he’d forget, or change his mind. The coin was much heavier than I expected; holding one I wanted a hundred, a thousand. I stuffed it inside my jacket pocket, made sure the zipper was secured. For the rest of the day I could relax, nap on the way back, show off my prize to my friends when I got home.

“I’d love to stay and chat, gentlemen,” said the trucker. “But I gotta get down to the Wall.”

“Gonna be a show there?” asked my grandfather. “Bob Hope?”

“It’s called Memory Day. They have one every few years. They’ll have speeches, lay wreaths.”

My grandfather nibbled his lips, fingered his fedora. I saw his eyes on the yellow ribbon, knew for him it was like a red cape to a bull.

“I fought that war with all my heart,” he said softly. “I feel terribly for what you and the other boys went through.”

“I appreciate that. Thank you.”

“I’ve been meaning to visit that Wall. Maybe we’ll see you there.”

They shook hands effusively, thanked each other a few more times, promised there’d be more deals in the future.

Back inside the car, my hand never left my pocket; I couldn’t stop fondling my new gold coin. But it wasn’t that I was blinded by greed or fantasies of wealth, my purposes weren’t even mostly mercenary. I was saving money, and would save the coin too, to escape. Escape my grandfather and his warehouse, try to find a normal job, lead a normal life. Every cent I saved meant less that I’d need from him. The coin was a down payment on my future, my freedom.

We drove into the heart of the city and soon I saw a white sword pointing skyward, the Washington Monument. The National Mall was surrounded by

dozens of tour buses gleaming like scrubbed missiles and in the distance I could hear a voice booming from a loudspeaker. Everywhere I looked were packs of men in uniform, veterans of every branch of the military, from decorated codgers who'd traded their guns for walkers and now weighed less than medals on their chests to rows of bovine teens marching in spit-shined combat boots. We moved at a crawl, pinned in by traffic, every face we passed somber and thoughtful, as if we'd joined the world's largest funeral procession. I swear I'd never seen my grandfather like this: patiently letting people and cars pass, even smiling and waving like a visiting dignitary.

"Whatta ya say we take a look at that Wall?" he asked.

Saying no would have been like driving a child to Orlando and then denying him Disney World. I figured he'd find a few stray veterans to harangue, maybe an amputee who couldn't wheel away in time; an hour or so of his usual shtick and then we'd go home. What did I care? I had a gold coin.

"My father was a veteran, Billy," he said. "My brothers too. We have as much right to be here as anyone."

But while they had served, my grandfather avoided WWII by either manipulating a blood test or feigning homosexuality, the story was never the same twice. "Fight in one of their wars?" he'd snap when I'd ask how he could have missed out on the Big One. "For what? Roosevelt knew in advance about Pearl Harbor. He needed that attack to save his reelection. I'm gonna get shot up for a politician to get reelected?"

Then came Vietnam and the military ballooned into his great white whale, he the vengeful, demented Ahab. My father had been prime draft age at the war's peak and my grandfather had pulled every string, performed every possible procedural trick, to keep him from being shipped off. There was a college deferment, a family-hardship deferment, a medical deferment, but eventually the excuses ran out. I was three or four and my father worked at the warehouse, I remember playing with bearings that I dug out of his pockets, crying when he wouldn't take me with him to work. One morning he received a letter from the draft board instructing him to appear. "I'm not gonna feed my son into their meat grinder," was my grandfather's reaction, and a few days later he hatched a plan. He drove my father to Toronto, got him a Pinto, an apartment, a bank account in a new name, and left him there to sit out the war.

But the twists of history are merciless and unpredictable. My father was driving in a blizzard, an unfamiliar man in an unfamiliar car on unfamiliar roads, and he crashed into a tree and died. Did I blame the Vietnam War for killing him? No. I blamed him for abandoning his family. I blamed him for driving in a foot of snow.

And I blamed him for being a dutiful son, for going along with my grandfather's stupid idea. My friends' fathers did sensible things like join the National Guard but that wasn't good enough for the Tushniks: always grandiose schemes, unforeseen fuckups, never remorse for the wreckage. The result was the same, war or no war: I had no father, no one to protect me from this madman.

Even in his seventies, my grandfather was hard to keep up with, always darted in the direction you least expected. We headed toward the crowd, then advanced around its edge, up the sloping hill that looms above the Wall. This was my first time seeing it: a glossy cenotaph like a black mirror reflecting sun and sky, it didn't cast a shadow but *was* a shadow, a veil thrown over the face of the earth. Along with the uniformed men was a platoon of mourning women, clutching bouquets, wiping tears. At the center of the Memorial, where the two massive slabs meet at an angle, stood a color guard and another man in uniform, speaking into a microphone. This man was grizzled, bearish, his chest a wall of shiny medals and ribbons. Then I recognized him: it was General (Stormin') Norman Schwarzkopf, this was right after his great triumph in Iraq, he was a national hero, maybe a second Eisenhower. For a moment I imagined having him as my grandfather: he would be strict but loving, demanding that I excel in the world, that I live with honor and dignity.

The general moved through his litany of platitudes: "*Sacrifice...heroes...we will never forget them.*" There was gentle applause, the wind ruffled a flag, a horn player stepped from the line and tapped his instrument. My grandfather had been standing with his arms crossed, slowly nodding as if the words deeply moved him, but now, with his chin buried in his chest, he advanced to the top of the Wall. *What the hell is he doing?* I prepared for a speech, a curse, the grand gesture he'd always dreamed of making, desecration as revenge, shock therapy to rouse the masses from their historical stupor. Instead he thrust forward his hips, tugged at his zipper.

Oh, no. Please, no.

Some shriveled appendage wriggled through the hole in his pants, people gasped and pointed, and I thought: *Is this the tiny crooked member that begat the man who begat me? The wellspring of my existence?*

An Air Force pilot tackled him from behind and then a Green Beret jumped on the pile. At first I felt only shock (*did he really just do that?*) and infinite, eternal revulsion. Revulsion that I might have just seen his shriveled, ancient dick; revulsion that we were so closely related, that this was my blood, my father's father, that he could perform such a crass stunt. I could easily have slipped out of the

crowd, in the tumult no one would have noticed me, renounced the man and our connection—this is what I wanted to do, what my body and brain were insisting I do. All this time I believed I had no concern for him, but then I learned that it really is a visceral pain, maybe like how one Siamese twin feels when you stab the other, to watch your grandfather being pummeled. My entire being urged retreat, but instead I saw myself fighting through the crowd to rescue him.

I threw an arm around the neck of the Green Beret (knocking off his beret), then someone, it felt like a thousand-pound man, jumped on my back. I swung my fists, fists swung at me, and even when a cop slapped a handcuff to my wrist, the veterans were still kicking and punching. My grandfather was ringed by burly policemen like a politician, his hands cuffed behind his back: he'd lost his fedora in the scuffle, his mottled head never looked more like a dented egg. His eyes feigned outrage that only I knew was glee. "They spit on me!" he was yelling. "They spit on me!" The cops pushed us down the hill and into one of their flashing cars. On the way I recognized a familiar face in the crowd: it was the bearded trucker, the gentle patriot who paid in gold. He was stunned, shaking his head.

"What the hell were you thinking?" asked the cop who drove us away.

"I was thinking I'd save the country!" my grandfather yelled.

"By pulling out your dick at the Vietnam Memorial?"

"I did no such thing!"

Then he turned to me and smiled.

Our clothes were stained, our faces scratched and bloody, but our personalities remained intact: I was ready to submit, he was primed for combat. He quickly hit upon his defense strategy:

"I lost my son too! I lost my son too! To that goddamn war."

"Your son's on the Wall?" one of the cops asked.

"That Wall is a desecration!"

My grandfather shuffled into the police station like it was a ball-bearing convention, ready to shake hands and pass out business cards, win over every man in the room. There was a big desk up front with a new bunch of cops behind it, and we were marched there to be checked in.

"It was all my idea," he announced. "The boy's innocent. He was just protecting his senile grandfather."

"This is the guy who pulled his dick out?" someone asked.

“I just wiggled my finger. Wiggling your finger isn’t against the law. What’s the matter, can’t take a joke, fellas?”

“I think we got incitement to riot, disorderly conduct,” said our cop.

“I lost my son too,” but this time instead of howling he delivered his line in a saccharine stage whisper, shoulders slumped, chin down. “The war killed my boy too.”

We’d been frisked by the Wall but now they dug deep into our pockets, sealed whatever they found inside manila envelopes. They took my keys, my wallet, yanked my jacket pockets inside-out—which was when I realized that something was missing.

“Hey, wait! I had a gold coin.”

“Me too, buddy,” said the cop. “And a treasure chest.”

This was the hardest blow of all. My precious coin, foundation of my golden future, was gone.

They pushed us through a door that read HOLDING CELL and we were led down a hot, tight hallway—the light became murky yellow, I heard more raving voices—and at the end of it was a room-sized cage, three walls of concrete and one of metal bars. The floor was covered with trash, brazen roaches scuttled between sneakers, a shit-soaked toilet in the corner made me gag. All of our ten or twelve cellmates were black men, most not really men but overgrown boys like me, and I could feel their conjoined exhalations, smell their sweat and breath and farts, an all-encompassing, inescapable animal warmth.

My grandfather took a seat on the closest bench and chewed his knuckle, Napoleon plotting his restoration.

“What you doin’ here?” someone asked.

“We are political prisoners,” he announced. “We were arrested for exercising our First Amendment rights.”

A chorus rose up:

“I’m a political prisoner too!”

“Me too, man.”

My grandfather scratched a temple, stroked his whiskers; in his mind he was Tom Paine crossed with Che Guevara, a man of the people come to liberate the oppressed. But this wasn’t a bemused customer or a buttonholed busboy: these were caged men, any one of whom might launch a counterrevolutionary barrage of fists while the cops would only cheer. I wasn’t about to be beaten by an angry mob twice in the same hour. Before he could begin his address, I grabbed his broomstick arm, dug my nails in, squeezed until he winced.

“No more,” I demanded. “No more. Please, just shut up. You dragged me down here and got me involved in your stupid stunt. Look where we are. Isn’t this enough? *No more.*”

This was the first time I’d ever snapped at him, defied him. It was better than landing a punch—he knew he was a fool, a tiresome babbling crank, and I watched him stew in this simple fact, watched him shrink from raging radical to vanquished fanatic, from leftist guerilla to old man who’d just taken a beating. He dug a hand into his pants pocket and found a crumpled tissue the police hadn’t bothered to confiscate. I was hoping he’d blow his nose, untangle the dense tendrils of nostril hair, but he passed it to me.

“Wipe your face. It’s covered in dirt.”

I dabbed the tissue with spit, wiped my cheeks and forehead. This would have worked better if he had done it, but I don’t think he’d washed my face, been a tender parent, even when I was a child. This was the best he could do. I was about to pass back the tissue, but his face was so close to mine, smeared with blood and dirt, and what kind of person doesn’t clean the blood from his grandfather’s face? He winced when I pressed the tissue to his nose and I winced back. It hurt to be within kissing distance of that leathery mask, but of course I hated it, it looked too much like my own. He closed his eyes and there was my father if he’d lived and there was me in fifty years and I felt a knot of love and nausea.

“I shoulda done it, Billy,” he said. “I shoulda pissed all over those bastards.”

My grandfather lived another dozen or so years, into his late eighties. I’ll never forget his face in his coffin: not exactly serene (that jaw was permanently clenched), but he’d been shaved and powdered, his nose hairs trimmed for the first time since my grandmother died. The rat in repose, I thought. He died a few months before the second Iraq War, which he would have loved. When I see Bush Jr. on TV, lying about his lies, another son trying to outdo his father, I think of my grandfather, even work up a rant or two of my own.

I spent every one of these years at a desk a few feet away (even just saying *retirement* was prohibited), keeping the business afloat. It’s a decent living, the days more enjoyable now that I can sit in silence without someone yelling *on* the radio and someone yelling *at* the radio, but by no means am I rolling in dough. My inheritance? There was no such thing, that hook had no cheese. Any real money was split between the ASPCA and the Socialist Labor Party. What I did receive, the Tushnik patrimony, was a crumbling house filled with feral cats. And then

there's this business, this warehouse: burdened with so many debts it would have been smarter to sell, slapped with liens and lawsuits that I'll be sorting through till I'm the one in the coffin. There's even a judgment against me from the city of Washington, because he never paid our fines. So, yes, I did get almost everything. But I never got away.



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