

# VANISHING POINT

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1. *the point at which receding parallel lines viewed in perspective appear to converge*
2. *the point at which something that has been growing smaller or increasingly faint disappears altogether*

In dying my father wasn't mythologized—he merely became smaller, simpler, and easier to reckon with. The way a chaotic and unreadable book, once finished, makes a strange kind of sense merely by virtue of its completion, its closure and return to the shelf. I think I've pinpointed an early and important chapter of the book that is my father.

I couldn't have been more than six years old, and my father had me for the weekend, as he always did. It was the day Dale Earnhardt died, though I didn't know that yet, and I never really thought of it as “the day Dale Earnhardt died” until, well, today—as I filter the beginning of one long, slow death through the resonances of another much more sudden one. Say the morning sun lay heavy and violent. I can only pretend to know what the weather was like in Wichita that day I assume was a Sunday.

My father lived downtown in the Commodore, which had been a luxury apartment hotel back in the 1930s before following that distinctly American trajectory and falling on hard times, resigned to subsisting as a low-income apartment complex whose other tenants I never remember seeing, only hearing and smelling: screams and cabbage. Every Friday he'd pick me up and if he had enough money we'd rent a VHS or two from Blockbuster on the way back downtown. When the building and its sign came into view my father would corrupt the chorus of an old eighties hit—*don't turn around, uh oh, the commodore's in town, wah-OH!*—and it was generally a joyous thing to go to the Commodore. Twenty-five years later, today, I learn that the song actually goes *der kommissar's in town, and if he talks to you and you don't know why, you say your life is gonna make you die*. I can think of no more accurate cause of death to apply to my father.

Nights, I'd perch backwards on the couch and look from his window somewhere in the upper floors of the nine-story building, watching the disembodied headlights double and waver in the Arkansas River. It's possible that the river wasn't visible from his apartment, but on the morning of the day Dale Earnhardt died, I wasn't facing the window. My father had retired to his bedroom, audibly locking the door and leaving me to the television and a lukewarm Kid Cuisine. The TV was playing *Sportscenter*, holy *Sportscenter*, the raft of reruns my father and I sailed the weekends on. The living room was filled with smoke or maybe it wasn't, since the smoke would've had to come through the cracks in the bedroom door, from the other side of which I could hear only the occasional lonely, restless bedspring, the *OM* of the weary box fan propped in the window.

I've never begrudged him anything. There is a part of my brain that was born depraved and lay dormant until my twenties—I believe *that* part understood at the age of six years old that my unimpeachably loving father had to have an existentially critical reason to leave his son in the living room by himself for an entire Sunday. I am physically sick now, writing this, and I have to step outside for a moment where the air is clean and smokeless. There was an amber, underwater quality to the apartment as I remember it: faux dusk made perpetual by the yellowed blinds.

I wasn't a NASCAR fan. Maybe I just sensed catastrophe while flipping through the channels. What I remember is how trivial and seemingly undangerous the crash was, just a little spinout into the grass and then the wall.

My dad, too, eventually died (an overdose), but before his passing my mother remarried: an auto mechanic, a good man, and one whose hero was Earnhardt. The walls of his house were adorned with the deceased driver's face emblazoned on all manner of memorabilia, but over time Dale Earnhardt *Jr.*'s face began to bloom on posters and decorative plates alongside Sr. in a strange braiding together of fathers and sons, death and matrimony. I am avoiding the blind heart at the center of this story. The scars on my father's arms weren't from the oven walls of his teenage pizza parlor days. He didn't have a partial denture because he wasn't a diligent brusher, the nervous ghost of laughter before and after every sentence wasn't a sign of amusement,

the errands we ran in his beleaguered maroon Plymouth were rarely wholesome, and even had I known what was going on, my unswerving devotion and aforementioned latent depravity would've forgiven all trespass. His oldest brother, high school basketball star and billiards savant, wasn't sitting on my grandparents' couch for thirty years telling jokes with Greek punch lines and strumming atonal jazz chords because he was lazy. My father, like my uncle, was intelligent but doomed; the only remaining relics of Sigma Chi and his bachelor's degree were the golf clubs akimbo in the corner and the Top-Siders to which he was a loyal adherent. The fall of our House is whole and fantastic.

I don't know if I became fascinated by underworlds because my father was, or merely because he was a denizen of them, had fallen inexorably through one after another. It's easy to fall from grace and tormentingly pleasing to caress the fragments of your legend each night, to be a ghost of achievement, to marvel at the light years traversed between whole and pulverized. It's easy to be the antihero until you realize that you don't occupy any story, that no art or feigned genius could blur the burnt edges and make this wreck of any consequence, and your fugitive euphorias will only ever be echoes of first loves, Sunday dinners, baseballs homered over the house. You are a shadow cast into shadow.

Apparently Dale's death wasn't distressing or curious enough to warrant knocking on my dad's bedroom door, so I stayed on the couch. I watched Scooby Doo unwittingly unmask conmen. The swamps and dead manors had to have been lonely headquarters for those villains: alone with self-consuming avarice, a projector, and a fog machine, not unlike the rooms my father (and I, in my time) revolved through, all of them identical, only seeming different because of the optical warping of the funhouses Scooby and Shaggy invariably get lost in. Villainy is lonely, and it's a wonder my father never did any time, save a few drunk tank stays—so much a wonder that I conclude I am serving, not bitterly, a sentence for us both.

There's a story my mother tells in which she receives a call from my father's number at the Commodore, but it's me: "Mom, I'm hungry and there's no food at

Dad's." Of course, she drove over in a rage and found me in his foodless apartment and my father wouldn't answer his locked bedroom door; perhaps he wasn't even there. I'm sure she spoiled me with Dairy Queen on the way home.

That story probably marked the end of the Commodore era, because my dad disappeared afterward, out of shame and/or fear of a looming creditor, for weeks lost to any history I could hope to assemble. At the high school where she worked, my mother (bless her for she is a saint) would receive menacing calls from anonymous mouthbreathers asking for money, obliquely but unmistakably threatening the well-being of her sons. Altogether my father's presence was felt much more *in absentia*, as when the sun is blotted out by a rogue cloud and you are both mournful and relieved.

On the day Dale Earnhardt died, there was still food in the apartment, and between *Scooby Doo* episodes I'd see what else the kitchenette had to offer. The fridge contained Budweiser and mustard, the freezer a few more Kid Cuisines, and it destroys me, trying to piece together what I possibly could've done to pass the hours that day. I remember nothing clearly but Dale Earnhardt: everything else is suspect amalgamation, a composite of my imagined childhood.

I believe my mind was tragically resilient, capable of erecting absurd walls between the truth and me. My father was merely *sad*, I supposed. He needed some time alone. And while that was a gross simplification, it was also a monstrously complete fact that only a child could distill so effortlessly. He was sad, and so he had done some harm to himself, what harm I couldn't yet articulate, and as a result he needed to be alone. Scientifically speaking, my father was almost certainly suffering from acute withdrawal syndrome, a result of diacetylmorphine addiction, and/or he was swinging back from the other side, methless in a mute sleep and so also sonless, futureless, and without knowledge of his lessness.

How can I explain that there is nothing to forgive? Dust was the foundation of the Commodore, and I think the whole universe was contained in that room and on that Sunday, which makes me an exiled astronomer, an estranged godchild studying with two naked eyes the ever-arriving light of dead matter.

As there were always CDs on the coffee table and stacked by the hi-fi, it is possible that I listened to one of them during the long afternoon that was becoming evening. Phish, Marcy Playground, Radiohead: they were in the car with us on the unwholesome errands, and they were in the dark when it was time to go to sleep, because after the divorce those were his bedtime stories, and I will always be grateful for them. When my father first played me “Sympathy For the Devil,” I thought he was advising me. Unlike Jagger’s anima, I wasn’t born in a crossfire hurricane, but years later, waiting to go to prison, I watched a newscaster christen a hurricane with the name “Alex,” and I knew then that calamity doesn’t happen to you, it becomes you, and there is no calm, no memory of before, only houses and histories eaten whole.

For my sixteenth birthday, my father bought me *Highway 61 Revisited*, an album I didn’t revisit or appreciate until years after he was gone, and there is a version of “Tombstone Blues” I sing, my version, in which I corrupt the chorus: *daddy’s in the bedroom he ain’t got no shoes, Alex in the cabinet he’s lookin’ for food, and I’m in the kitchen with the tombstone blues*. I don’t know how “Alex” and “I” can simultaneously exist as discrete beings within the same song, a song that isn’t even my own, but if I were to record me singing it, then listen to it on my father’s long-gone hi-fi, it would be like hearing a mirror, twice, then breaking it.

Now, when Bob Dylan asks *is there a hole for me to get sick in*, I realize that that is what my father was looking for all his life, and he finally found it in the ultimate hole that is the great yawning sky over a salt marsh near the Kansas-Oklahoma border, where his ashes were spread—only now he’s not sick, or well, or anything.

I saw him one more time, nine years after he died. I had finally found my own hole to get sick in: a cell in Portland’s Inverness Jail, and six years of daily opioids were leaching in clockwork fashion from my body. Since beginning my dabbles with pills and eventually heroin and speed, I’d never actually fully withdrawn—just the odd sleepless night waiting for someone to answer the phone—so I could hardly fathom what lay in store for me.

The first couple of days in Inverness were a biological nightmare, but I was still able to entertain the possibility that I might just read my way through it. *The Once and Future King*, *The Chrysalids*, *Don Quixote*—I'd found them on the little shelf in the dayroom and felt something like hope. But there turned out to be goblins in my cell—the prospect of fifteen years in prison, and the specter of withdrawal whose accompanying dysphoria was mutating beyond all bearable proportion. Over the course of those twenty-one days without sleep I read perhaps one page, instead monitoring the alarm of every single neuron and nerve in my body, the shuttling of ghosts through the cell walls, hallucinating a constant jingle of passing turnkeys come to release me, and then finally understanding the deep, deep trouble I was in.

The ghosts were many and various, reeling randomly from every chapter of my life: a professor; Benedict the dachshund; all my girlfriends, bandmates, nemeses, dealers; and, of course, my father. I wish I could tell you that he imparted something profound, begged me to remember him, said anything at all. I wish I could tell you that he looked happy, that he sat on my bunk and stayed awhile, and that I had a TV for us to watch *Star Trek* on together; but in the manner of a distracted stranger you pass in the hallway of a nameless institution, he avoided or simply was not aware of my eyes, and disappeared into the wall.

Watching my father and the rest walk single file through my cell, I wondered whether my addictions had so mangled my wiring that I was now privy to some very real twilight procession in a far-off future, a future so distant that everyone I had ever loved or hated or barely known had died. I regret to inform you that the dead have nothing to say, at least to us. Did my father see a six-year-old ghost of me slip through one wall, and then another, as I drifted across his bedroom at the Commodore on the day Dale Earnhardt died?

At some point the sun had to have gone down and I probably reversed my body to watch the newborn headlights, the stars double by way of the river. I heard his voice then, speaking gently to itself, though at first I thought he was calling to me. He was coming to—chiding his body, his sadness. And so I prepared to reenact what I now see as my creation story. I changed the channel.

One of my earliest memories is not a memory at all, more like a photograph still submerged in the darkroom, forever developing. Along the photograph's bottom third are three pairs of outstretched feet, my mother's on the left and father's on the right, both reaching far past my own in the middle. The top third is just twilight popcorn ceiling, but in the center of the photo is a television screen with its million vanishing points from which the rest of my life has appeared.

*Sportscenter* was mourning Dale but I turned to Fox, channel four, *Star Trek*—the show we would watch together. I heard my father speak again, as though to no one, like a widower on his deathbed, and for a moment the dream was partially reassembled, the once-real dream of lying between my sleeping parents with their bedroom TV spinning a funeral shawl of starlight for me and only me.

♦

When I mailed an early draft of this piece to a mentor of mine, he responded: *I think it's okay on page one to say, "Sunday, February 18th, 2001." You'd know that now.* The reason I didn't know the date is that I wrote the piece when I was living in prison, where I had neither access to the internet nor the heart to ask my mother over the phone, "What day did Dale Earnhardt die?" because that question might as well be "What day did my father die?" Staring at the date in the letter from my mentor, I realized that Dale Earnhardt died on a Sunday when I was eleven years old, not six. I began to wonder if in fact my father had vanished from the Commodore many years before the day Dale Earnhardt died. I had thought: *I remember nothing clearly but Dale Earnhardt.* How wrong I was. It seems I remember nothing clearly.

I've since been able to sort the years and places out, and it is likely that my father was indeed living in the Commodore at that time, but my vertigo in the face of that date—Sunday, February 18, 2001—is burned into me. For a long time I wasn't able to pin down the whereabouts of myself and my father that day, and so during that time we walked, unmoored from time and space, together in our

vanishing. I've learned that I don't like to look too closely at things. I like to leave some things unlocatable.

I was released from prison two months ago and this morning I watched the video of Dale Earnhardt's crash on YouTube. It is much more violent than I recall. It is not "just a little spinout into the grass." He flies headlong into the retaining wall of the track at over 150 miles per hour. I can see now that what my child's mind did was supplant the actual crash with its aftermath: the yellow car nudging the stunned black number 3 across the track and into the infield, both cars coming to rest over ryegrass, a disembodied tire flipping in the air like a coin, headless and tailless. 