



1-1-2005

Barrel O' Fun

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Recommended Citation

Dobbs, Cynthia (2005) "Barrel O' Fun," *Calliope*: Vol. 35 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/calliope/vol35/iss1/5>

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BARREL O' FUN

Larry twists open a beer for breakfast, and I think it might not be a bad day to take the kids to Astroworld. Presidents' Day and we're all getting a little stir-crazy. Even Fence Post, that butt-ugly mutt Davey brought home last summer, seems sort of antsy. He keeps roaming back and forth from the living room to the kitchen. I can hear him grunt as he jumps down from the green La-Z-Boy, hear his claws scratch as he leaves the shag rug and scrapes across the linoleum. He slinks along the wall, keeping a watchful eye on Larry's boots, the right one tapping like he's sending messages in Morse Code down to the roaches in the basement. Usually that tapping doesn't start until Wednesday or Thursday, when Larry's about had it with the two hour there-and-back drive to Sugarland, the freeway's clogged, and him never knowing when someone in the crawling fast lane'll whip out a gun and just shoot their way downtown. And by the end of the week, after sweating in that sugar mill nine hours a day, head spinning from the heavy smell, Larry says he feels all clogged up, like his insides have turned to old molasses. Or that's what he used to say, before his words got all stuck in that syrup too.

Fence Post slinks right on past Larry and throws himself down with a smoker's cough right under my feet, where I'm trying to do the dishes. Damn fool dog. I musta kicked him 29 times today. You'd think he'd learn something from all this abuse.

Davey, my son, he's thirteen, and his mouth has already started to shut down like his daddy's. Ashley, my little girl, is seven, and feisty as all get out. She can still wangle Davey into playing with her, even though he's started doing this I'm-soooooo-much-more-mature-than-you-are-and-soooooo-bored-with-life-I-just-can't-bear-to-answer-your-childish-questions routine. From the way he rolls his eyes at every single solitary thing anybody, especially me, says, you'd think he had a Ph.D. in philosophy. Of course, today, like almost every day, I do the wrong thing. I practically chirp, five hundred words a minute, "Hey, Davey, how 'bout we go to Astroworld? When's the last time you went, probably fourfive years now? You're big enough now to ride that Texas Cyclone, but don't think you can talk your mother into going on it with you." He sighs, shrugs, looks at Larry staring a hole right through the screen door, and says, "Yeah. I'll go. Whatever."

In the car on the way to Astroworld, Ashley tells me about her friend Suky in her second grade class. I think, Suky, why that's a pig's name, but I keep my mouth shut. That's all I need, to piss Ashley off too by saying something stupid. But God Almighty, that's an idiot name. Anyway, it seems Suky set the trash can on fire during third period on Friday. She just raised her little hand, polite as can be, and asked if she could have permission to leave her desk, ma'am, cause she needs to throw her Kleenex away cause she just used it blowin' her nose, she's got a cold, ma'am... and she just walked on over in her little lacy pink dress and little shiny black Mary Janes, and lifting her hand, dropped her crumpled Kleenex down, watched it flutter down, and then took out a box of matches from the pocket of her cute little pinafore. Then she just lit that sucker on fire.

Ashley tells it almost just like that, and I nearly die laughing. And then nearly kill us all laughing, cause I'm laughing so hard I run the damn red light on Fannin. Four lanes. I'm surprised we don't get hit by a Pepsi truck or something. Some angel must be watching over me—or at least over my kids.

We pull into the parking lot, which is, like everything else in this city, oversized. I pay this busting-out-the-seams, greasy-headed kid two bucks to let our Malibu rest on the pavement for a few hours. Ashley and I get outta the car. Davey's just sitting there, staring.

"Davey, what's your problem? Come on."

He turns his head slowly and says, "It's gonna rain."

I look up at the sky, sinking in grayness, and say, "It is not. You're just being difficult. Come on. We'll have fun!"

I hear my voice inch higher and I know all this cheer is driving him crazy, but I just can't seem to help it. I watch Davey turn into Larry, and what the hell do I do but push him farther away, playing the same smoothing-over games that I play with Larry. I stand there, the hazy Houston brightness ricocheting off the asphalt into my eyes. Time has moved into the slow lane, and I don't know how long I just stand

there looking down at Davey, trying not to cry because I suddenly know that I'm afraid of my own son.

Davey sighs and slowly puts on his orange Astros cap, backwards as always. He's got that orange plastic tab that lets you fit the hat to your own size head clamped so tight I can see it digging into his forehead. When he leans out of the car, I flick the tab open. He glares at me, snatches the hat off, and tosses into the Malibu. I decide to let this little scene slide away. We haven't even made it to the front gate and already he's having a terrible time.

Walking across the parking lot to the zebra-striped shuttle that'll haul us over to the entrance, I see Davey and Ashley tromping straight for the stripes but looking left. My eyes slide across the Houston haze, following behind my kids, and I see what's got their attention: the godforsaken Shamrock Hotel. I remember when that hotel was first built in the sixties, when everyone was just booming with oil-rich smiles. So they built this twenty-story luxury hotel, boasting "THE LARGEST HOTEL SWIMMING POOL IN THE WORLD." Used to go there with my high school buddy Missy, whose rich parents had a summer pool membership. They had a water skier in that pool once, just to prove, as if you couldn't tell, that that pool was THE LARGEST HOTEL SWIMMING POOL IN THE WORLD. And that's what they had painted across the miniature ski boat pulling this bonehead on pink skis. They didn't say they were using THE SMALLEST SKI BOAT IN THE WORLD. But hell yes, it was a helluva big pool. We felt like real sophisticates lolling poolside, sipping iced teas and reading *Seventeen*. I remember watching Larry, who'd come sometimes with his cousin Anthony, watching Larry staring at the French stewardesses who'd go topless. (Houston was so sophisticated.) I knew even then, before we had even started going steady, that we'd get married. I don't know how, but I just knew. The way we'd be the only ones to laugh at Mr. Gerber our chemistry teacher's jokes. I don't know if we were the only ones to get the jokes, or if we were just more obnoxious than everybody else, but the way it'd strike us new each time how we were sharing this big laugh, and the way he'd look over and smile at me... I don't know, I just knew we'd get married.

But that Shamrock Hotel, all chandeliers and carpet you could get lost in, and just towering over the area, it was something. Stupid in its being so oversized, but also, I don't know, kinda brave. And the kids must know that too, cause they both look sad now. It is kinda sad, that big building being brought down, too big for Houston's shrinking economy, the papers say. For some reason, they're blasting away at it slowly, piece by piece. So now it stands, all elegant up the left side, almost to the top, and then the top's just gone, crumbled down in gray dust, the right side hacked away.

Suddenly, the Zebramobile is in front of us. As Davey steps up into it, I put my hand on his back, his shirt already stuck to him with sweat, and it's cloudy and not even noon yet. He stops, turns his head back to look at me, and I rub his back a second, drop my hand away, and smile. He looks confused, but the sides of his mouth lift a little into a kind of sad-but-not-angry grin. I think today might be alright. We might be alright.

It costs us twenty-six bucks to get in, and I know Larry'll be pissed. But I also know what he'll be like today, that staring through the screen door turning to staring at the TV, until somebody is just a little too loud, or hasn't bought the right kind of mustard for his roast beef sandwich, or just isn't, like everything and everyone else, like he'd thought they'd be. And then it'll be goddammit this and goddammit that, and next thing I know, Davey or me, one, will get a good slapping around. We might as well have a decent day before the proverbial shit hits the fan.

We're just through the turnstile, and I say, "Hey kids, it's not so crowded. Lines won't be bad at all."

Davey looks at me, all surly. "It's gonna rain, that's why."

"Oh, Mommy, it can't rain, can it?" Ashley's whining, and I hate it when she whines.

Before I get a chance to answer, Davey's there with, "Of course it can, bonehead. Look at the clouds!"

He's right. I look up, and clouds are moving fast from the north, cutting across the glaring sun. And Ashley's face is moving red. The storm's coming.

"Davey, just shut up!" I snap. I know I snap it too hard, but I also know I just can't deal with Ashley's tears right now. Anyway, nothing I do'll make Davey cry. Like his daddy, he just closes up.

"Where to first?" I ask Davey, trying to apologize.

He shrugs, looks around all dismal at the whirling cotton candy machine, at the little shoot-a-duck rifle range, at the Peter Pan ride. Ashley chirps in with "Barrel O'Fun! Pleeeeease, let's do that first. That's my favorite!"

Davey looks down at her. "When'd you ever ride that thing? You were only three or something last time we came."

Ashley, feeling sassy and still pissed, I bet, about that "bonehead" comment—I should watch that—says, her little hand on her hip, miming me, "You're the bonehead, fool. I was here two weeks ago at Caroline Hermes' birthday party, so there. What the hell do you know, anyway?"

I'm not used to her this sassy. "And where the hell do you get off using that kinda godforsaken language, Ashley? Now, both of you, just watch it."

We gotta salvage this day, I think, so I say all cheerful, "Hey, let's do the Barrel O'Fun first and then whatever you want to do, Davey. This is y'all's day."

Davey and Ashley stare at each other a second, Davey sighs, and then he actually lets me take his hand. We're headed together for the Barrel O' Fun. It's funny how Ashley loves this ride. It was my favorite when I was a kid too, that somehow fun terrifying feeling when the round room got spinning fast enough, like the centrifuge in high school chemistry class, that they'd let the floor drop down. And there you were: nothing below your feet to hold you up, but that force of the centrifuge keeping you safe, smack against the wall.

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