

The Wind

Brian Guthmann

That wind. Ever constant through the trees of my childhood like a gentle hand assuring me during times of never-ending change. The wind brought hints of Mamaw's wonderful cooking to the three of us boys whilst we re-conquered Texas for the glory of Spain. The area between the driveway and the very forbidden area of the Texaco oil pumping unit varied from day to day between high oceans full of pirates and a high-speed race track which doubled as a smash-up derby race.

That wind whispered through my tawny hair as well as through the limbs of the china berry tree like a secret friend, sometimes drying the tears that came with being a boy unfortunate enough to be caught throwing rocks into the rain barrel where minnows were kept for Papaws' future fishing expeditions. The china berry tree held its own secrets, for we kids had often been told by our uncle that Papaw could fashion a homemade toy of wood and rubber bands called a 'china berry gun'. We would pick the berries and yearn for such a toy, unless we were too busy arguing about the nature of the berry's toxicity. When we would ask Papaw to make the much-coveted toy, he would growl something about we stayed in enough trouble with what we already had, and go back to his work as the god of tools.

Papaw could fix anything under the sun, and although we knew he could fashion the china berry gun into existence with a mere gesture of his hands, he never solidified that belief. His large bear claw hands seemed to us like those of a great creator, deftly wielding the shining wrenches like a master swordsman slaying the mighty dragons which were housed within the big block Chevrolet engine at his beck and call. He was a man of a very few words, but his features told volumes of information about him. He stood six foot two and was very broad at the shoulders, arms tanned in the Texas sun and covered with tattoos he collected in the South Pacific in World War II. His curly hair, once rich and brown, was still full but showing signs of grey. And those eyes. Two sparkling pools of peaceful blue water, sometimes lighting up with joy at the sight of us boys when we came home, other times raging with the promise to "overhaul our asses if he heard us stirrin' up a racket" while he was trying to sleep. Most times we were convinced that he was God. Other times we were positive he was the Devil. Whatever he was, we loved him. He was Papaw, and he felt the wind just as we did.

The old house where we lived was a remodeled oil field house called a 'shotgun shack'. They say it was thusly named because one could open the front door and the back, fire a shotgun into it, and never hit a thing. I don't know when Papaw bought it, but it was our home as far back as I could recall. The front porch was very wide and cool in the summer, as it was constructed of concrete and always kept fashionably painted with whatever color of paint Papaw was impressed by at Western Auto. It was on that same porch that I gazed up at the moon on a steamy night in 1969, straining to see these men who the TV assured us had landed on the moon. When I became frustrated and dashed

back through the screen door to question Mamaw as to why I couldn't see them, she would inform me that all that on TV was a big Hollywood stunt, just a fake. I never trusted the old Zenith again after that. It had been lying to me the entire time about my hero Yogi Bear.

The fragrance of plums was always present in the Texas summers courtesy of the hearty plum tree at one end of the porch. Us boys were held in awe of the plum tree, not in lust for its sweet, luscious fruit, but for the fact that it was guarded by a steel contraption which was shaped like a three sided ladder which beckoned us like the ladder to heaven. Many times we were lured by its siren's call and paid dearly with our backsides at the severe wrath of Mamaw and her mighty hickory switch.

The floors within were all of hardwood, which creaked like tired old men when even our tiny bare feet walked across them. My fondest memories of the living room were of winter times, basking in the warmth of the old Dearborn natural gas heater with the light of its happy flames dancing like drunken cowboys on the living room walls. Us boys would be there on Sunday nights, fresh out of the bathtub with our sleepwear on and our hair duly slicked back with Grecian Hair Formula, waiting impatiently for Lawrence Welk's bubble-blowing buddies to get off television, clearing the way for the Wonderful World of Disney, brought to us by Mutual of Omaha. Mamaw would lay out an arrangement of quilts, some of them hand-sewn by her grandmother, on the floor fashioning what she called a "pallet" for us to sleep on. Papaw would then go off to bed grumbling something about "all that horseshit on TV these days." It is my belief that Mamaw actually liked Disney. It took away the other talk on TV us boys couldn't understand about far off places called Cambodia and Viet Nam. She surely worried about her son having to go, as he was rapidly approaching the age of induction, and she knew the wind which rapped against the windows outside was definitely not the same wind as lived in those far-off places. There were many things which worried her. Even through the eyes of childhood we could see the deep trenches on her face where worry held its constant war, gaining ground when it could.

Mamaw, whom Papaw always called Dink, was a very petite woman, all of about 100 pounds on a five foot three frame, but her moxie was bigger than that of a Sumo wrestler. She could out cuss a seventh fleet sailor on a payday Saturday night. She wore denim jeans with flannel shirts and tube socks under her Keds sneakers. She swore by Folger's coffee and did her best to support the Folgers family with her weekly trips to the Affiliated Food Store in our town.

Those trips to the Affiliated were always an adventure to us boys. We knew that even though she always complained about a curious condition her money had which made her refer to it as 'tight,' if we were as good as we could possibly stand to be she would purchase for each of us a small balsa wood airplane. If we were especially good, and if her money's peculiar ailment was not so severe that week, we might even get the more expensive model powered by rubber band and complete with its own landing gear fashioned in bright red plastic. The planes, ever present in our young minds, were stocked

strategically at the checkout counter, so we had to be on our guards to resist the temptation to poke at the loaves of bread on the shelves or snatch a cherry, which we were certain were there for free samples. Down one aisle and back up another, the metal cart with one wheel askew would roll as slowly as a funeral march with arthritis. The aisles where dry beans, rice, corn meal, flour and sugar were kept seemed to take forever as she scrutinized the price of one brand compared to the other. One final trip to the aisle where Papaws' eight ounce bottle of Coca-Cola (the real original recipe, not this stuff they're telling you is the original recipe nowadays) was kept stocked, standing like icons of upper crust life in the eyes of us boys. Usually we drank sweetened iced tea at meals, and if we were lucky we had various flavors of Kool-Aid, sweetened until you could feel the sugar as you drank it down. But Papaw never, ever, under no circumstances drank tea. He even went as far as to tell us boys tea was for sissies and if we imbibed the drink he would forbid us to join him on those wonderful fishing trips. Although we often wondered what his aversion to tea was, not one of us would ever breach the subject with him under any circumstances. I guess he was having his own boycott on tea. Somebody may have forgotten to tell him we weren't pissed at the British anymore.

On those trips when we would return home with the treasure of a squadron of balsa wood, we would disappear into the high East Texas Maheja grass field beside the house and launch terrible aerial assaults on hapless targets for whatever reason we could dream up. Our old friend the wind would join us, merrily lifting our airplanes on its billowy breezes, carrying them along while we ran and shrieked with delight on the ground below. Our hair flying back as we ran in dirty bare feet, we would exchange glances of fondness, not knowing we were burning forever into our memories those innocent grins and peals of laughter. Never realizing only the wind stays young forever.

Sooner or later, as the laws of physics demands it, our mighty squadron of balsa warriors would come diving to the earth for the last time, smashing this piece and that, until we would be forced to use our innate ability to overcome hardship and cannibalize each one to make one last airplane. When that Frankenstein's Monster of aviation would meet its destiny, we more often than not had more fun filling the plastic bags in which the parts came with pebbles or sand and flinging them into the air, competing for distance and speed. Then the wind would come again, bringing us the smells from the open window of the kitchen, telling us it was soon supper time.

Growing up, we never knew what rich or poor was. We assumed everyone was as fortunate as we, sitting down all together to a wonderfully spread table laden with such sumptuous fare as pinto beans and corn bread, fried potatoes, cabbage, and greens. The most heavenly dish Mamaw could ever bestow upon our hungry little mouths as far as we were concerned was called 'red noodles.' A king's treat, to be sure, the red noodles were, as I found out to my amazement in adulthood, nothing more than shell noodles with tomato juice and black pepper. What a feast it was! Surely even Elvis and Yogi Bear ate this good! Oh, wait. I forgot, Yogi's only Hollywood.

Small towns in East Texas have a way of being boring to teenagers, like to our Uncle Bub in that day. Boring unless of course you knew how to build a hotrod Chevrolet that gave the local police fits. Uncle Bub was certainly every bit the son of Papaw. He had inherited the godly art of wrench handling that was coveted by most every peer he had. At ten years old he tore down his first big block Chevy while most little boys were playing cops and robbers. By sixteen, he had the fastest car in the county. The detached metal garage was his domain where he would work his magic to the sound of Simon and Garfunkle, who never failed to remind us that Cecelia was breaking their hearts. The orange 1973 Chevy Nova was a Rally Sport, and we were sure this meant he had the only one on the face of the earth, handed to him directly by God himself like Excalibur given to a King. Long hours each weekday were spent adding more horsepower, removing less important parts, or repairing the wreckage of a fun-filled weekend of high-performance indulgence. Words like torque wrench, gasket, and carburetor made their way into our mouths, as well as a few that shouldn't have, as we toiled beside the garage souping up our Big Wheel.

Uncle Bub was without a doubt cooler than Elvis. He had curly brown locks framing his well-formed face, and his blue eyes he had inherited from Papaw. He was tall and strong, tan from mowing the yard, and other great quests of toil which Papaw would challenge him with. To say the hometown girls liked him would be like saying there were a couple quarts of 10W40 in Texas someplace. When the sun would set on Friday night and he would emerge from his room minus the oil and grease, he cut a handsome figure in his jeans, boots and buttoned-up plaid shirt with the sleeves removed. All us boys would line up in the hallway, eyes gleaming with the thin hope that perhaps this would be the magic night he would say we could go along on his campaign of horsepower and pillage. Each time our hopes would be dashed by Mamaw reminding us that bedtime would surely come long before Uncle Bub returned. Out the screen door he would stride and the sound of 500 horsepower thundering out of headers and side pipes would soon disappear and leave us on the porch with our bitter tears being blown dry by that wind.

Even in real life, sometimes fairy tale magic can happen, and once came the time when my cousins were absent and I was the only boy at home. This time when the sun disappeared and Uncle Bub reappeared, I was shocked to hear it would be okay if I tagged along...IF I were good and swore to never, ever call him Uncle Bub in front of the girls. His name was Allen. Uncle Allen was fine, but the 'Bub' part had to stay home. Small price to pay, I figured and gladly obliged his requirement to swear off. After a bath that set speed records still held in our county to this day, and a bout with Mamaw and her love of Grecian Hair Formula, I was seated in the navigator position in the Chariot of the Gods and beaming from ear to ear.

With the push of a button the mighty dragon under the hood awoke and bellowed his might out of the pipes, shaking the hood scoop, which seemed to be three stories tall. Down the long dirt driveway we bounced along until reaching the blacktop road, which the county had given Uncle Bub for his personal drag strip. The tanned hand on the shifter would slap it, launching us into orbit, the sheer g-force of which I can still recall

vividly to this day. About the time I thought I could hoist myself forward in the seat again, I was met with another burst of hellish energy from second, and then third, and lastly fourth gear. I looked over at him, filled with delight as he grinned that devilish smile and that wind rushing through the open windows as the telephone poles raced by like bullets from a gun.

Greggton was a town merely by virtue of its post office and dozen or so buildings, four of which were strategically placed on the corners of the most wonderful real estate in a teenager's dream. Burger stands. The old kind of burger stands, not McDonald's or Burger King with their plastic personalities and repetitious fare of this day. Names like The Top Burger, K&N Root Beer Stand, The Dairy Queen, and such. Each stand's parking lot competing with the other for who could hold the most hotrod cars, the best looking girls, and the toughest guys. Once the correct selection had been made and we rolled to a stop in the greenest pasture of teenage wonderland, girls rushed over to greet this uncle of mine like a hero returning from distant lands. Their straight blonde hair, skintight bell bottoms and tie-dye tops made them appear to be muses, daughters of Olympus, dedicated to fun, music, mirth, and laughter. And the wind...blowing their sweet perfume to our noses, along with the smell of a Texas rain riding on its shoulders.

Thirty years. Much has changed in our hometown, as well as in our lives. If nothing else in life is certain, it is the fact that time continues to roll on and on. Gone now is the notion that us boys were placed on Earth to be children and that's just the way things were. Never did we dream of being men with children of our own. Some businessmen came and tore down the burger stands. The Top Burger is now a used car lot where one can purchase another man's problems for a couple thousand dollars. The K&N Root Beer Stand is now a locksmith's shop, selling protection to everyone in the vastly changed community where crime has crept in. The Dairy Queen sold out to move two doors down and adopted the mask of other modern commercial fast food places. The Nova was called back to heaven until another young hero proves himself as worthy as Uncle Bub to wield her might. Uncle Bub? Married to a very pretty woman and has three boys now in high school. He's still cooler than Elvis ever thought about being, but now in a more refined and wiser way. Still drives fast too.

Mamaw and Papaw stepped into that Texas wind a few years back and now we hear them only when that wind carries to us their whispers.

"George, what do you want for supper?" She says.

His voice comes back as always, "Hell, Dink, I don't care..."

"Well you got to tell me something," she shoots back, "or you'll end up gripin' 'bout what I do cook."

And both of them know she will be making pinto beans and cornbread, cabbage, fried Potatoes, and maybe...just maybe, some red noodles.

Last time I saw the old place, my small son stood beside me as I quietly stared at the ghosts of the past playing out their roles in the play of my memory. A tear made its way down my cheek, and Timmy saw it.

"What is it, Daddy?" he asked with inquisitive blue Papaw eyes as the wind blew his tawny hair playfully.

I smiled at him and said, "Es apenas el viento, Mijo, it's only the wind..."