

Father and Son Buried in One Grave

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It was the end of a wet April in the coal days of 1882. Somewhere east, Ralph Waldo Emerson was on his deathbed, and, for one night only, the New United Monster Circus was in Nelsonville, Ohio. Advertisements were in all the papers: a cavalcade of Kentucky thoroughbreds, a den of performing hyenas, the first hippopotamus and babirusa ever shown in America. So they claimed. A week earlier, on a nearby rail line where Mr. William B. Dewland worked as an engineer, the railroad company had lost several freight cars of material, but no one had been hurt. William and his son Charles worked the same steam engine.

It was hump day, dinnertime, but William and Charles were still working the rails, dragging coal out of the hollers down around Sand Run. Back at home in Nelsonville, Mrs. Sarah Dewland and their second son Willie had probably already headed to the circus. A little west, in Cincinnati, the first ever National Forestry Congress was in session. “The time has come when some such action is necessary to prevent the utter annihilation of our forests,” said the local paper.

Sand Run was not the most glamorous bit of track William and Charles Dewland had to work, a two-mile there-and-back around a ridge near Airplane Holler, though in 1882 it did not yet have that name. No airplanes to name it after, Orville and Wilbur Wright still some ten years and one hundred miles away from even their first bicycle repair shop. No cozy sleeper cars ran on the Sand Run spur of track, no fancy gentlemen letting down their window curtains, no dining car, no swaying chandelier. Here was only black-lung freight and the men needed to load and unload it from the hills’ spiderweb of coal seams. Land pulled out of the land. They were as dirty as the miners, the Dewland father-and-son team, plus a brakeman whose name the newspapers would never agree upon when they reported the coming accident.

The water was high that Wednesday evening, all that rain and all those ridged Hocking Hills for it to run off of. Sand Run kissed the bridge supports like a soon-to-be-widowed mother rushing off to work. No one seemed too worried about the stream, though. The tracks over it were only two years old, and this was the rail company’s third trip out to Sand Run Station that day alone. That was two trips there and two trips back, plus one more out that the Dewlands and the brakeman had just made before they turned around their engine, hitched up their freight, and started back with their suddenly heavier haul.

It wasn’t a long bridge, when they came to it, fourteen feet across and ten feet high. Tall enough, though, to do damage if the waterlogged trestle collapsed. *If? When.* Down the train engine plunged into the flood-choked stream. William and Charles went under with the burning coal, boiler, and smoke box. Pinioned, submerged. Whether they died of drowning, boiling or crushing, the papers do not say. Their brakeman’s legs were both shattered. The papers report he died later that night in Nelsonville, after the circus had closed up and the giraffes had bedded down, but the brakeman’s death was not listed in the railroad’s official reports. By the time the papers had the news of the Dewlands’ demise, it was Arbor Day, the first one ever celebrated by the State of Ohio.

Before he retired, my father was in charge of all the trees in all the towns in Wisconsin. That's not exactly right, but it's how I explained it to anyone who asked. He was a forester, an arboriculturist, but mostly he was a bureaucrat, a state employee with a cubicle in a massive concrete bunker near the state capitol. The Department of Natural Resources could not have designed a less natural building in which to spend its days.

Some children are raised to love gods. My father raised us to love the forest. When my brother and I were young, this meant hiking, and camping, and clambering up any branch low enough to grab, and piles and piles of autumn leaves raked onto blue tarps for mulching. It meant that, in parking lots, we found the family minivan, forest green, by searching out the Smokey Bear car aerial, and that, when we drove through a new town, we looked for the sign declaring the community a "Tree City USA." When we smiled for portraits, our family said *Trees* instead of *Cheese*. After my brother and I left home, Thanksgiving and Easter could go unremarked, but woe on us if we forgot to call home for Arbor Day.

When he still worked, my father left the house before any of us woke up. In the evening, he coasted into the driveway on his blue road bike just in time for supper. Often he fell asleep on the couch in the middle of reading us an after-dinner book. On weekends, he dragged us to the home improvement store, where we wandered through one manufactured ecosystem to the next: the land of ceiling fans and chandeliers, the land of untreated lumber, of bolts, of different gauges of rope. And then, after dinner, when our mother needed some time to herself, he'd look at me and my brother and say something like, "Let's see what's happening in the prairie," and we would scramble to get our shoes.

Our house abutted a city nature preserve, prairie and woods and eventually ponds, and it was there we tromped, greedily giddy to have our father all to ourselves. Yet the walks came at a price, for everything outside took extra time as my father stopped at every trunk or new flower that caught his eye. Had we seen the new patch of bloodroot, he asked, and not much farther up the wooded path, "Get a look at all that *Mertensia*!" Then a bird called and he paused to find its white throat. Next he picked up a strange nut and we could not proceed until he located the accompanying tree. Every stroll with my father had a lesson: "This is buckthorn. *Rhamnus cathartica*. Highly invasive. You see how it's filled in this entire understory?" Meanwhile dusk approached. The deer stepped into their clearings. My brother and I began to pester each other for a distraction.

I was not unappreciative of the forest, but, like with everything else I took into my body as a child, my young cells metabolized the woods faster than an adult's seemed to. I loved the stand of quaking aspen near the drainage ditch and the skeleton of an oak tree that I'd once pointed out to my father as a perfect perch for an owl, only to have a great horned swoop into its branches as I spoke. But these landmarks I treated as pace markers indicating how much of the walk was still to go. I could not understand what enraptured my father about a single patch of land.

Yet on those walks, my father's expertise entered me via a strange filial osmosis. I learned without knowing and knew seemingly without learning as plant names and shapes snagged in my mind. One day, as an adult, decades later, I took a walk on a path blossoming with tiny white dancers. I did not recognize the flowers or the leaves, yet from somewhere within me the word *honeysuckle* floated to the surface. It was the most useful gift my father gave me on those evening walks. There were many others.