

# Father's Days

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*Translated by Arienne van den Dries*

Wyoming, May 17th – May 21st

May 17 (1)

Father loved driving. And although Mother drove even faster than he did, if for no other reason than to pull another disappearing act, he was the one who bragged about his driving style. He claimed, for example, that it took him only two and a half hours to drive from Ghent, where my half-brother Ron was studying, to Denemarken, the hamlet in Groningen we lived in—a distance of more than 250 miles at an average of 105 miles per hour. We had visited Ron, who wanted to become a veterinarian on the island of Ameland, but never did, just as Father never became its mayor. I remember the icy student hovel and the heated discussions about the symphonic rock on the turntable. Father was a jazz and blues purist and couldn't stand Genesis.<sup>1</sup> It must have been December 1979—I was four. The entire family—Father's second—had spent the night at a Holiday Inn, and the next day we'd toured a fortress containing various torture instruments that branded themselves in my memory. And then came the drive, long past midnight, over empty roads. Whenever I looked out of our house in Denemarken and saw Father racing along the Slochter Canal, he had to slam on the brakes hundreds of yards before the turnoff, so he must

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<sup>1</sup> He was friends with Harry Muskee and jazz pianist Roelof Stalknecht and allegedly played the clarinet, like his hero Acker Bilk, though I never heard him play a single note.

have topped 105 mph that night too. But surely there must have been curves, traffic lights and pit stops? How can I untangle the truth from the tall tales?

I remember that trip—I think—but not the speed he prided himself on. I do know that my only sister at the time was sitting in the front seat on Mother’s lap—Mother, who has refused to wear a seatbelt her entire life, because you’re better off dead than crippled, and who the hell wants to follow rules? I remember dragging along my stuffed dog, which was bigger than I was, the smell of Father’s non-filter Caballeros, and the bouquet of cigarette butts growing out of the ashtray, which would have been more befitting of his grave than the flowers that were waiting in the wings of time.

### May 17 (2)

I think a lot about my father these days. It’s May 17th, the day before the anniversary of his death, and I now have the opportunity, more than in previous years, to contemplate that rift in time. The endless driving inherent in an American road trip offers me that opportunity. I’ve left the Black Hills of South Dakota behind and have crossed into Wyoming, six times the size of the Netherlands, with the same population as The Hague. The rolling-hilled emptiness is a relief after the hordes of tourists at Mount Rushmore. I surrender to the call of the Great Wide Open, my self-imposed exile from everyday life. After Newcastle I venture off onto the 450 West, which crosses Thunder Basin National Grassland, an undulating carpet of treeless green. The landscape’s few vertical features are all manmade: fences, rusty silos, telephone poles, electricity pylons and coal-mining structures. Number of cities: zero. I pass a BLAST AREA, where signs warn against dangerous orange fumes, but the sky is a dazzling blue, the vast expanse enveloped in a post-nuclear stillness. The hours and miles glide by and I follow the yellow line that divides the road and draws me towards the horizon.

It took a long time before I got around to getting my driver’s license—I had convinced myself that driving a car was bourgeois. But maybe I just didn’t want to admit that I came from a long line of drivers and that I was born for the road. When asked, I replied that I was a dreamer, doomed to get killed in a car accident, like pretty boy James Dean.<sup>2</sup> During my first American journey, following the trail of Jack

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<sup>2</sup> The twenty-four-year-old actor died on 30 September 1955 near Cholame, California, when his Porsche 550 Spyder (serial number 0055!) crashed into another car at the junction between Highway 46 and Highway 41, now known as the James Dean Memorial Junction. He was on his way to a car race and had been fined two hours earlier for speeding. There are persistent rumors that his silver-colored “Little Bastard” was cursed. The wrecked car was sold to George Barris, a custom-car builder, who sold on the parts. Cars with parts from the “Little Bastard” were involved in a variety of serious accidents. The body of the “Little Bastard” later disappeared without a trace.

Kerouac's *On the Road*, I rode shotgun. The King of the Beat Generation didn't have a driver's license either, which meant he had to rely on Greyhound buses, Neal Cassady's stolen cars or passers-by who dared to pick up an asphalt junkie with Bensedrine eyes—in those days I was still able to justify my shortcomings. But as the years went by, my feeling of guilt grew stronger. I had always gloried in my independence. So why did I let others drive me around?

And so it happened that one day in 2015, when I was standing by my own car on the ferry to Ameland, I had an epiphany: I am my father, the continuation of another person in a new body. In a flash, I saw him vividly: a forty-something-year-old behind the wheel of a Citroën 2CV van, with one hand loosely holding the wheel and his elbow resting on the rolled-down window. I heard Sniff, our Great Dane, whimpering softly in the trailer. I saw Father's beard and glasses, his corduroy trousers with patches on the knees, the stocky body that had seemed so huge. And here I was, about to turn forty myself, a fact I was going to celebrate in a big way on Ameland in defiance of my true feelings: fear and embarrassment. A forty-year-old, oh my God... My father never reached the end of that decade. It wouldn't be long before I would outlive him, but then again maybe not.

Am I wearing my final skin?

May 17 (3)

To be honest, I have no idea of who my father was. Or almost none. As a result I have no idea of what a father is. Or almost none.

May 17 (4)

I have no idea of what a father is. I know what the word means—a man who has one or more children; an ancestor; a founder—but I have too little experience with the de facto meaning of the word. To me, it connotes a negative space. Father, *noun*: he who is not there.

Once, when I was in a restaurant in Amsterdam, I saw a man at a nearby table having dinner with his son. The son, in his twenties, was a photoshopped version of the father, in his sixties, though the youngster's hipster beard had not yet been streaked with grey and his complexion had not yet turned the tell-tale yellow of the hardened smoker. They had the same eyes and moved with a similar ease, as comfortable in their bodies as in a pair of old jeans. The table wobbled, the wine waltzed. What were

they exchanging? Memories? Ideas about the world, about life? Or were they putting on a show of immutability, of immortality, under the guise of small talk?

I was fascinated by the dynamics between the two diners, even though it made my head feel as heavy as a wet sneaker. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't picture myself as either the son or his begetter. So perhaps I don't know what a son is either, in the sense of a boy who lives in a father's slipstream.

May 17 (5)

There's hardly any traffic on the 450. For the last fifty miles, all I've seen is one lone school bus, a couple of big rigs and the pickup coated in mud that's been on my tail for ages. Only the area cleared by the windshield wipers is visible, and it's too dark inside to be able to see if the driver is a man or a demon. I slow to a crawl and the beast roars past me.

I stop a few times to make a sandwich or take a picture. Everywhere I look, I see a hushed land beneath a big sky. In the west, the sun sinks towards the blazing horizon—a doomfire. In the east, a first star, a shepherd's light, pierces the dimming blue. How many of such skies are bestowed upon a human being in a lifetime? Much fewer than we, in all our invincibility, think possible. I get my acoustic guitar out of the trunk and, sitting on the hood, search for chords to match a melody that came to me while I was driving. I fiddle around until it sort of works. Then I drive on, with my notebook on the steering wheel, searching for words. *"Is this the final skin / that I'm allowed to wear? / that I'm allowed to care for? / my God, I'm really scared."* And I am, I admit it.

May 17 (6)

Still on the 450. I'm almost out of gas and there's not a station in sight. I should have studied that damned road atlas more closely! Chances are I won't make it to the next town—assuming there is one. My belief in such a thing is dwindling rapidly. I'm going nowhere in a dying vehicle... I turn off the A/C, let a big rig pass me and try to follow in its wake. Time seems to be on constant repeat. I think of Mother, who made a game of driving on Empty; of Hans and Raoul, who rolled down a mountain with me when the engine stalled, passing a widow's veil of melting snow, until we finally reached Lake Tahoe; of Judith, who sat for hours in stony silence as we cruised down the German *Autobahn*. I search for a similar memory of my father, but the image that springs to mind is that of an overheated engine: the car was smoking and he was smoking too.

He was no doubt proud that his driving style had exhausted the machinery. “Outta the way, everyone, so *me* can get by!” he’d shout from behind the wheel as he hit the accelerator. In my autobiographical novel *Children of the Savage Land*, that expression was changed at my editor’s request into “so *we* can get by” for fear that it would look too much like a typo. I regret that change now, because mutilating his language means mutilating him.

And so in America, as the sun goes down beyond the High Plains and I sit behind the sweat-soaked steering wheel with *all that road going*, I think of the young father I never knew, and of my old father, who was likewise unimaginably young. Now that I’m nearing his age, I understand just how young he was. How unfinished. *And nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old.* Sure, Jack, but my father wasn’t even given the chance. Still, this also meant that he was spared those rags.

May 17 (7)

I’ve been thinking about writing his biography for a while now. I’ve researched the public records, but something keeps stopping me from contacting the people who knew him well. He’s a mythical figure, born of a handful of images and semi-apocryphal tales, and polished by memory. The truth will violate my truth—*crumbling to pieces under the knife edge of mere fact*, in the words of Adrienne Rich—and I don’t know if I want that.

In *Children of the Savage Land* those scanty images are archived in a chapter called “Scenes from Before the Rift.” Such as images of him digging a pond on a bucking excavator, arranging a tour of the bakery because I’d said I wanted to become a baker, showing me a picture of a pixie that only he had seen. Of him going into total stress the winter we got snowed in because he hadn’t ordered enough cigarettes from the farmer who’d plowed his way to the supermarket on his tractor. Of our going to look at a seventeenth-century whaling-captain’s house on Ameland, because he was sure he was going to be appointed mayor there. I remember the editorial office of *’t Bokkeblad*, the local newspaper he put out. And the dark room. I remember him ranting about the government’s plundering of Groningen’s natural-gas reserves, and his fervent wish that Groningen would declare its independence from the Netherlands and become the Kuwait of the West.

One chapter, ten pages out of three hundred and thirty. That’s all the space I gave him.

May 17 (8)

Ten pages out of three hundred and thirty. Pages like these:

There was a coffee stain on the wall, where Father had smashed his mug. There was a crack in the tiled floor of the playroom, where he'd pulled down a cupboard full of toys. One time he drove the car through the garage door, which left us without a garage. Another time he smashed up my mother's precious china—a soup tureen, a gravy boat, the floral-relief plates—and the police had to come and calm him down. He slept four hours a night. People loved him and quarreled with him. He drank too much, he wolfed down hamburgers and bacon and egg sandwiches, he smoked two packs of non-filter Caballeros a day. He worked too hard and he was hardly ever around. But when he was, he was the whole world. And yet he was slowly extinguishing himself as if he too were a cigarette.

He voted conservative.

He hated squatters.

He could never *not* express his opinion.

He was restless and there were other women.

Sometimes he hit us, but always on the rear end, which turned red with love.

There were days when he'd come home with a BMX bike for one of us. Or a carousel filled with toy cars. Such displays of largess would occur when a department store had gone bankrupt and he knew the people there. At other times we'd be down to our last cent. The money had been frittered away, squandered. Here's another example: once when my father was still working for the radio, he'd gone out of his way to help rescue a circus. The manager was so grateful that he gave him a cougar. The cougar slept in a cage and ate live chickens. But keeping a predator in a house full of children wasn't such a great idea, so even though it pained him, he had to give it back. And yet he and that cougar had been a perfect match.

I've heard the cougar story from more than one source, so there must have been some truth to it. In my mind, my father and the cougar are one: the predator symbolizes the man. And by extension, me, the cougar's son.

May 17 (9)

Rarely have I felt as relieved as I do when I drive into Wright, Wyoming. The Nissan rolls with fits and jerks onto the dusty site of the Sinclair gas station, a mechanical adolescent among macho pickup trucks. “You from back East?” the attendant asks, having cast a disparaging glance at my cloth cap and trendy sneakers. His superior grin is framed by a three-day beard. He himself has on a Cheyenne Mustangs cap.

Historically, the High Plains had been the hunting grounds of the Sioux and the Crow until the homesteaders arrived at the end of the nineteenth century, lured by the promise of cheap land. Wright was founded in 1911 by a family of that name who opened a post office there. The town is now home to around two thousand people, most of whom work for the Black Thunder coal mines, the most productive mines in the U.S. It’s a strange frontier town, looking as out of place amid the Nothingness as a moon base would be. The southern half consists of trailers and glorified shacks off a dirt road, but when I round a hill, I run into asphalt and a hesitant attempt at suburbia.

My dinner, at the restaurant next to Don’s supermarket, is a rubbery schnitzel served by a chinless kid with a second head of hair peeping up defiantly from the back of his collar. To avoid the stares of the McFat Family, I seek refuge at a corner table and in the pages of my notebook.

Father would have gotten along fine in this town, I think—he had the pioneering mentality that I lack. How else could a radical atheist have ended up buying a dilapidated cottage in the Groningen countryside, surrounded by fanatically religious farming families?<sup>3</sup> I remember that house, the first I ever lived in: the uneven floorboards, the splinters, the damp stains that scared me at night. Father had the house torn down and a larger one built, after which the woods grew bolder, wilder. His death catapulted that wilderness into a kind of metaphysical entity that nestled itself in his progeny. A *terrain vague*. In Wright he would undoubtedly have started a local newspaper, as he had in Groningen. He would have made friends and enemies—and cherished both. Perhaps he would have taken part in the local demolition derby, his head enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke.<sup>4</sup> “Outta the way, everyone, so *me* can get by!”

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<sup>3</sup> I read in various newspapers that in 1971 my father had tried to convince judicial authorities to prosecute P.J. Dorsman, a Dutch Reformed minister in the Bible Belt village of Staphorst, for advising his parishioners not to vaccinate their children, despite an outbreak of polio. The prosecutor rejected his plea on the grounds that the law did not require vaccination. Father always sided with the children and not the church.

<sup>4</sup> Early versions of demolition derbies were supposedly organized as far back as the 1930s to help reduce the number of surplus Model T Fords.

I like open spaces too, but I feel smothered by small towns like these, where the lack of culture reduces life to a stage play with an uninspired script. Still, these are not the only differences between my father and me. I drink with moderation, I don't smoke, I exercise. But I am a bad sleeper, and I have a nervous disposition. I'm gloomy too. Whether he was gloomy, legend doesn't say.

I don't want this place to stick to my clothes. So I drive on, into the night. It's forty-five minutes to Gillette.

May 18 (1)

I wake up from a dream and am lost for a moment. Where am I? I look for the window above my piano, but no, this is America, there's no piano here. Only when my cell phone lights up—4:52 AM, *Wednesday May 18*—to reveal my travel studio in eerie chiaroscuro, do I remember: I'm in the Country Inn Suites in Gillette, Wyoming, where I had recorded, sometime around midnight, the basic tracks for a song about Father. In the dream I was on the phone with my half-brother, talking about the havoc our anti-authoritarianism was creating in our professional lives. "Just like Dad," I said. "Haven't you heard the news?" he exclaimed. "Dad died last week!" I crumbled to pieces. "Hello?" a voice said on the other end of the line. "Are you still there?" I didn't answer. I couldn't, and the connection was broken. More telephone calls soon followed: condolences from total strangers and a reporter from the regional paper who needed a quote for the obituary. What kind of father had he been? I stammered a few disconnected sentences and told him that I had to call my brother and sisters first. I dreaded having to do that. Until it slowly dawned on me that my father had left us thirty-three years ago. Surely he can't have died twice?