

The Burnie-Can

from *The Old Priest* by Anthony Wallace

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In the early summer of 1966 my grandmother captured a baby dinosaur, or maybe it was a fully grown dinosaur, just a small one. She trapped it under a clothes basket. It was early in the afternoon, just after lunch, and she and my mother were the only two people at home. It was a hot July day. My sister Ailie and I were off swimming at a nearby lake. My father and grandfather were both at their jobs, down at the Owens-Corning plant, working on their asbestosis. When the dinosaur arrived my grandmother was out in the back yard, taking laundry down off the line and folding it into a red plastic clothes basket. My mother was in the house, chain-smoking cigarettes and watching *Days of Our Lives*.

We all heard about it over dinner, and even though it was my grandmother who'd caught the dinosaur, it was my mother who began to tell the story, and I think the four of us who hadn't been there probably chalked the whole thing up to my mother's fondness for diet pills. In fact, there was a copy of *Reader's Digest* out in the living room with an article that my sister had urged my mother to read. The title of the article was "The Diet Pill Menace."

"I was in the house," my mother explained. "Nan was outside, folding the sheets. Then she came into the living room and said, 'I trapped a dinosaur under the clothes basket. Hurry up! I trapped a dinosaur under the clothes basket!'"

But when they lifted the clothes basket up the dinosaur ran away. Up to this point my mother told the story, and then they both began speaking at the same time, breaking in on each other's account of what the creature looked like and what had happened next.

"He was like a lizard but stood up on his hind legs," my grandmother told us, bending her hands at the wrist to illustrate a dinosaur standing up on its hind legs. "He looked over his shoulder at us and made this strange sound, like a roaring sound but small, then took off for the burnie-can." The burnie-can, I should explain, was a rusted oil drum that my grandfather used to burn things in, back in a time when burning things was an acceptable way of getting rid of them. There were holes and tears in the side of this can and toward the bottom, from repeated exposure to fire and the elements, and apparently the dinosaur ran in through one of those openings. "We didn't know what to do," my mother cut in. "The dinosaur was in the burnie-can!"

Little by little we got the story of how, with great caution, my mother and grandmother decided to overturn the burnie-can, clothes basket once more at the ready. But when they followed through with their plan, the dinosaur was gone.

No one that evening quite knew what to make of my mother and grandmother's story, and even my father, who had a mean streak and loved any opportunity to ridicule, was unusually reserved. Nobody, it was clear by the time the blueberry cobbler was on the table, knew what to say. As kids we were used to telling stories that had a heightened sense of what was possible. (One time, sitting alone in the basement, my sister Ailie swore she'd seen a small parade of ghosts, and ghosts of rabbits at that, spirits of dead animals that my grandfather had hunted and then skinned at a long low porcelain sink.) That the grownups were telling a story this strange and improbable was exhilarating and frightening at the same time.

Several times more the ladies alternated with their descriptions of the prehistoric creature. It stood on two feet, but it had another set of little feet that it kept tucked close to its puffed-up chest. It was as green, my grandmother added, as the ginger ale bottle that was sitting on the table in front of us. It had a long toothy snout and a tiny red tongue that lashed out in quick, furtive movements, and a long slender tail that it seemed to use not only for balance but for propulsion.

Finally my sister went into the living room and returned with the volume of an encyclopedia that identified the dinosaur. It was a miniature *tyrannosaurus rex*. The illustration in the reference book seemed to be all the proof the ladies needed that what they had seen was real. Everybody got up from the table except for my grandfather, who sat there for a long time by himself, pipe in one hand, the silver-plated lighter my grandmother had given him that past Christmas in the other.

My mother put the dishes into the sink. My grandmother went into the living room to lie down. My sister and I wandered around the house and then out into the yard. My father took the shotgun from the basement and went out back. What he did, on balmy summer evenings such as this one, was to sit out in a lawn chair and shoot rats as they emerged at dusk from the woodpile on the far side of the property. He got a kick out of it, and nobody in the family seemed very eager to speak up for the rats, and in those days neighbors didn't seem to object very much to a man shooting off a sixteen-gauge shotgun in his own back yard. He'd take a can of beer out with him, a pack of Lucky Strikes rolled up in the sleeve of his T-shirt, and the blasting would be done in an hour. He killed them with my grandfather's shotgun, a pump-action Browning that is no longer in the family. The rats exploded off the top of the pile, and each time my father hit one he laughed and cried out in the manner of Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*: "Mother of mercy! Is this the end of Rico?"

Sometimes my sister and I would sit on the back porch and watch him, sheets of Kleenex wadded in our ears and drooping down on our shoulders so that we looked, as my mother liked to observe, like a pair of precious bunnyrabbits. Other times, if we had a little money, we'd walk the two blocks to the Dairy Queen. In either case the shooting was over by nine

o'clock, at which time we had to get ready for bed, school night or not. The procedure was that we'd get in our pajamas, each one of us in our own bed, and then my father would come in and spank us. The spankings varied with my father's mood, but we had one every night, as he liked to say, whether we needed it or not. He used his right hand, and sometimes his calfskin belt, doubled up to create a lot of noise and a little sharp sting through the thin summer bedclothes. When it was over Ailie and I would both be bawling our heads off and laughing simultaneously, a sort of emotional confusion that was a cross between the shame that accompanies senseless violence and the exhilarating silliness stirred up by a pillow fight.

My father would wish us good night and my mother would come and tuck us in, following which we might coax a story out of our grandfather. On this night my grandfather told us that there was no story that could top the one we'd heard at dinner, so the lights were turned out and we drifted off to sleep, as I'd like to remember, dreaming of bottle-green, fiery-tongued dinosaurs.

This day that I've described would be unimportant, of course, if not for the dinosaur story, which stayed in the family the way a good service of dishes does, or a first class recipe, and was trotted out on special occasions. When enough time had elapsed that people would not be quite so prone to point fingers or talk behind their hands, first my father and then various family members told the story in front of friends and neighbors, and in time the story got around and acquired something of a reputation. People seemed to like the idea that such a thing was possible; my mother and grandmother were known to be simple, truthful women, and there really was the possibility that they'd seen a dinosaur, or at least a creature that exactly resembled one. People also had the added enjoyment of thinking up various explanations. It was a lizard, or something that had escaped from a pet shop. Then too, maybe it really was a dinosaur.

Invariably there also followed the story of my father's scheme of capturing the dinosaur and getting rich in some way by his ownership of it. He had, later that evening when we were fast asleep, read the description in the encyclopedia, which said that Mr. Tyrannosaurus Rex was a carnivore, a meat eater. My father reasoned that the dead rats by the woodpile would be too much for the little fellow to resist, and that if he just kept his eyes open he could capture an early retirement with the possibility of an appearance on Johnny Carson or Merv Griffin. He even devised a snare, using an old crab trap, but it never came to anything.

The mysterious sighting, though, worked no end of change on our little family. For one thing, my father didn't come in to spank us any longer. Neither my sister nor I ever had the urge to ask him why. And my mother seemed to get off the diet pills, too, though she got fat as a result—for a time she was plump as Santa, and just as jolly—and spent a lot of time baking. Pop, always nice, was still nice. He still shot rabbits now and then, but only he and my father would eat them. My grandmother, who'd passed a

good part of the last twenty years in a prone position, rising only for the few household chores she liked to do, started to get up and around more. Her only son had died in the Second World War, I should mention, and it had ruined her outlook. The sighting of the dinosaur was somehow restorative, though nobody ever figured out how.

This is a story of my childhood and how I remember my childhood. Happy times went on in this way for quite some time; in my heart I chalked it up to the good luck brought to our house by the dinosaur. The other shoe did drop, though, and that also had to do with the dinosaur. It started to get around that my father was having an affair with the girl who worked the register at the auto parts store where he spent a fair amount of his leisure time. My mother confided this to me, suddenly, in the middle of a silent August afternoon; the only thing you could hear was the sound of the cicadas, buzzing like an electrical current in the overgrown buttonwood trees. She wanted to know if I thought she should leave my father because of it, and even though it came as a small surprise that an adult should be asking a child for advice on a subject like this, it wasn't so difficult for me to answer that she should. I think I shocked her, as if she suddenly saw a whole new part of me she'd never dreamed existed. "You can do better," I told her in a world-weary voice. "You can do a whole lot better."

She never did, though, and my father's affairs and my mother's forbearance in the face of them became sort of legendary around town. Women who would not have normally had anything to do with him lined up, one after the other; it was as if he'd suddenly discovered a magical power and become someone else, someone he had been all the while trying to become and then had, at the very last, become. Most people, I've found, do not become what they have all the while secretly planned on becoming, and it tickled my father that he'd been able to get it right. This too gave my mother a more interesting role, which she cherished; she found herself all the more valuable because she was the one who could lay legitimate claim to a man who'd ended up, by the mid Seventies, wearing Italian sports jackets and driving a two-tone aqua and pearl '63 *Thunderbird* convertible.

If all this seems a bit unsavory, I should add that he also became a kind and loving man, and never hit us again, and never shot another rat again, as far as I know. Another person had emerged, though he came into the world with a fairly high price tag dangling from his sleeve.

The next incident that makes up this rather loosely constructed narrative has to do with a man who used to come to the house once each year, either on his way to or returning from a lake in Canada where he said the most beautiful and delicious trout in the world existed. This man, whose name was Robert Welsh, had been my Uncle Buddy's bunkmate in the Marines, in 1943, in the Second World War. They had been eighteen-year-old kids together, and had gone through boot camp together, and had been shipped to the Pacific Theater together. At some juncture in their brief friendship

they had also struck the promise that if one of them died the other would look in on the dead soldier's parents. My Uncle Buddy, as it turns out, was the one who'd perished, in a matter of a few months, in some skirmish in the South Pacific on a spit of sand that didn't even have a name.

The day the Government man came to the house is also an important story. It took place on another one of those silent sweltering August afternoons. The man in his dark suit came into the driveway in his polished dark car, its bulbous chrome fenders gleaming. Pop was sitting out on the front porch counting the minutes until it would be dinnertime while Nan was out in the kitchen, placing a blueberry cobbler into the pie safe. My mother was upstairs, writing a letter to her brother on stationery she'd bought that very afternoon. The writing paper was powder blue and featured a little reproduction of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the very top of the page, the part where God and Man touch the ends of their fingers together.

In the mythology of our family the Government man comes into the house and Nan drops the pie before he can even say what he came to our house to say. Pop shows him out. There is a heavy crashing and Mom in her room knows what has happened without having to go downstairs to ask any questions. Meanwhile, there has been a fly buzzing furiously at the top corner of her open window. She takes her shoes off and stands up on the chair. She traps the fly by rolling the writing paper into a cone pressed against the glass, climbs down from the chair, and sits once more at her writing desk; then, the fly in her fingers, she pulls its wings off one at a time. In this way, my mother told me one day when we were having one of our secret conversations, she sat by herself in her little upstairs room, watching the wingless fly wander the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel for a few minutes before balling up the sheet of stationery and wadding it into the back of her desk drawer.

No one said anything, about my Uncle Buddy or anything else. My grandmother took to her bed for many years. My grandfather doted on his wife, and on his little girl. A few years later my mother brought home a taxi driver she'd met on her way home from school. Not even a year later they were married, and at approximately the same time I was born.

But I see I've wandered away from the subject of my Uncle Buddy's bunkmate Robert Welsh. He came by our house each year, on his way either to or from Quebec Province, and I watched him come and go, and enjoyed it, from an early age. It was something to look forward to, like a national holiday, for Robert Welsh always carried in the backseat of his car extravagant gifts of whiskey and cigarettes, chocolate bars and frivolous toys and novelties presented in fancy packages at a time of year when Christmas seemed as if it would never come again—the seasons of childhood are so long and slow. I remember him in automobiles of different makes and models, always new, always well cared for, coming to our house always with different women, I don't think ever the same one twice, some of them girlfriends and some wives, albeit extremely short-term wives, in about equal

proportion. He had fast cars and convertible cars and long cars and expensive serious cars. He was at first handsome and glib and then filled out and a bit preposterous and then finally alcoholic and flush-faced and tired-seeming, suffering from angina. It was always a point of interest to see what he would be like on his next visit, what the woman would be like, what the car would be like.

The only thing that never varied was that he would always have to tell the story of the day my Uncle Buddy was blown up. There was the usual bourbon-induced rollercoaster of emotions that led up to this point, and this point in the visit to him possibly was the point. Everybody saw that he had to tell this story, that he'd come to our house in order to tell it, and continued to come in order to tell it, again and again. There was a beach on some tiny nameless Pacific island and a chaotic landing on that beach and then a lot of smoke and men screaming and shouting and then a heavy deep blast like someone had punched him in the stomach and then he was up and running with my uncle only he'd gotten it backwards, or not quite right: it was just Uncle Buddy's leg he was carrying under his arm. That was the last Robert saw of my Uncle Buddy, his right leg, his green pant-leg, his high black boot with its metal-tipped lace.

We knew when Robert told the story of the leg that he would be gone the next morning, and he always was, until the next year when he would come to our house without warning and then leave once more without warning. It was the dinosaur, once again, that seemed to change things, because Nan after all that time had finally begun to get up and around, and many years later, on her deathbed, she still wondered if she had done the right thing by telling Robert Welsh never to come to her house again, he was no longer welcome, she was tired of seeing ghosts.

All this has an end, the story has an end, if not exactly a plot. Our lives went on the way lives go on. My father became more profligate, though everyone always forgave him because he had found this nice way to be. It's what everybody said about my father, that he had a nice way about him. My mother meanwhile went back to the prescription drugs and the soap operas, cigarettes and speed all the livelong afternoon. She was a very speedy ma, right up until the day when she discovered Valium, that is, at which time she became a very languorous ma. My sister and I grew up all the same. Pop was good to us, and took us out in the pine forest for long walks with his beagles, and he even stopped shooting rabbits when my sister Ailie finally asked him to. My grandmother continued to spoil my mother and treat her like a child; in this the story of Uncle Buddy also figures. When Nan disappeared my mother disappeared as well, at least for a time.

That was on the day of my grandmother's funeral. She'd had a long and bitter fight with emphysema, sneaking cigarettes to the very end. She was the only woman my grandfather had ever developed an interest in, as he occasionally enjoyed pointing out to us, ever since the day he'd spotted her out in a field, all by herself, picking dahlias. She was not doing this for

beauty or for idleness; she was getting paid one cent per dahlia. I like to think of two people who met and fell in love in summertime, not too long after the First World War, in a dahlia field. I like to think of a time when there was such a thing as a dahlia field. Maybe there still is, but I've never seen one.

So this story starts someplace in the early twenties, with two people standing talking in a dahlia field, and this story ends on the day of my grandmother's funeral in the late autumn or early winter of 1985. There are some stops along the way, like the incident that happened perhaps ten years after the courtship in the dahlia field. Pop owned land, with his two brothers, and they split it up and the three of them went to work, building three houses from one set of plans. My grandfather, in this way, came to own his house free and clear, and settled there, and fathered first a son and then a daughter. When the Great Depression arrived there was a man in the town named Ward Lyons who was going around trying to buy up everything cheap. This kind of character is a cliché in the movies, but in the real life of my grandfather and our little town he made a very good and original villain. When he came to our house Pop greeted him with a loaded shotgun—the same one that has been featured elsewhere in this story—a gallon of gasoline, and these words: "Ward, I will burn this house to the ground before you ever get your hands on it." This was a story told often in the family because my grandfather had never acted that way before, and he had never acted that way again. An important moment in his life had come and he'd responded to it honorably. He wouldn't tell the story himself but my grandmother told it for him, many times, complete with dialogue and stage directions. It was repeated much more than the dinosaur story, but it was similar, in a way. It was a story about something that mattered.

There are other stories that could be included, stories about things that mattered, that matter still; the last one, as I've already said, takes place on the day of my grandmother's funeral. My mother during this time was admitted into the hospital for certain tendencies she'd been exhibiting, tendencies which featured sleeping pills and razor blades, for the reason that after all those years my father had finally left her. So it was only the three of us who went in the rented black limousine to the cemetery, my grandfather in the front seat, my sister and me in the back. We watched the coffin as it was lowered, and we tossed red roses after it as it went deeper into the ground. It was a misty, colorless afternoon, the first day of December. On the other side of the graveyard, perched rather dramatically on a wheel-rutted hill, my father sat by himself in his '63 *Thunderbird*, smoking a cigarette and wearing a trench coat and a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. He was not mocking us, I don't think; my grandmother had been good to him and he was, after his own fashion, paying his last respects. At least that is what I told myself and that is what I tried to tell my sister Ailie. We did our best to keep my grandfather from noticing him, but of course he did.

"Wait on that," Pop said, pulling ferociously at his necktie and

generally losing patience with the stiffness of his black polyester suit. "Just wait on that."

Nothing more was said. After the funeral we went back to the house and had a country-style buffet supper. Women from our town brought delicious things to eat in covered dishes and gigantic Tupperware bowls, deviled eggs and cold fried chicken and baked bean casseroles topped with slabs of crispy bacon. The house was as full of life and companionship as I have ever seen it, friends and neighbors and family members with connections going back generations, in many of those people the characteristic chin of my grandmother's side, the small frame and thinning hair of my grandfather's. Pop passed the afternoon in his sitting room, framed by his collection of pipes arranged in built-in shelves on the wall behind his La-Z-Boy, simultaneously telling stories of rabbit hunts and chicken fights and his two dead brothers who'd distilled moonshine, and watching his favorite show, *The Wheel of Fortune*. People do not think of these activities as associated with New Jersey (hunting rabbits and fighting roosters and mixing up moonshine, I mean: not watching *The Wheel of Fortune*) but there are many things about southern New Jersey that are on the verge of being forgotten. A lot of us are country people and we were raised country; now all the farmland is gone, or most of it, and an awful lot of the pine forest too, and the state of New Jersey seems to be not much more than a gigantic strip mall. But on that day my grandfather advanced the opinion that life is not just what you see in front of you but everything that has happened. History, in his view, was taking place all at once. It's probably because of this that the dinosaur came up, and even though everybody present had heard the account in all its variations, no one objected to hearing it again. It was like those stories of the Jersey Devil, only better, because of the unimpeachable character of the witnesses, and even after all that time people talked and argued about the dinosaur as if the sighting had taken place that very afternoon, and there were even a few other people, as it turned out, who claimed to have gotten a glimpse of it.

That story, plus a few too many highballs, conspired to put my grandfather in a certain mood. When all the friends and relatives finally left, including my sister Ailie, who was then just out of high school and living crosstown with her boyfriend Artie—a twisty young dice dealer from Atlantic City who had convinced Ailie to give up her scholarship to NYU for a life of PASSION—Pop took me down into the basement, where we stood for a moment at the long low sink at which he'd skinned and gutted the rabbits. He told me that he'd salvaged that sink when the asbestos company he'd worked for was getting ready to remodel their lavatory: the rabbit sink, it turned out, had been a men's urinal. He showed me also that he'd saved the collars of all his beagles and had them in a velvet-lined Christmas box. Next to that, tangled together inside a Folger's can, were the metal spurs that the high-spirited young men had attached to the feet of the fighting roosters. From there we went to the brass-trimmed foot locker that contained the flag taken from Uncle Buddy's coffin, and also his dress blues, and his letters, and

the journal he'd kept in the short space between boot camp and the end of his life.

Also in the basement, suspended on two mismatched coat hooks above the sink, was Pop's sixteen gauge shotgun, the one he'd used to hunt rabbits and game birds, the one my father had used to exterminate rats. This gun my grandfather loaded, his fingers feeding the red shells one at a time into the underside of the rifle, for he wanted to go out back and have a little fun of an autumn evening. He wanted to blow off a little steam, he explained, and talk some more about the olden days.

It's a strange accident that, as we went up the steps and then out onto the back porch, my father was just stepping out of his car and then for a moment as if to regain his balance standing by the burnie-can with a long-handled white wicker basketful of dahlias, and just as strange that even as he opened his mouth as if to greet us my grandfather pulled the trigger of the shotgun. No words were exchanged. Earlier that day, as I'd helped him on with his suit coat, Pop told me that his only regret was letting my father into his house. "I knowed what he was," Pop kept insisting to me. "I knowed what he was." What my father was back then, we all knew, was a taxi driver who liked to troll the side streets for high school girls. He'd finally gotten one and, typical of his lot, had cast her aside, even though it had taken him more than twenty years to do it. Pop was defending his daughter's lost honor, you might say, regardless of how long it had taken for her to lose it or for him to get around to defending it.

My grandfather's eyesight was poor, but he did manage to clip my father in the arm that held the basket of flowers. You can imagine the terrible ordeal that followed, legal and otherwise, so I won't bother to go into all that here. It's a mess at the end, a king-sized mess, as the story of any family would be, I suppose, if you only had enough information, and if the story only went on long enough. The only thing that might somehow square everything up, of course, would be the return of the dinosaur. Perhaps that's what you've been waiting for, and I'm happy not to disappoint you, because within the collection of stories that makes up the history of my family the dinosaur does make a final, unforgettable appearance. My father and grandfather saw it, I saw it, we all saw it. And to this very day we tell people about the spilled basket of parti-colored flowers, the paint-peeled house, the front yard with its rusted, dented can—my grandfather with the shotgun in his hand and my poor father rolling and thrashing on the ground, his spiffy new car still idling—a million-year-old creature emerging from a jagged tear at the bottom of the can, stopping just long enough for us to see that he is, in fact, a dinosaur, then moving off with great dignity across the open field.

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