

Pounding Basil

Katy Giebenhain

Mom jumps when the telephone rings in the kitchen, though I can barely hear it over the roar of the pounder. The TV screen is a mass of static. Bo and Luke Duke have just disappeared in the middle of a getaway. I desperately wish we could have just one car or truck door that stuck shut so we had to climb in the window like they do on *Dukes of Hazzard*. Basil wears blue Superman pajamas. Mom safety-pinned a red bath towel to his shoulders so he has a cape, too. The red and yellow S is getting the snot beat out of it. When Basil stretches his arms out it looks as if he could fly across the carpet right into the doors of the wood stove, where he aims them to give Dad more maneuvering room. The pounder is Dad's creation. Since Basil needs to cough up the mucous in his lungs, at least twice a day, and since it is really arduous to always whack him with cupped hands all over the front and back and sides of his chest, Dad has come up with a solution which is effective, if not loud. Dad is a solution man. He is part rancher and part high-school algebra teacher. So he went to his favorite hardware store (where the owner calls me "Mr. M," and Dad "M Junior,") and bought a bright orange Black & Decker jigsaw. He replaced the blade with a leather cup. When you turn the saw on and Basil lies on his foam rubber cushion, shaped like a big slice of cheese, it pounds his ribs and his lungs until he coughs and coughs.

When the coughing is done, Basil sucks both thumbs and rolls over, looking at the TV, which is back to normal for a minute while the pounder is switched off. Then comes the other side. More static. After pounding each section of his lungs, the pounder is switched off again for some handwork, which sounds like a horse trotting when I close my eyes. I know how to do this, since Mom showed me how to hold your hand with the thumb pressed against the knuckle of your pointer finger and the palm making a sort of hollowed triangle. Tonight I really can hear a horse trotting, since the windows are open and Buddy and Ramone have been moved to the front pasture with some of the cows. Maybe Nainsi's playing with them. She's not barking, though. They are all up near the fence to avoid the big sprinklers Dad likes setting up to keep the clover and grass moist. This is only a problem in the summer because where we live it rains bloody all the time says my grandfather. The sprinkler sound is much nicer than the real rain sound (in my opinion). He also calls it

the incredible nonstop rain, and the Jesus-Christ-will-it-never-end rain and the holy-mother-of-God-sponge-country-we-landed-in rain.

Mom and Dad do not talk this way about rain, or anything else. They also don't have a mini-bar like grandfather, which I think is wonderful because they have those on TV, too. Grandfather's bar is not as fancy, though. His furniture is what Mom calls Danish Modern, which means plain. I can't wait until I am old enough to try things out of this mini-bar. I would like to have my own right now in my bedroom with an ice bucket and a row of 7-Up bottles and Kool-Aid and striped straws and powdered lemonade. My own mini-bar would also be useful for playing flight attendant.

Sometimes Basil plays passengers while I pretend to pour him drinks and answer questions about how high we are flying, and where to find the life preservers. For such a little kid he is very good at playing so many different kinds of people. Sometimes he wears hats or Mom's poncho or Grandfather's old sunglasses to make it more realistic. I wear a name tag and Vaseline on my lips. My friends like Basil. They think he is funny, especially Mac and Trevor. They know from his coughing that Basil needs the treatment. Mom and Dad handle all of this as the normal routine. Dad especially says words like routine. Even the enzyme capsules that Basil has to take before eating are routine. He can swallow an entire handful all at once. It is impressive. When he was a baby he almost died. It was pneumonia. They didn't know he had cystic fibrosis, only that something was wrong.

For a while Basil had to sleep in a mist tent. This was a clear plastic tent with a flap over his bed. Dad set it up. Then there was a little beige machine which made fog. It had a plastic hose attached to a mask for his nose and mouth. Sometimes I would crawl in with him to say good night. I liked breathing the mist. This machine was much, much quieter than the pounder. No comparison. When Grandfather first saw the mist machine and the tent and bedroom filling up with mist he asked where the Hound of the Baskervilles was.

We took the pounder camping last year. Dad borrowed the Murrays' Volkswagen and drove to a campground that had a building for laundry and making phone calls. They also had outlets so mom plugged the pounder in and gave Basil his treatment. Basil didn't use the mist machine then, but I had a dream that the whole canopy filled with mist, and the gold curtains on the windows started sparkling and waving back and forth between the fishing poles, and that the glove compartment had a secret mini-bar which folded down for making drinks. It was a very mysterious dream, like *Land of the Lost* without dinosaurs.

Grandfather is also named Basil. He lives even further away from town than we do, but he can make it from his driveway to ours in eleven minutes flat. My brother is his namesake. I am named after Dad's best buddy who died in a lightning storm a long, long time ago when his horse ran through the trees. There's a picture of him and that horse upstairs in the hallway. When I play flight attendant I wear Grandfather's name tag from the war box which says McIverson. These things belonged to Grandfather when he was in the Pacific, enough said child. Passengers call me Mr. McIverson and like my drinks better than any of the other flight attendants' drinks. They like the way I give them the foil package of peanuts lined up just so with the napkin. I stapled gray construction paper into a package this size with real peanuts I took from Dad's jar in the workshop. I decorated the package with the symbol for my airline, which is called Gloriful Mists, Canadian Airlines International.

Basil has played Superman aboard the airplane. Only Clark Kent would fly in a normal airplane, of course. But when Basil is not feeling well he can keep his cape on. I pull the curtain separating him from the other passengers. I tell no one that the real Superman is on board. I am very good at zipping my lips in the line of duty.

Grandfather asks why I don't play pilot or mechanic if I'm so taken with planes and the like. Mom bristles and tells him his opinions are his opinions and that's enough. When she says this, she stands up straight as a rail and is nearly as tall as Grandfather. Then he repeats well he's a good soccer player. Yes he is. A good soccer player and that's the truth. What does that have to do with anything?

One night last week Mom and Dad woke us both up and carried us into the living room, not the family room. The living room has the striped sofa and examples of Grandfather's photographs. Mom is careful to frame them all the same way. Basil was on this sofa with his cape mashed behind his shoulders and his eyes closed. Mom and Dad sat on the floor looking up at us.

Why were they on the floor? Mom started talking and she leaned her head to the side a little bit like she does when she is explaining something. It turned out that our yellow lab, Nainsi, had been hit by a car out on the road and killed. Mom said the driver, a cardiologist of all things, got out and did his very best to save her, but it was no use and she knows better than to be going off the property, etc.

Mom and Dad looked sort of strange. I was really tired. I wanted to go back to bed and I didn't really like Nainsi that much anyway. I like the horses and cows much better. Nainsi was okay. I was sorry that she died. I just didn't know what to say. Then I realized that I was the oldest brother.

I had to do something, and whatever I did, Basil would more or less follow. Mom's eyes got really big, and she kept tilting her head and pressing her hands flat together between her knees. I concentrated as hard as I could. I prayed, too, and managed to cry until snot ran down my upper lip. This was gross, but I pretended not to notice. I was too busy saying, "Naaaiinnssiiii pooor Naaaiinnssiiii."

Basil cried too, and coughed and coughed, hitting his fists against his pajama legs. He was great. Dramatic. I started to feel guilty because he really seemed sad. Then I started crying for real because I didn't want Basil to miss Nainsi. I felt awful. Mom and Dad looked at us with their eyebrows smushed together, very concentrated. Mom's eyes were teary too. She seemed more relaxed, though. She picked up Basil and carried him to bed patting his back saying, "Basilbee, Basilbee, it's okay." Dad walked me back to my room and said, "I'll leave the door open a crack, son."

When Basil and mom go away to the hospital, Dad and I tend to go to Grandfather's for dinner. He makes pork chops on the grill and macaroni salad that is yellow and very tasty. I eat a mountain of it. After dinner Grandfather likes to watch the cows from the deck while he has a gin and tonic. Once I brought a pack of candy cigarettes that my friend Lotti gave me. I sat in the lawn chair sucking on two cigarettes and relacing my tennis shoes. The crop duster was finishing his passes over the neighbor's fields. Grandfather used to smoke skinny brown cigarettes. I don't remember this exactly, but I see them in the photo albums. Mom says he stopped smoking once they found out about Basil's CF. On the spot. He won't let another soul smoke on the property either. He told me if he ever, ever caught me smoking he would beat me to a bloody pulp.

This is just an expression. When Grandfather gets mad, the veins in his neck stick out and his skin turns red as a beet. His bark is worse than his bite, is what Mom says, always has been. She also says grown up men get angry when they are not in control and that sickness is something that is especially hard for them to deal with. Mom talks to me as if I am older than I am. My airline will offer candy cigarettes to the passengers, but never real ones.

Dad and Grandfather hardly talk. When they do it is usually about ordering parts for the Massey Fergusson or what to do about the slugs in the garden or which of the Larson boys will inherit the mobile slaughtering business. It is like two people talking at the same time instead of two people talking to each other. They have what Mom calls intrinsical mutual respect for one another. Tonight Basil is already in bed. Mom tucks me in. She leaves the

window open. The sprinklers in the pasture seem particularly loud. It sounds like fifty of them out there pumping in circles, like guns firing water. Rain Birds spray slowly in one direction and then chut-chut-chut fast coming back. Basil's window must be open too. I hear coughing. I think about the moles in the pasture being soaked with the sprinklers.

Our moles dig many tunnels and leave mounds of dirt by the openings. A couple of times the neighbor kids came over and we ran a garden hose into a few of the openings. Dad gave us all pointed shovels. We stood by the mole holes waiting for them to come out so we could kill them and they wouldn't ruin the pasture. We got a few. It seemed like an awful lot of time to spend for a couple of old moles. There were always more.

I think about the moles now, under the wet ground, with the Rain Birds chut-chut-chutting over their heads. I think about Basil's lungs and imagine thousands of tunnels going every which way through them and the slime that does not totally go away, ever. I imagine him grown-up, piloting a plane for my airline, which would have both passenger planes and crop dusters. Basil will make an excellent pilot. Basil's plane will be custom-painted, blue and red (of course). It will have a special compartment for the pounder, and before he takes off, his dog (he should always have a dog) can come say good-bye, if he feels like it. Mom and Dad and Grandfather can fly as often as they want to. I will see to this. ☞