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>READY TO GO

Illustration by
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Charles Bethea How It's Done

FATHERS AND
SONS WHO TRAVEL
TOGETHER UNRAVEL
TOGETHER—MOSTLY
IN A GOOD WAY

Woodford Reserve makes a mighty fine bourbon with a not-unpleasant hint of leather and tobacco in the nose. That's what the connoisseur to my right slurred, anyway. I sniffed mine, tipped it back, swirled it around, and waited. It could have been Old Crow. I set the tumbler down and nudged my father through a side door of the convention center, into the warm Bardstown, Kentucky, night.

We'd been liberally sampling the open bars at the Kentucky Bourbon Festival's annual black-tie gala for over an hour, and, though he wouldn't admit it, the old man needed to chase his tenth tasting with a little fresh air. Just moments ago, he'd nearly spilled mash down a passing blouse. It struck me as the perfect time to ask a few questions—the kind we're always saving up for that elusive *right moment*—away from the crowd.

I was drunk too, of course.

There, outside, stood Sandy Noe, wife of Frederick Booker Noe III, whose great grandfather Jim Beam is the namesake behind the family bourbon (now the world's most popular), which was first crafted in the foothills of Kentucky back in 1788. The Noes were our hosts for the weekend, which I saw as a chance to reconnect with my dad while finding out how he, the oenophile, would fare around unlimited whiskey. Fred had thrown his annual backyard Bourbon Festival barbecue the previous evening, announcing, between gulps of Knob Creek, "My goal is to kick Jack Daniel's ass." Dad looked on, amused, still warming up to his drink. Now, Mrs. Noe, a steely matron who'd presided over our relatively sober bourbon breakfast the previous morning at the historic Jim Beam home on North Third Street—bourbon's Stratford-upon-Avon—was trying to enjoy a quiet smoke.

The first lesson I'd long since learned while traveling with my father? A polite nod never suffices. "Son, watch how a gentleman lights a lady's cigarette," he said, initiating the oldest of paternal rites, which we often play out on the road: Show the son *how it's done*. Smiling at Mrs. Noe, he reached for the pink lighter emerging from her purse, and then for her hand: "Please, allow me." There was a brief look of alarm, and then, to her credit—and my great relief—she did. The fire took a moment to find its fuel (bourbon brings out the gentleman, not his dexterity), but as it did, Mrs. Noe smiled ever so slightly. It was the same smile I'd seen on the face of her wizened mother-in-law, Annis Noe, the night before, when my father had inadvertently referred to her equally wizened Jack Russell terrier as a Jack Daniel's terrier. The same smile I'd seen cross dozens of faces in dozens of places around the world, as I stood wincing next to my father, drink

in hand, doing what we've done best since I became an adult: bonding in foreign lands like we never quite could bond at home. All fathers and sons have their rituals, the activities that both familiarize and renew their relationship. Sharing hangovers in strange places, for better or worse, is ours.

I first got *whacked* (Dad's preferred expression for having one too many) with him when I was 12, on a couple of "educational" beers. "Better to learn with family than strangers," he told me. And I got really whacked at 15, on a trip to western North Carolina to scout for property—though I don't recall much scouting. We've since downed horseradish-infused vodka at Moscow's Hotel Metropol (clears the sinuses), lost our minds on orujo in Barcelona (missed the meeting the next day), sipped white lightning in Appalachia (give it a few minutes), and braved the pedicab-strewn streets of Saigon after too many "ba ba ba" beers (was that really a foot massage parlor?). Dad has been brewing spirits at home, in Atlanta, recently—with limited, but well-broadcast, success. I received a phone call about the first bottle of Bethea Vineyards produced that was potable. I reminded him that the package store was just down the street.

On three continents, through ten time zones and innumerable bottles of "your best local white," my father has shown me that the finest spirits and places become even finer when shared by a father and son. Sometimes it's awkward, usually it's endearing, but the intentions, and resulting buzz, are almost always good. To be sure, over the years I've heard him shout alcohol's praises and warn of its undertow, in word and in blunder. Through it all, he's been teaching me to live exuberantly—to drink it all in as it were.

So there we stood in Kentucky, on our first reunion trip that I'd planned myself, experiencing a rite of passage I hadn't anticipated. To wit, father outdrinks and outcharms his son, who rediscovers the boy in the old man. I don't know what exactly I'd wanted to ask him out there under the setting Kentucky sun, on yet another father-son foray into an uncharted wilderness. But I'd gotten an answer: Free spirits come in many forms.

I should have known. He's the guy who caught me smoking my first cigar in the backyard late one night during high school, and stood there smiling, contentedly—as only fathers can—while smoke poured from my pocket, where I'd reflexively stuck it when I saw him at the door. My face turned brighter than the embers. "Take the cigar out of your pocket, son," he said. "It's gonna burn a hole in your pants." Then, there on the back patio, we shared what remained of the moment—and the cigar—just as we did outside the gala. ☺