

Carl

M-4

Memories of my grandfather Carl exist as shards of irreverence and fun. In the day-to-day responsibilities of holding a job and providing for his family, Carl was a bit of a ne'er-do-well. As a grandfather, however, he was a tremendous playmate.

Carl dressed in beautiful suits that draped his long, languid frame. He wore his hat at a rakish angle and sang with a beautiful baritone voice that must have melted the corset off my grandmother. After serving in World War I, Carl failed to find a lick of honest work, he drank too much, told charming stories, and declined to take seriously anything that wasn't steeped in pleasure. In a perfect illustration of his bias against responsibility, he sent a telegram to my grandmother from a poker game two hundred miles from home. It read, "Missed the train today and tomorrow. Be home Friday."

My grandmother Marian was a jaw-dropping beauty with skills as a choral director and the cocktail habits of an Episcopalian. She was as radiant as any Hollywood star when she wasn't worried raw about Carl's myriad shortcomings.

Carl's legacy to me was his playfulness. When I was four or five, we'd sit together on the curb in front of the hardware store where I would guess the color of an M&M concealed in his soft, labor-free hands while he told me nonsense that I took as wisdom. He'd say, "Cows that graze on hillsides have longer legs on the downhill side of their bodies so that they don't tumble over." He was also a genius at making me feel okay about being a bouncy irritant to the polite congregants of Trinity Episcopal Church. Years later I realized that Carl liked being responsible for me on Sundays because when I could no longer sit still, it liberated both of us from the service. I remember several Sundays sitting on the back porch of the church with Carl, a Chesterfield in his hand, as he chatted amiably with me. It was his job to entertain, but

perhaps I was there to keep him out of trouble too. As we stood in the warm California sun, hymns wafting out the window, Carl sang along at a volume suggesting that he found immense joy in our banishment from Sunday's proceedings. His failure to sing the same lyrics as the choir and congregation was, I believed, an absence of mind. I understood only much later that Carl was having fun balancing some unnamed score with his bride in the choir loft.

When I graduated to sticking it out for a whole service, it was Carl and me, sitting side by side, his hand on my bouncy leg, doing our best to behave. I would gape in awe when he offered editorial commentary on the content of the homily. There was sure to be a well-timed "I doubt that," or a "That just doesn't seem possible." At the mention of John the Baptist, he informed me with great seriousness that "old John" was an admiral in the Lord's navy. His verbal gems shattered like broken china on the concentrated silence particular to Sunday services.

One of Carl's favorite dishes was Boston baked beans. These were often accompanied by a canned, molasses-rich, raisin-filled brown bread that we slathered with butter. One Sunday morning, Carl served this breakfast to my little sister, mother, grandmother, and me. Church was in a couple of hours and he seemed unusually pleased with himself to have gotten the jump on making breakfast—a rare effort. My grandmother left shortly after she ate to lead the choir through the early service. The rest of us took our time and wandered off at a leisurely gait for the 10:15 service, walking off our breakfast, delighting in the fresh air.

Once seated in church, Carl's ability to make me laugh acted as a comic contagion to which my sister and mother were terribly vulnerable. Not long after the service began, Carl excused himself from our pew. On his way out, he bent over to sniff a plastic flower in the large, round hat of an equally large, round woman in front of us. Carl feigned delirium at the aroma of the artificial flower and winked at me—a gesture that made my mother rue the day any of us were born. Carl's wink set off a stifled giggle in me that resulted in

a single, loud report from my backside, which was perfectly planted at an angle for maximum amplification on the oaken pew. Well, my sister knew comedy when she heard it, and she let loose with a string of giggles and an audible report of her own. A vicious cycle of toots and giggles followed.

There comes a moment in one's adult life during which one abstains from the egregious nature of flatulence firing off the tone-enhancing surface of a wooden bench. Sadly for my mother, this was not the moment. Refreshed with a baked-bean breakfast and surrounded by her children and the many congregants who had known her since her infancy, she loosed her own cavalcade of not-so-subtle giggles and reverberant effervescence.

As my poor, red-faced mother grabbed my sister and me by the hand and hustled us out of the impressive acoustic of the Episcopal church, a trail of giggles and atomized baked beans accompanied us along the length of the nave. Outside, Carl stood grinning. Patting me on the back, he asked if we weren't out awfully early. Mom thought that perhaps we'd be best served by walking home before the congregation came out.

Not long after that, Carl died. It may have been his only way of permanently getting out of going to church, and I remain grateful that I was never enthusiastically encouraged to return to church after baked bean Sunday. But without Carl, what would have been the point?