**The General Mysterium**

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There is a yellowed picture of my father as a toddler, squatting

Hands reaching out for the old farm dog—some pointy eared shepherd mix—

With a gigantic grin on his face.

It’s the happiest I’ve ever seen him.

I imagine as a baby my father smelled like the general mysterium

Of all babies—sweetened unformed ego, talc, and a touch of stewed-fruit vomit.

But as an adult he smelled like a combustible combination of The Right Look

Hairspray, Vitalis hair oil and Old Spice deodorant.

Whisky and coffee and cigarettes, which I would later try to live on exclusively

As if the diet had been decreed as an evidence-based salvific.

At seven, and barely unstinking of mysterium myself, I was pretty sure

Of two things: I would marry my father and our song

Would be Wille Nelson’s Don’t Get Around Much Anymore.

When my mother would visit my aunt in Georgia we ate

(once we’d devoured her premade casserole and the dishes sat, stacked

Speckled with dried food, precarious in the kitchen sink)

Meals purchased entirely from the corner 7-11. Red Hots and chips

And hot dogs fried in whole sticks of butter off Chinet plates but

When the hot dogs were gone, we’d drive to the Hukilau

Where the arched bridge covered in musty thin carpet

Over a tiny green pond filled with face-sized turtles and a fist

Full of tangy-smelling copper pennies to wish on

Was a dream come true.

Murals of Polynesian beaches complete with palm trees

Smoldering sunsets and women in grass skirts were lit in a dazzling

Rotation of pink and green lights like a G-rated rave.

Scalded green maraschino cherries on sticks, blue rocks on fire

And chicken teriyaki strips the length of a horse’s tongue.

We always got a booth.

On the way home, my belly stretched around a pu pu platter

My father replete with several tall cylindrical cups of rum and juice

Shaped like totem poles, I’d watch the Brobdingnagian hood

Of the baby blue Cadillac list across the yellow divider and back

As if we were passengers who suddenly woke to find ourselves

On an unmanned ship

Blinking through a fog of Marlboro Red, drifting

In the vague direction of home only by the grace of the sea

And her unconscious, rhythmic push toward destination or destiny.

Even back then home and death felt like words for the same thing.

Explaining my buy-one-get-one-free years of agoraphobia

And suicidal ideation.

Explanation, but not in the way you can explain

To a therapist who asks, apologetically, after assessing your polite posture

And educational background

Any self-harm? I have to ask

While you laugh derisively and shake your head

Twisting the bangle bracelets that cover the scabbed tracks

Where the week prior after a particularly heinous fight with your husband

—the early days of your marriage, in the vainglorious bombasticity

Of broken dishes and ultimatums—

You raked your fingernails into your own flesh

And dragged them like a trapped wild animal.

There was one Hukilau night, no mother to shush me back to bed

Wandering the darkened house with the firstfruits of a stomachache

Digestive tract ballooning with salted meat and sweetened coconut milk

I found my father asleep at his desk, cigarette falling out of his hand

Blackly singeing the golden rug of the wood paneled den.

I picked the smoke up.

My first time holding a lit cigarette, feeling the heat of its fiery tip

Like some diminishing fairy wand

And when my father sensed my pajama footed presence

Through the miasma of his curative-induced sleep he smiled

And I smiled too and then I said what if the house burns down

And his smile got bigger—almost as big

As the smile in the picture with the dog—and he said

As if it was the most obvious thing in the world—

I’d save you.

My father’s father shot the old dog from the picture

Because the animal got into the neighbor’s chicken coop

And made a ruckus.

But I had a fat cocker spaniel named Mr. Sherlock Nubbin Bear Wog Holmes

Who was my best friend and wore a bow tie

Was allowed to chew all the expensive furniture legs

Fart like a freight train and eat sirloin cheeseburgers for dinner

And on whom we spent thousands of dollars for joint replacement surgery

So that he could live comfortably until he was 18 when he died

Of what we think was the oblivion of utter contentment.

So anyway my father did save me

Because he lifted, upon coming home

Mr. Sherlock Nubbin Bear Wog Holmes into his arms and rocked him

Like a small child, eyes glossy with held back tears

And I would grin and grin, watching

Knowing there were many worse ways a childhood could go up in flames

Than the one in which our bodies would be released back to dust

Leaving only whatever made those tears and those grins

Freeing them, finally, to the estates and offices of ether and magic.