

Ordinary People

by Brian Joseph Davis

Pa never wanted to hurt people. Before his execution at the hands of the state of Texas or afterwards, when he came to be the focus of the only death penalty case that turned into a custody case that—my lawyer reckons so—turned into a right-to-die case.

The media tagged Pa as “the abnormal brain” in this whole Reanimator of the Rio Grande story, as it came to be known, but there was a man behind that brain. I know you expect a daughter to say so, but it was true.

Actually, there was a half dozen men behind that brain, or more specifically, parts of them. Back some time ago, Pa was arrested after his armed robbery of a Piggly Wiggly done went wronger than wrong can get. Two stockboys were shot and killed, their blood sprayed onto jars of pickled hotdogs, I was told.

Ma and me hadn't seen Pa in years at the time of the robbery. We heard he tweaked out on meth after getting laid off from a tool and die shop.

He was never the same after Vietnam, Ma recalled. Until he was drafted, he was as gentle as sweet grass. After he shipped home and they hitched up, he started boozing and she booted him out not long after I came to be. It hurt her bad, she said many times, hand on heart, but she made the choice for my sakes.

Pa went to trial—against the public defender's wishes—pleading the mitigating circumstances of his methamphetamine addiction. The judge rewarded Pa with the death penalty. When Ma and I said goodbye to him the morning of his execution he seemed more tired than anything. “Ain't this a heap a cowshit I rolled in?” he tossed over his shoulder as the warden ushered us out. Those were Pa's last words to me. His final last words to those gathered, truth be told, were “This government can suck my West Texas dick. Y'all hear that.”

That was his way with words. So you can see why Ma and I were surprised that Pa bequeathed his body to medical research. He figured there might be something to glean from looking at his twaker's brain. "Probably look like an ol' dirty carburetor when those docs pull it out of my skull," Pa conjectured.

We mourned him, and moved on, hearing nothing until, well, until you did. Seems that the university doctor who took Pa's brain away that night used it as the final touch for an experiment as audacious as it was unholy. This doc went and made himself a patchwork monster man that he then—through a process the doc took to the grave with him—got all alive and like. The investigators figured the doc jumped it with a car battery, given the electrodes on the head of the monster. Upon waking from eternal sleep, this monster destroyed the doctor's lab, ripped the arms off the doc, took those arms and continued to beat him. The monster—oh hell, let's just start calling him Pa—then rampaged through the campus till he was taken down in a hail of bullets after he stomped his way through a die-in of students protesting this current war.

Pa—despite five hollow point shots—did not die for a second time. Guess 'cause the doc, sick sonobitch he was an' all, did do a bang up job. Give 'em that I will.

Ma and I ran down to the hospital where Pa was chained up. He didn't speak much, just growled like a sick dog. But one of the nurses, a kind woman, discovered that the music of Charlie Daniels soothed this creature whose very existence replied "tough titty" to the laws of nature.

"It is Pa!" Ma and I cried in joy while looking in through the glass window. Though he had a different face, younger, like someone from a catalogue, Pa loved Charlie Daniels.

"No, it's Josh," a woman said, walking up behind us and fighting for a look in through the window. "It's my husband's head. That's Josh."

The woman was Courtney Mellon-David, and clutching her side was her daughter Bethany—a bright and beautiful girl of five, no bigger than a thimble.

And damn if this isn't where this whole cockeyed story gets as complicated as the game of cricket. Not a month before this, Courtney's husband died of a heart attack, and too young if you ask me. Josh Mellon-David was the lead project manager of a wildly successful web startup. Josh was a charitable man, we heard, who walked many miles for cancers he would never live to get. At work he was respected, but not feared by those below him. And he loved Bethany. No matter how busy he was at work, he would commute home for her ballet recitals or swimming lessons before driving back into work in downtown Dallas.

Like my Pa, Josh willed all of his mortal remains to the embetterment of science. It was probably Josh's face—so JFK Jr. like—that moved that doctor to saw off his head and make it the vessel of my tweaker Pa's dirty ol' carburetor brain.

"It's Josh and I can prove it." Courtney held up the smallest iPod you did ever see. "Josh loved Feist."

Courtney went into the room, smiling and taking small steps towards Pa, holding up the white ear buds in her shaking hands. She put the buds to Pa's mismatched ears, just below his electrodes. Pa frowned and made a mewling sound. He screamed something bloody and swatted at his head. He bit the iPod in half and strained at his chains, one of them popping out of its wall mount. Courtney was a smart girl—educated at Columbia we later found out. She stayed calm and was able to turn the Charlie Daniels CD back on. Pa stopped his rampage, whimpered and swayed awkwardly to "Long Haired Country Boy."

Courtney came out of the room weeping and Ma embraced her. I wished to say it stayed that cordial between us girls—two families now connected by this one act against nature. But it ended up back in the courts as we tried to figure out what took precedent in custody for the creature—the chicken, or the bucket the chicken resided in.

Actually, the first issue to be decided was whether the state of Texas was legally obligated to execute Pa again. We got hooked up, for free, with a sharp fellow from the Amnesty International. This

lawyer proved that “as you cannot convict a man twice for the same offense, you may not execute him twice.” Our lawyer also brought up—and this was risky considering our suit against Courtney—that there is possibly another life involved that could be affected. That of Josh's.

The judge threw his hands up, ultimately confounded by the philosophical entanglements. “Hell,” the judge decided. “He is hereby released jointly to the families in shared custody until court hears arguments.” That old judge brought down his gavel with a smirk that beamed I quit and I don't blame him.

While waiting for the custody hearing we shared Pa-Josh, as we agreed to call him. Ma and I felt fancy and hyphenated, just like our new kin. Ritalin helped Pa concentrate. Enough that he could move around town without shackles and do simple tasks. Sometimes Courtney and Bethany would pick Pa-Josh up at our little place. Bethany took awhile to warm up to him and had to be prodded by her mother. The papers made a lot out of Pa-Josh's fearsome countenance. His lopsided arms, and too small head—but let me correct one thing. He did not smell of the grave. Pa-Josh was harvested from lab quality cadavers only.

Sometimes we picked Pa-Josh up at the Mellon-David residence. While I didn't like to see Courtney swat smokes out of his mouth and admonish him, saying “Cigarettes. Bad. Fire. Bad,” her home was such a beautiful place, with its real wood and two TV and all, and those Gap clothes done made him look a lot more together. I felt something terrible bringing Pa-Josh back to our house which, no matter how hard we tried, could never look so clean as the Mellon-David's.

Though the man could smoke a Pall Mall in peace here.

Well, it was while he was visiting his other family when this story got as complicated as the Electoral College vote. Pa-Josh escorted Bethany to her swimming lessons and while the instructor was leading the other kids in leg kicking exercises Bethany floated off to the deep end and the poor girl, she sank. Pa-Josh wasn't too bright since his operation—that's what we took to telling the

neighbors—but he saw Bethany lying at the bottom of the deep end and did what needed to be done. He stepped into the pool and sank to the bottom too. He picked Bethany up and started walking his slow shuffling walk up the slope to the shallow end. At the crest he collapsed. Stupid thing forgot he couldn't breathe water. Bethany was revived by the lifeguard, but Pa-Josh, he never regained consciousness.

At the hospital Courtney and I stood over him. He looked as forlorn as the end of a TV movie, with those tubes doing his breathing. I looked towards Courtney and asked her, “Was Josh the kind of man who would want to be kept alive like this?”

“No.”

“Neither was my Pa.”

Courtney and I didn't discuss it. We just did it. Working quickly, turning machines off. Pa-Josh trembled and it was over. Well, over for Pa-Josh, rest his soul, or whatever car parts were in his chest.

Now Courtney and I are back in court, again, this time on the same side—as co-defendants.

Funny, you think those Christian folks would be happy to get rid of Pa-Josh, seeing as his existence kind of proved them all wrong. Nope. There they were, every day outside the courthouse brayin' with signs a saying, A man designed his body badly, but God designed his soul intelligently or No separation of God and monsters! They never had slogans for Pa the first time he done got pushed off this mortal sofa.

Ma's taking care of Bethany while Courtney and I are in the hoosegow so I guess we're kinda like a family now. Though I sometimes do think back upon Pa's final words to me.

No, not that guff about his West Texas dick. Rather, I think, Ain't this a heap a cowshit I rolled in?

