



the
Dead Mule
School of Southern Literature
ISSN 1535-8488
Published in The South, USA

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"No good Southern fiction is complete without a dead mule." –Valerie MacEwan, 1996

Essays / Memoirs

Cortney Cameron: Dads and Guitars

2016-10-01 by **DeadMule**

Southern Legitimacy Statement: I have lived in North Carolina since the turn of the new millennium. I eat Cajun fried chicken for at least one meal daily, have received live diddles in the mail, and secretly brewed wild blackberry wine in my closet as a teen. I earned my bachelor's in earth science from Duke University. I currently reside in Asheboro.

Dads and Guitars

I was a freshman in high school when I got my black Fender Stratocaster. My mom had forbidden me from getting an electric guitar on the grounds that they were too noisy, and I had never even touched a guitar, but she'd consider an acoustic. Fortunately, that's what a dad is for—understanding the importance of distortion. On October 21, 2004, he picked me up from school early. I was wearing a black skirt and black go-go boots. We went to the local pawn, and since it was my birthday, the salesperson even gave us a discount. We paid \$120 for the guitar and a cheap amp. We had lunch at Wendy's, back when they sold turkey sandwiches, and as soon as we got home, I plugged in outside and cranked up the amp, so the whole neighborhood could endure my screeching. The first song I learned was "I Wanna Rock" by Twisted Sister. For years, the sounds would echo through the hills. Eventually, I broke the amp, and the guitar strings would shock me when I used it. During a particularly painful zap, I threw the guitar in the gravel, dinging the shiny black paint. I was grateful when he bought me a new amp.

One day we were driving through the steep, twisty part of Mountain View Road, which loops through a valley. I was a junior going on senior and had started my college applications. "What do you want to be?" Dad asked. "A doctor," I said. I can count on one hand how many times I'd seen my dad disappointed on me, and with the rest of the fingers—three—how many times I'd seen him truly get angry with me. When I was nine or ten, I back-talked in front of my friend. When I was twelve or

times I'd seen him truly get angry with me. When I was nine or ten, I back-talked in front of my friend. When I was twelve or thirteen, I acted up in front of his dad. This time, I parroted somebody else's wishes in place of my own. "You can tell that to your mom and grandparents," he said, his face flushing, "but don't give me that shit. What do you want to be? A rock star? I'll be your band manager." That's the good thing about a dad. He actually, truly believes that you can be a rock star. Even if he comes into room one night, a little buzzed, to say you write great songs but, your talents being what they are, you should consider finding a singer. You laugh in agreement, because you already knew as much. Which brings me to the other good thing about a dad—he always wants to hear your songs. He always wants to hear you.

I practiced on the guitar every morning before the school bus came. On September 19, 2007, I was playing "Fire on the Mountain" by the Marshall Tucker Band. "Now my widow, she weeps by my grave." Dad asked me to replay the song. I was sixteen, which means, by the definition of that age in particular, I had reached maximum brat. I put the guitar down, protesting that I couldn't play until I changed the strings, but to do that, I needed the missing wire cutters. In the afternoon, he picked me up from an afterschool yearbook meeting. As I sat on the hood of the Bonneville, he asked me to take care of my brother and sister should anything happen to him. I laughed, because I knew that dads were invincible. We went inside, and he asked me to fold the laundry. I stomped into the utility room and slammed the dryer open—it was empty. Dad laughed at me, then asked if I would pick up my brother and sister from school. I glared. "You know I'm supposed to meet my friend at 4:30!" Dad laughed harder at his jokes. I'd been had again, and even I had to laugh. My friend and I ate at Bojangles; I ordered buffalo chicken bites.

That night, I went to bed early. Dad came into my room and asked if I wanted to help him find the wire cutters. He wanted to hear my music. Once more, I declined. Hours later, Mom shook me awake at three in the morning. "Your dad won't wake up. I need your help." I texted my friend to complain about being woken so early. Every time Dad had went to the hospital for chest pain, after all, he'd been fine. "We can't find anything wrong," the doctors said. Just a few months prior, I'd smuggled

him gas station snacks into the hospital an hour away in Winston-Salem, and in exchange, he'd given me cover to enjoy the city and stay out past my curfew. So there was no reason for me to worry, since I knew that dads were invincible—they had to be. A world without a dad was simply unthinkable, and a dad disappearing seemed as absurd to my teenage mind as the sun failing to rise. A former EMT Mom showed me how to rub my knuckles in Dad's sternum to try wake him while she

sun failing to rise. A former EMT, Mom showed me how to rub my knuckles in Dad's sternum to try wake him while she called the ambulance. He snored strangely. "Stridor," she said.

The stretcher struggled in and out of our house. I walked outside and watched the paramedics pump on Dad's chest in the back of their truck. When they noticed me, their faces couldn't lie, so they shut the doors. Mom followed them to the hospital. The phone rang. I went outside to scream so I wouldn't wake the kids up. But kids aren't stupid, and they found me on the porch.

A few hours later, when I walked into the kitchen, I noticed bright blue handles—the wire cutters—sitting on the counter. The moral of the story is this: even when Dad dies, he still thinks you're a rock star.

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