

NONFICTION FEATURE: “COUSIN MIKE: A MEMOIR BY DANIEL NESTER”

¹**Cousin Mike: Portrait Sketch**

The palms of his hands, a ring of pointy calluses,
which seem to end all the way up to where his
Popeye forearms meet his elbows.
In the mornings: The dings of shave-and-a-haircut-six-bits
on the side of his coffee mug with a spoon. Milk
and two sugars. Eggs, bacon, home fries.
His big square head, same as mine, same as his father’s.
A three-holed work belt draped over the bedroom door. The
threats with a fold and hard snap.
The draws of a black comb over his head. Cheek-slaps of
Old Spice in the morning. As he looks into the
steamed mirror: “You handsome devil.”
His briefcase, combination lock, his “important papers.”
His Jackie Gleason and Johnny Carson imitations to
counter quips from our mom—Ralph Kramden’s
“To the moon, Alice!” or a Carnac the Magnificent
comeback like “May the fleas of a thousand camels
infest your sister’s armpits,” respectively.
The bow-legged walk across the yard in work boots to his
car.
His striking resemblance, as a young man, to actor James
Garner.
The flat-top haircut. The raised eyebrow.
Giving my sister “the whisker treatment,” her laughing,
telling him to stop.
His Navy pea coat I wear through college.
The hair on his back. The hair on his arms. Again, the hair.

Cousin Mike’s Items of Interest, Enthusiasms, Preoccupations, c.1969-1985

At the Navy base: lighting farts, cutting other seaman’s
hair.

Puts sewing machine, which he buys so his wife could
make her own clothes, in hock to gas up their

¹ “Cousin Mike” is the nickname my immediate family uses when referring to Michael Nester, my estranged father. At times in the larger work, I express that I have drawn my father with a cartoonist’s hand, a caricature rather than a character sketch. All efforts have been remain loyal to biography and to history.

copper-colored '59 Impala to drive from Virginia to New Jersey.

Makes the eagle tattoo, which he gets on Cannery Row as a 14-year-old, flap its wings by flexing his right bicep. The design is the back of a dollar bill. The bald eagle heraldry, the *e pluribus unum*, olive branch and arrows in each claw, peace/war, out of many, one.

Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger*, Merle Haggard's "Big City," 8-track trucker songs compilations, Conway Twitty's "Tight Fittin' Jeans," Staff Sgt. Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Beret."

Reads *Choose Your Own Mantra*, written by "Lalita," to adopt "a mantra of opposite energy to neutralize negative energy."

Group Therapy, board game with personal questions and flashcards for "With It" and "Cop Out."

Risk, the "World Conquest Game." Favors the Europe-into-Urals-and-Yakutsk Strategy; never wins.

Corrects children's grammar: Cannot say "like." Cuts off children if they say the word in conversation. Example: "Well, Did you 'like go to the store' or did you 'go to the store'?"

Pastime: To drive past LIVE NUDE SEX SHOWS on the highway, honk horn at the men pulling out onto the road. We are all instructed to wave, greet the men with invented names: Uncle Louie! Johnny! Grandpop!

Southern Comfort and Coke.

Esperanto studies. Common exchange around house:

Kiel vi fartas?
(How are you?)

Fartas bona—dankon!
(I am good—thank you!) a

Whale-call cassettes, Gregorian chants.

Game for children: “Carrot.” Object: Stay as completely still as possible in backyard pool.

Homemade potato and raisin wine. Kits ordered from back of *The Mother Earth News*.

Biorhythm theory: Four family members trace charts of the physical, emotional, and intellectual waves of our month to come; make special note of “triple caution days” and “risky days.”

CB radio handle: “Hi-Test.”

Vitamin therapies: Bee pollen, lecithin, calcium.

Soldier of Fortune magazine. A poster of Afghani Freedom Fighters bayoneting Russian invaders tacked on wall in garage.

Wrist brace–supported sling shot, usually used for hunting, which shoots marble-sized steel balls. Ordered from an L.L. Bean catalog. Uses to shoot squirrels and occasionally watermelons.

At Ocean City, NJ boardwalk, words he has pressed onto t-shirt: “Klaatu barada nikto,” phrase uttered by alien robot in 1951 science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

The Christmas he decides to make his own liver pate, which, along with a Southern Comfort–spiked fruit punch, makes five members of my family vomit into the evening.

A “liverwurst ball,” which he concocts for another party. Also makes family members vomit.

A special mix of iodine, baby oil, and vitamin E, which he makes for my sister as she tries to get “The Ultimate Tan” one summer.

Cousin Mike’s Selected Get-rich-quick Schemes, 1969-1981

1967: Running a chinchilla farms in out of my parents’ one-bedroom apartment in Oceanview, Virginia.

This is prompted by reading article on the prices of chinchilla fur in a local newspaper. Plan never gets off ground.

1968: Selling large photo albums with padded covers, door to door, in the Virginia Beach area.

1969: Selling baby furniture, door to door. Same area as above.

1972: Selling vending machines, door to door. Training consists of memorizing sales spiel, the main component of which is to “symbolically break bread” with the prospective customer—in this case a sample of a cookie and a cracker from a vending machine. If the customer is not willing to break a cracker or cookie, the training materials asserted, you could pretty well assume the sale was in the dumpster.

1974: Selling round, concrete pool tables. This was an idea hatched up by a school friend of my mom’s named Beaver McDermott. Two other friends at the time, Freddie and Jimmie, along with my father, wanted in on this sure-fire plan. “It was Beaver’s sales spiel this time,” my mom tells me. The round, concrete pool tables, intended for outdoor use, are manufacture red for resort areas. Beaver’s crew is assigned by the company to the towns in and around Wildwood, NJ. Apparently they sold some, still part of the boardwalkscape today.

1976: Inspired by the men who were selling cans of beer at a Bicentennial Beach Boys concert on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum, my father decides that he, too, will sell beer at successive concerts for the same substantial mark-up. The next week, he arrives with a case of Budweiser cans on ice in his old navy duffel bag. The concert is a quiet, classical music event, sparsely attended. At the first shout of “cold beer here!” he is stopped by a Philly cop, who at once tells him to stop, and takes one of his beers.

c. 1977: Small investments in soybean stock, gold, life insurance.

c. 1978: Attends Glassboro State College on the G.I. Bill with ambitions to become a high school history teacher. Attends a half-semester for course in Western Civilization, and receives a grade of "Incomplete."

1978: Sells sales displays for "Personal Safety Shriek Alarms" at local retailers. After getting a good deal on wholesale gross of "Personal Safety Shriek Alarms," he approaches local merchants to sell display racks of these personal safety devices. On package: "Ear-piercing shriek will disorientate attackers and will provide valuable seconds for you to get away..."

1979: Sells boxes of meat, door to door. Buys cuts of meat at the Philadelphia waterfront, he later sells them to households in the richer neighborhoods in the Delaware Valley. There is a cassette tape in which my Uncle Tom, training my father for the job, role-plays as a customer who answers the door, with my father giving him his sales pitch. From the transcript:

MY FATHER
[knocking sound]
Hello. Is anyone there?

MY UNCLE TOM
[in old lady voice]
Yes, hello. Please hold on a minute. Yes, how may I help you?

MY FATHER
Well, ma'am, I sell premium cuts of meat to some of the local finer restaurants around here, and I have some extra inventory. I was wondering if I could show you some of my meat and, if you're interested, I could sell some of this to you just a little above cost.

MY UNCLE TOM
[in old lady voice]
That would be nice. What kind of meat do you have?

The meat scheme does not work out for my father, but does work out for my Uncle Tom for some years. Tom would go and make a living of meat-selling and, after the Philadelphia waterfront becomes too inconvenient for him to get his

supplies, he goes to the local discount stores (BJ's, Costco), packs into smaller, plain white boxes, sells them.

1979: United States Postal Service, weekend deliveries.

1980: Flirtations with joining the sales team of Herbalife, skin and health care products produced from aloe plants. Goes on Herbalife diet, grows aloe plants in bay window, rub cuttings on our skin to test the substance's efficacy.

"But the mind was always working," my mom tells me.

Cousin Mike Sayings, Advice c.1965-1985

"Once you get past Harrisburg, you're in America."

"Don't ever get in a fight with an old guy. They will kick your ass every time."

"If he's getting on my nerves, I must be getting on his nerves."

"Always get to work a half hour early. Get your coffee, sit down for awhile. Read the paper. Take a shit. Get yourself situated."

[Speaking of his children] "I won't have anything to do with them until I can have a complete, adult conversation with them."

Stanza from poem he often recites:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's
plains,*

*And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*

—from Rudyard Kipling's "The Young British Soldier"

"Of course you have good grades. Look at you, your mother, your father. You're from good, Aryan stock."

[Upon arriving at a family party] “Look at all these healthy white children. A beautiful sight.”

“Show me a man who doesn’t eat pussy, and I’ll take his wife away.”

“Everything you have learned today is incorrect.”

“What do you want me to do, Patty? Squat and shit money?”

“I hated teenagers when he was a teenager.”

1982: Three Plans and a Merle Haggard Song

It is around this time when my father calls up one trucking place for work and says his name is “Miguel Nester,” a Mexican version of himself, in the hope that he will be taken on as an Affirmative Action hire. Plan does not pan out.

Neither does the letter he sends to Vice President George H.W. Bush in 1982 to ask for a job drilling for oil at his son’s fledgling business ventures in Midland, Texas.

On the coffee table book around this time: *Clean Slate: A State-by-State Guide to Expunging an Arrest Record*.

Our unemployment theme song: Merle Haggard, “If We Can Make It Through December.”

1985: In My Room

A blue stripe painted on the wall not opposite my parents’ room.

In closet: Woven ties, leather ties, a piano key tie; pants with mesh sides, velcro snaps on the bottom; brown-gray shirt with epaulets on the shoulders as worn by Tom Selleck on *Magnum, P.I.*

Pictures of a moped, stolen out of a garage weeks after it was bought.

Wads of wet twenties after a day at the carwash.

Sparkomatic speakers at the ready for the day I'd
take over a car, any car.

Hand-me-down, all-in-one Emerson stereo:
Cassette, turntable, radio.

Cassette shelves bolted to the wall, shifted to keep
the collection alphabetical.

Semi-hollow body Rickenbacker copy with
sunburst finish.

Stickers ready to put inside my locker: Elvis
Costello, Queen, The Jam, R.E.M., Joe
Jackson.

A Mighty Mouse t-shirt bought from a store in the
Cherry Hill Mall called Heaven.

Stash of warm Old Milwaukee beer cans.

Red Ray Ban knock-off sunglasses.

Casio one-touch keyboard with drum machine.

Steno pads I hide under my bed. The Bible under
my bed. The *Playboys* under my bed. The
earplugs under my bed.

Cousin Mike End Credit Events, 1985–Present

Next plane flight Cousin Mike takes after leaving
family in 1985: Flies with sister to visit
distant ancestors in Baden-Württemberg, c.
1995.

c. 2002-present: Sends anti-immigration
protectionist emails to daughter, mostly
about Mexicans working in Arizona
illegally.

Last ten years as truck driver: Makes copper runs in a flatbed truck to Nogales, Mexico, up and back twice a day.

Signature karaoke song, according to Meri's visit in 2005: George Jones, "He Stopped Loving Her Today."

Karaoke song my sister does interpretive dance to on same visit to Arizona, 2005: Night Ranger, "Sister Christian." Afterwards, her father says: "You're your father's daughter; you're a troublemaker."

Dental work in Mexico, 2004-present: Shows up in special sterile room, gets work done, stays in hotel, then nurse visits next day.

Sister:
Dad, you had such great teeth, what happened?

Father:
I dunno. I dunno.

Sings praises of the VA hospital, Arizona.

Meri writes our father "letters and letters and letters" over 20 years, keeps them, then one day sends them all to him in a shoebox.

passed by dad in airport he looks so old
--

—text message from sister, May 2005

"Hey, dad had another round of heart attack(s) on Sunday. They operated and did bi-pass on Monday. I talked to him for a second last night and he sounds ok. He is at the VA hospital in Tucson. Just an update!!!"—email from sister, November 2006

Black-and-white snapshots sent in 1987, his guns and cigarettes on a table in his Tucson apartment; day spent shooting his automatic rifles in desert.

On the Praize.com website ("Find Christian Singles like you!"): 6FT 230LBS GREY HAIR BLUE EYES
RETIRED DIVORCED LIVE ALONE