

# No Means No

by Chris McCann

Had the bag boy begun his two-minute relationship with my father by saying something along the lines of, "May I roll your mechanically-separated, synthetically-preserved, steroid-dripping, heart-dissolving, cancer-baiting sustenance-in-a-cage-on-wheels out to your serial killer cargo van?" instead of, "Can I help you out to your car today, sir?" my father probably would have let out a tremendous, long-overdue guttural laugh, and their relationship just might have lasted a lifetime.

"No," my father replied, glaring down at the cart's handle, at the bag boy's hand on the handle—*touching my father's*.

John tolerates touching from exactly two groups of people: those handing him his change and members of his immediate family. The former a necessary evil of success, and the latter—as he puts it— "Part of the job." Previously rumored for generations but never confirmed, much like ball lightning, Roswell, yeti, I have finally witnessed this phenomenon—someone other than myself actually touching my father—with my own eyes, but only amongst his sisters and brothers. Aunts, Uncles, I think they call them? After being introduced to a boatload of McCanns recently, I am still struggling to correctly define what exactly a cousin is. It seems to be anyone with your last name that you don't recognize. Those other people in all the pictures.

Sincere apologies for my ignorance, but having a family is quite new (and news) to me. As a child, I often wondered if I wasn't so much born, as shat into a truck stop toilet along with yesterday's lunch somewhere in the '70s by some random dude strung out on good pot and bad acid; someone who had never seen the inside of a library, but possibly the backstage of Woodstock; someone who around the time he discovered the illicit beauty of Reaganomics had pulled me out of said toilet on a lark—an inconsequential bet he could then afford to make with himself that a grown man couldn't objectively evaluate his own feces with his own two hands—only to toss me back in.

And there by the grace of God would stay I, floating, waiting pa-

tiently until life caught up with him. Or maybe until he had garnered enough information about life to form a hypothesis as to how life *might* catch up with him. Or until he died. Or just maybe until we had a black president...

Semantics; now that I am rumored to have grown up, I have arrived at a much higher truth: I was a little harsh on my mother, very harsh on my father, and absolutely brutal on myself for existing as a result. I owe it to my mother, and to myself, to lend my existence a little more credence than some petty, obscure scatological metaphor.

The truth is, my father simply forgot to flush.

In the last month that I've spent with him—mostly snowbound in his Minnesota trailer that's older (and, amazingly, worse for the wear) than myself—I have opened up to the possibility that he's come around some in the ten years since we last spoke. This new hope didn't manifest without some hiccups of miscommunication along the way. Stepping off the plane with the most open, most willing of minds I'd mustered in decades of dissolution, I was arrested at baggage claim by just how nice, by just how accommodating, just how darn happy my father was to see me.

I suspected aliens.

Clarification would arrive on the ride home as he talked. And talked. Somewhere along the way, I couldn't help but wonder if his endgame wasn't to drive in a random direction, make his point, then turn around, haul me back to the airport and ship me back to Florida, both of us somehow atoned in the whitewash. I did retain that: he has cried "a million tears" over the "choices" he's made, and that they were "all the tears" he's "ever going to cry," and with this "newfound clarity," he's "officially" through "beating himself up" over these "things."

It used to be you couldn't have waterboarded a simple yes or no out of the man when it came to his past, so I listened patiently and duly front-filed his unsolicited, meandering confessional as an appendectomal apology of sorts. He was at least articulating some fashion of post-Clintonian emo-

tion as opposed to napalming small villages with it. Besides, I'd come to find comfort in viewing our decade-long incommunicado as a *de facto* peace treaty, one I'm sure we would both attest was a resounding success. That night, I was able to fall asleep only after promising myself that I would simply listen for as long as it took for my father to feel like he'd absolved himself. Peace, man. Groovy.

It's those times when he tries to coax from me his memory of all the good times we had—say, our trip to Disney World when I was eight—that the concept of peace more closely resembles that of Israel and Palestine. I find myself listening less, and—with increasing frequency and ferocity—reminding him of all the bad times we had, particularly when the subject of my now-deceased mother arises. This was his first wife after all, the woman whose jaw he once accidentally broke, or, as he wistfully described her recently, directly on the heels of my filling him in on the myriad horrific details surrounding her death: "the fuck of my life."

Thus from beyond the urn my mother surreptitiously catalyzes various "moments" between me and my father, most of which haven't been pretty, but therapy—my father's main selling point for luring me back into his life—isn't supposed to be, right? And it must be working, because despite our confrontations—the kind of which hampered our relationship for years, prior to these Asshole Accords—we usually manage to sit down and talk frankly about why we loathe each other.

Alas, someone's plane finally got accidentally shot down:

"Chris?"

"Yeah?"

"I want you to do something for me. For both of us."

"Torch the place. Collect the insurance. Bali."

"What?"

"Joke, Dad."

"Why is everything a joke to you?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to call me John from now on. Instead of...you know..."

"...What?"

"Dad."

He blinks at me. It occurred to me that a few seconds ago we were having dinner.

"It would help us along. Move us in the right direction."

I blink at him. No way he's serious. Wait—he's totally joking.

*Finally!* I laugh.

He doesn't.

"That way you could think of me as, you know, a friend. I think that would be healthy. If we saw each other as friends from now on."

I look down. Sigh. Look up.

"Are we breaking up?"

"This isn't a fucking joke, goddamnit! I'm sorry. Obviously this isn't working."

"Has it ever?"

"Friends, by definition, they can't be enemies, can they?"

Aliens. I was right. Aliens have abducted my father and replaced him with this...this...*thing*.

"Wait—we're enemies now?"

John picked up an errant swatch of burnt toast, mopped up what was left of runny egg yolks, some bacon crumbs, and then methodically squeegeed the entire plate with his index finger until the motherfucker was spotless.

I watched. Breathed. Counted to ten. Like we were taught.

"So I should categorically deny that you and I have ever had a past of any kind. This is what you're asking me to do."

"Forgive and forget. Wise words." A tiny bit of egg lands on my face as he says this.

"I have forgiven you. And I've apologized just as much."

"You have."

"But outside of a frontal lobotomy, how the hell am I supposed to just *forget* everything, Dad?"

He put his hand up.

"John."

Was this his endgame? No winners or losers here, just peace. Peace. A concept worth fighting for, no?

Though now longing for a hot shower date with a Brillo Pad, I shake his hand. *Nice to meet ya, John!*

To celebrate the new us, he proposes venturing out for a mid-winter ice cream. I will respectfully decline, give my newfound friend a hug, retreat to my bedroom, close the door, make sure to lock it, manage to squeeze out a tear or two, banks of snow will creep up the rotting trailer walls as winter marches on, the trailer will soon resemble a 1950s nuclear bunker, getting to the mailbox will require digging a cave, I will take long midnight walks in a T-shirt and shorts, turn around at some point, unsure of how far I've come, unsure of how I got here, scan dumbly for my tracks, hoping they've been

extra medium



erased, only to be disappointed each time. I will instead find my way back, numbed to the bone, and properly medicated by yet another experience which should have killed me.

Occasionally, John and I will hug following our spats. Is this friends thing working out? I will reserve judgment at least until spring, until I see just one sign of wildlife, a smart bird, a stupid squirrel. But what then? Will I go? Will I stay? Will I die in this bunker? Nuclear winter, indeed.

Alas, I am unable to recall a single instance prior to this week that my

father has hugged me, so if this is what progress feels like, I'll take it. "Part of the job."

Now if he would only stop referring to me as "son."

"No," my father replied, glaring down at the cart's handle, at the bag boy's hand on the handle—*touching my father's*.

It was here that all matter of time and space paused and stretched out like a rubber band. It was like watching an atom split in slo-mo on the Discovery Channel, while bracing for the inevitable cutaway to the organic fireball, the glorious afterglow of the mushroom cloud. Seconds became decades...

I didn't want to wait that long. My eyes darted toward the exit. *I'll just sprint. I'm a stranger here, no one will know...*

The bag boy, apparently deaf, politely nudged himself against my father and assumed control of the cart. I was too late.

The knuckles on my father's hand turned from cherry red to ghastly white as he squeezed the handle tighter—thereby preventing the bag boy from quitting his crappy customer service job and scurrying off into the night with our provisions.

"Let's try out that new Sureway store!"

Seven words I had hoped I would never hear from my father.

I was instantly consumed by the dread that sunk my heart a couple of weeks earlier upon learning via the local paper that the new Sureway store would strive for excellence with policies such as assisting every customer out to their car. Whether the customers wanted the help or not.

On paper this must have seemed like a swell idea, but the notion should have never made it out of the boardroom. Someone should have mentioned to the boss that there were enigmas like my father lurking out there, and to them this would be akin to going to McDonald's, placing your order, then having the clerk follow you out to your booth, sit down across from you, and hand-feed your cheeseburger and fries to you. Whether you wanted them to or not.

As they approached the exit, the bag boy addressed my father's message-sending grumblings, insisting, "Really, sir, I'm happy to!"

"You shouldn't be doing this," my father insisted back.

"Well, actually its part of the excellent customer service we provide here at Sureway," the bag boy beseeched, his voice squeaking an octave higher, "to—"

"To what? Harass the customers?!"

My father, quite possibly the least socially-conscious man on the planet (there simply is no wrong time or place for a man to belch or fart), reared this with both a wry, unctuous grin, and his signature concoction of earnest venom and ersatz jolliness. Solely meant to confuse the recipient, much like a peacock fanning out its legion of "eyes" when threatened, it forces the offender (however unwitting) to fight or flee.

On paper it's a swell idea, but let it be said that before you yourself attempt to entertain such heightened states of self-aggrandizing/-flagellating fuckyouness, its success is entirely dependent on the delivery. Should you not completely own it—which is to say that if you don't relish preying on another person's most nightmarish insecurities—at best it won't work, and you'll come across as nothing more than a moron, and if it does indeed land,

you will forever be embalmed by the recipient as a Major Fucking Asshole. You have to be okay with either outcome. Enter at your own peril, for it is an art, an art my father mastered long ago, probably soon after learning to walk.

He is the singular member of the family with this gift, or with any trait resembling meanness, really. Although the branches of the McCann tree span the country, they all still somehow manage to make time to spend with each other. They listen to each other, they are kind to each other, they laugh with each other, they cry with each other, they accept each other. They just love one another.

Who knew it was that easy? I am now proud to say, finally, that I belong to a family. A real family. A down-to-earth, well-adjusted, loving, functional, family.

You probably want to puke. That's okay, my father can't stand them, either. He wasn't about to join me at a recent impromptu family reunion in Minneapolis, where I was surprised with a three-course dinner, a cake decorated with a cartoonish image of Chris leaning over a pen and paper (nothing was written on the paper, most appropriately), greeting cards, and an untold amount of hugs and kisses from people, whom, for the most part, I could somehow remember.

Here lie my earliest, and best memories. Here in my trembling hand was the Polaroid of my mom in this same living room—vivacious, bubbling-with-life, 29 years-young Mom—sitting in the same armchair I was sitting in this moment, cradling me in her arms, gazing down at me, beaming as if I were the most precious, amazing thing she'd ever invented. Here was the first time I've allowed myself to cry in the presence of another, since she died five years ago. Here was proof that I was glowingly, unrepentantly happy, once.

Wild rumors had circulated about me over the years. Turns out I had become somewhat of a legend (much to my secret delight). Some had heard I was out in California, which I was for the last decade, until what I affectionately refer to as "The Big Meltdown." Most of my aughts were spent pinballing around L.A. between girlfriends, jobs, and drugs as I tried to make it as an actor, and when I failed at that, a screenwriter, and when I failed at that: "The Big Meltdown." Some had postulated that I might have stayed in New Orleans. Others suspected I was nearby, but refusing to contact anyone. Others were convinced I was dead. Not even my father knew where I was.

Late in the evening, minutes before he swung by to whisk me back

to his trailer, someone across the room asked me about John. Why wasn't he here?

The room fell quiet.

I told them exactly what he had instructed me to tell them. He told me they would understand.

I told them, "He just needed a day to be alone."

Everyone understood.

Like John, I was hoping the Bag Boy From Hell got the message, but he instead responded to my father's charge of harassment just as eagerly as it had been delivered: "No! To help!"

It's called "Minnesota nice," and it's not a myth. His is hardly an isolated case; politeness is actually on the books, here. While within the state's 86,000 square mile area should you happen to curse at someone in public, you can be cited on the spot and forced to appear before a judge. Now imagine for a moment just how much money one would need to procure in order to have a lawyer undertake at \$200 an hour the unenviable task of scouring countless volumes of legal precedence in hopes of proving judicious use of the word "fuck." Especially to a justice weaned from birth on milk, wheat, and corn. Good luck with that.

As a result, should someone mistakenly set your dog ablaze in a YouTube prank gone wrong, or should someone accidentally urinate on your face as you ate breakfast, people here, well, they shake hands and make up over such mere trivialities. They wave to you from their cars as they pass. They hold endless conversations in stores, in parking lots, on the sidewalks. They ask you how your day is going, and they really do want to know. Whether you want them to or not.

But here's the thing. Somewhere along the way, somewhere within those 86,000 square miles, you start to become the one waving first. You catch yourself smiling more often. You find yourself asking a complete stranger how their day is going. And you actually do want to know. Eventually, you manage to catch up with You: who you were before here, who you are now, who you can still become, regardless of how you got here, regardless of whether you stay or go. Life in Minnesota is a deep, peaceful sleep in and of itself, the kind of sleep most of us enjoy only on Sunday mornings when, upon waking, your dreams imperceptibly merge with reality and dance with you, without You, for the rest of the week, for the rest of your life. It's

always Sunday morning in Minnesota.

As they walked, the bag boy continued to smile, though nervous now, sensing a dilemma beyond his proportions, sensing my father's ego-torn anger—each now with *both* of their hands on the handle. Judging from the pale, pasty look on the kid's face as he glanced around hoping none of the managers would notice his inadequacy, this was now officially one of the scarier things he'd had to endure in his young life, something not unlike what the science fair winner must have felt when, upon a dare, he asked the homecoming queen to the prom: a warm, ticklish fluid coursing down his leg.

I wanted to inform my father of the article I'd read in the paper a couple of weeks ago about the new Sureway store, but at this point it wouldn't have mattered. For John this was now a matter of principle. I decided to fall behind and watch as the two—in a duel refereed by a confused, waffling electronic door—awkwardly tried to squeeze through the exit at once, half of me cringing, pretending to have nothing to do with this surly, burly old caveman, and the other half doing all he could to curb a tremendous, long-overdue guttural laugh. *Welcome to my world, kid.*

In John's world, it wouldn't have been worth your second glance should you enter Disney World's Main Street USA to find a man shaking his eight-year-old son's arm while informing him, "Listen to me you little cocksucker-motherfuckingsonofabitch, I will take you straight back to the hotel, pack your bags, and ship you straight back to your mother's. Is that what you want?"

That was indeed precisely what I wanted, but first, shouldn't we see Tomorrowland? How could we leave without seeing Tomorrowland?

As we continued toward the exit, I promised myself that if he were to let go of my arm—even for a second—I would peel off, disappear into the crowd, hide in some bushes overnight, emerge tomorrow, and live here, The Happiest Place On Earth, for the rest of my life.

But he never let go.

Emerging from Sureway I am blindsided by a savagely cold March gale that feels like shards of white-hot shrapnel expelled from a failing jet engine. I fumble blindly for a ski mask, pull it over my head, don my gloves,

rub my eyes until they're warm again, look up, and witness an old man and a young man, far away now, pushing a grocery cart across a frozen parking lot together through the snow, the wind, the night.

From this distance, from the exit, they almost look like father and son.