

5-1-2015

Mr. Davey, President of the World

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Recommended Citation

Hagerty, Keara (2015) "Mr. Davey, President of the World," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol3/iss2/15>

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KEARA HAGERTY

Mr. Davey, President of The World

There was a long dirt road that fell parallel to the edge of the farm. Neither his father nor his mother ever used it as it was the service road, designated for the farm hands and infrequent deliveries made to their house. The road was the closest thing to the outside world Davey could see from the sprawling acres and he watched it with fervor from the backyard in the sun and from the covered porch in the rain. His mother suffered from nervousness and so she spent the majority of her time watching Davey watch the road, calling from inside the house if he ventured past the fence and into the cow field. This was the farthest he could go while her eyes bore on him. The farm was in a secluded patch of Wyoming, too far from any town and too far from the small school for the bus to reach. His mother homeschooled him, skipping over math, global studies, and language, spending hours on religion, reading from dusty books she kept locked in a cupboard next to the stairs, allowing Davey thirty minutes of free time while she took a nap on the sofa in the front room, as prescribed by the doctor.

“Matthew: 13.” His mother struck a match, letting the end of her cigarette burn, folding in on itself between her pink lips. Her blue eyes were intense and unblinking.

Davey looked around the room. When he was younger he had enjoyed the Bible, fascinated by the plagues, Moses, Eden, and Jesus. The years of memorization had taken the enjoyment out of the tales, which felt stale and robotic as he recited them.

“That’s the parable of the sower.”

“Good. Do you remember what it means?” Davey’s mother took a long sip of her iced tea, the glass fogging with the mixture of hot breath and ice.

Davey nodded. “A man’s reception of God’s Word is determined by the condition of his heart.”

“Amen. Now go play.”

Davey made his way up the steps to the porch, skipping over the last one, which had become rotten with water from the snow that past winter. His legs ached with puberty, growing so rapidly he half expected his bones to break through his skin. The house had fallen into disrepair in the last few years from a combination of the weather, money troubles, and his father’s frequent trips across state to look for better land. Davey remembered the hopeful conversations once tossed between his parents like coins in a well, plans to leave the farm in search of better land before the start of the next season, which came and went year in and year out. From his spot on the steps Davey watched the last farm hand, Trevor, feeding the cows at their bushel. They pushed with their noses, greedily lapping at the hay with purple tongues until he couldn’t tell one from the other.

The sun bore down enough to make the early spring air bearable and cast patches of warm greenery on the field beyond the dirt road. Twenty-six acres, only a third of which he had explored. From inside the house, Davey could hear his mother snoring sharply, as if someone had just surprised her. He walked to the edge of the fence before kicking off his brown leather shoes, knowing his mother would spy any dirt on them from a mile away. The ground was moist and dry all at the same time and Davey winced as he walked through the field, knowing that cow shit lurked beneath the milk thistles and grass. Halfway between the house and the road Davey turned around. He thought he heard his mother, but it was impossible to hear anything over the satisfied sounds of the cows feasting. He reached out to touch one of them as he walked past, the hide wincing as he brushed it. From behind the bushel Davey could hear someone coming. He crouched down until his small body was hidden amongst the herd, too busy to acknowledge his presence. Trevor set down two buckets of water next to the cow, only feet away from Davey.

“Move, go on,” Trevor called. “Let me get in here you fat heifers.” He tossed the water sloppily into the trough behind the hay, bits of water hitting Davey in the face. He knew Trevor would tell his mother where he had been; he took any excuse to talk to her. Davey would watch his eyes flit up and down his mother’s body until she excused herself from the conversation.

“Your mother is a fine lady, you hear me?” Trevor would say as he made his way back to the barn. “A real fine woman.” Davey knew his mother was a beautiful woman; her clear blue eyes and sunflower yellow hair had been the envy of all the women in the last town. She hadn’t wanted to move out to the farm when his father came back from the war, but there was no arguing with him—stoic and unnerving in his distance, they packed up and followed his dreams of isolation.

Davey waited until Trevor’s footsteps were too far to hear and he slowly began making his way toward the dirt road. The fence at the edge of the field was rusted and his shirt, a red and white striped crew neck, ripped at the seam as he crouched underneath it.

“Shit.” Davey sucked in his breath quickly, sure that his mother, Jesus, and the rest of the God-fearing county of Washakie had heard him. If he turned around now he would have enough time to sneak back into the house and change before his mother awoke, but instead he passed under the fence and onto the road. The dirt felt velvety under his feet and Davey marveled at how narrow the road looked close up, how small his house looked from where he stood now. There were only a few feet between him and the edge of the woods and so he walked toward them, cautiously at first, but then quickly, as if they were calling to him.

He had only been walking for what felt like a second when he stopped to look around. On all sides and in every direction thick masses of trees surrounded him. The path from the road had disappeared behind the leaves, and the footprints indented in the ground moss had inflated again, leaving him motionless and utterly lost.

“Hello?” Davey called. Somewhere in the distance a bird chirped and fluttered from branch to branch, its blue wings splattered like paint against the trees. He tried to calculate how long he had been gone—*ten minutes? An hour?* The sun was still casting small patches of light through the canopy of green and so Davey figured it couldn’t have been that long, at least he hoped. From the corner of his eye, Davey spotted what looked like a house in the distance. It was partially covered with vines that twisted around the roof and through the crumbling chimney, thick and knotted. He thought it might be a lodge for hikers who often came through the county on their way to the Continental Divide Trail, a famous route that even the most geographically ignorant were taught about. It reminded him of his house, with its sunken steps and chipped paint. Davey walked up to the porch and stopped, listening for the sounds of the house’s inhabitants—people or animals.

It was only silence that greeted Davey, and he knocked on the door for good measure before turning the knob and opening it.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” Davey surveyed the room—a small coal-burning oven, a couple of pots and pans, a sturdy set of bunk beds stripped down to the wood. Bottles of every shape, size, and color hung suspended by rope from the rafters, clinking gently against one another in the breeze.

“What are you doing in here?” The voice was old and hoarse, and through the muddled clinking of the bottles he thought he recognized it. Davey froze, paralyzed by thoughts of his father finding him in the middle of the woods without explanation; his ass clenched instinctively, readying itself for the belt. Davey could only remember a couple instances in which his father’s belt had been fully removed—when he forgot to latch the chicken coop and three of the largest hens were ripped to shreds by the neighboring fox, and when Davey had called his mother a bitch just loudly enough that his father, passing through the kitchen, heard him—although his mother had not. Mostly it was unbuckled and pulled out far enough to strike fear into Davey that struck harder than the leather against skin.

“I’m sorry. I was walking and I got lost,” Davey stumbled over his words. “I thought someone might be in here.”

“I’m someone.” The man moved close enough so Davey could smell alcohol on his breath, “Don’t I look like a goddamned someone to you, kid?”

“Yes sir, I’m sorry.” The sun was setting outside and Davey knew he only had twenty minutes, tops, before it was pitch black. “I’ll just go now.”

“Whoa, whoa there.” The man grabbed Davey by the shoulder. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you scared?”

Davey wanted nothing more than to be nose deep in the Bible, vowing to never cross that road again. “No.” Before his father had gone off to “fight the good fight,” as he called it, he took Davey aside and told him one thing: a man has nothing to fear but what lies inside of him.

“Good.” The man pulled a chair out from the small table pushed in the corner and motioned for him to sit. “It’s just, I don’t usually have company and I like a little time to prepare. Tidy up, cook a seven course meal, maybe shave if I’m entertaining ladies.” He grabbed two beers from a cooler. “But there ain’t no ladies as far as I can see.” The man cracked one open and set the other down in front of Davey. It was the same brand his father drank; Davey recognized it from the small rounded bottle and red and white striped label. He used to peel them off the dozens he would find strewn around the garage.

“Go on, have some.” The man popped off the cap and pushed it closer. “What, your old man never give you a beer?”

Davey shook his head.

“That’s a damn shame. What’s your name anyway?”

Davey took a sip. The taste of it—bitter and metallic—took him by surprise and he struggled to swallow it, choking on the last few drops. “Davey.”

“Well, Davey, did anyone ever tell you that you look just like John F. Kennedy?”

Davey shook his head. He had seen some of the young politician’s inaugural speech with his mother who, after much pleading on his part, allowed him to watch the history unfold on their small black and white television. Davey had watched her usual tight-lipped expression soften as the speech began, unable to hide her fascination and, he suspected, desire for the leader. She was captivated by his dark hair, chiseled jaw, and baby blue eyes as all women were; he was captivated by his voice: strong, respectful, and mesmerizing.

“Ask not what your country can do for you,” Davey spoke slowly, careful to correctly recite the quote that had stuck with him, “ask what you can do for your country.”

“He speaks!” The man took a cigarette out and stuck it between his two front teeth, yellowing and chipped.

“What’s your name?” Davey asked. The man recoiled at the question and Davey felt a pang of fear run through his chest.

“Name...name...” He pulled at his long, graying beard. “Well, I can’t for the life of me remember my real name, kid, but you can call me Randall. That was my brother’s name. Good man.”

“What are you doing here? I mean, in this cabin?” Davey asked.

“Hitchin’ my way over to Cali-for-nia.” The word poured smoothly out of Randall’s mouth and Davey could almost feel the warmth of the West Coast sun pouring down upon him.

“Caught the freight up this far before the conductor started doin’ night checks.” Night. Davey looked outside the small scratched window, the trees casting dark shadows on one another.

“Could you point me toward Route 6, sir?” Davey followed Randall out into the woods that darkened slightly, colder without the patches of sun. They walked together for a while in silence when they came to the edge of the trees and the start of the road. Davey stopped and watched Randall walk back towards his house, his gray beard the last thing to disappear in the early evening haze. As he came closer to the house, he could see soft yellow light cascading through the windows, the silhouette of his mother in the kitchen preparing dinner. Davey could feel his heart attempting to escape his chest as he made his way to the door. Imagined fury in his mother’s eyes would burn like two spotlights as she heard the door close and her jaw would clench when she saw the giant rip in his shirt and mud on his feet. Davey looked down—he had forgotten his shoes back at the fence, but it had started to rain and they wouldn’t help him now.

“There’s cornbread in the oven, could you grab it?” Davey’s mother leaned over a vat of steaming broth, mixing lumps of indistinguishable ingredients further into the milky liquid. She didn’t look up at Davey whose feet tracked a line of dirt across the floor as he walked toward the stove. A gust of heat hit him, prickling his cheeks and making his skin itch.

His mother filled two glasses with milk and set down a beer in front of his father’s place. She must have been ignoring his absence, not wanting to address the issue while his father was home. Davey knew his father would find a way to blame his mother as he always did. When he was younger their love was obvious, open, and enormous. Pet names for his mother and lingering embraces passed between them like steam. It was obvious to Davey even as a twelve year old that there was something gone between them; the conversations that once hummed in the dead of night were now shouting matches that lasted until his mother had to retire. The three sat in silence at the table. His mother watched his father eat, inhaling food between swigs of beer.

“So, Pop, you think we’ll move any time soon?”

“Don’t be a fool, boy,” his father grunted. “We’re never getting out of here.”

Davey’s throat lurched. *Never*. Davey thought of himself as an old man, still reciting parables and sitting on the porch in the afternoon, looking out over the trees rooted in the ground—still freer than him. Suddenly his fork felt like lead in his hand and he let it drop to the floor before pushing away from the table in silence.

From his bedroom, Davey could hear his mother trying to sway attention away from his exit. “Davey is really getting good at reciting the parables, Peter.” Her voice jumped an octave—whether out of fear or excitement Davey couldn’t tell. “Basically has all of them memorized.” She picked up her fork, taking small bites from her plate, which seemed to be eternally full. His father grunted before making his way out to the garage for the remainder of the evening.

That night, Davey lay awake in bed dreading the next morning when he would surely meet his fate. His mother woke him at six with two poached eggs and black coffee. It was the only vice she allowed him and he clung to it, draining the cup within minutes as she took drags on a Marlboro—the first of many. As promised, they continued where they had left off but his fate had yet to arrive. The day crept on until his mother lay down for her nap so seamlessly, he was unsure if she had ever awoken.

The walk to the road felt shorter than before and Davey curtailed around the cows gathered by the hay, picking up his shoes, caked with mud and shit around the edges. He walked aimlessly, letting the trees guide him. He would

pick one in the distance and aim for it, varying his choices by size and bark, picking no favorites. Within minutes the cabin appeared on the horizon, bigger and more expansive than it had seemed. Davey walked toward it without reservation, half expecting to find his mother asleep inside of the log walls, half hoping to see her expression filled with rage.

“Mr. Davey, President of the World!” Randall greeted him from atop a thin ladder that bowed under his heavy frame. He strung a sea green bottle from a rafter crowded with at least fifty others, tapping them lightly as he stepped down.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” He did a makeshift salute and handed a beer to Davey who popped off the cap, letting the amber liquid tickle his throat and nose.

“Do you have a family?” Davey was surprised at his forwardness but not regretful.

“That’s like asking if a bee has a hive, kid.” Randall sucked his teeth, playing with the gold cap on his canine, smoothing it beneath his tongue. “Of course I have a family.”

“I hate my family.” The words hung in the air, visible like the smoke from his mother’s ashtray. He tried to waft them away with thoughts of his mother’s sweet rolls and her beautiful singing voice, things he loved that he had taken away from her, things that he clung to in spite of everything else.

“Well shit,” Randall laughed, “you wouldn’t be human if you didn’t. It’s what you do about that hate that matters.”

“But I don’t know what to do.” Davey clenched his fists, “My mom never lets me do *anything*, and my dad doesn’t even know I exist.” The beer shot out quickly from the bottle and foamed over Davey’s lips, a sour mustache forming on his upper lip. “I wish they would disappear.”

“You don’t.” Randall’s eyes bore a hole in Davey, his gray beard twitching with each breath. “It’s a lonely world without a family, kid. I would know.”

“What happened to yours?” The wind outside had picked up speed and the sun seemed to set in time with his heart, each beat moving it further below the horizon.

“Well, I killed them.” Randall tapped a bony finger on the table. “Chopped up my mom and dad into tiny bits and buried them in the yard. Bodies are heavier than you’d think.” He laughed, tapping his fingers rapidly on the table.

“POW!” He slammed his fist down suddenly, his body going limp. “Just like that and they go from alive...to dead!” The sound made Davey jump, his heart begging to be released from his chest. He watched Randall, handling him as though he were a caged animal—no sudden moves.

Davey thought about his mother's face, her straw colored hair splattered with blood. He imagined the garage floor covered in the beer that would pour out of the gunshots in his father's belly. Davey remembered his father's words, and if not fearful for thinking these thoughts, he was deeply ashamed. He wondered if Randall ever thought about heaven, ever worried that they had condemned him for his act, or if he even believed in heaven to begin with. Davey longed suddenly for the comfort of his mother's cigarette smoke, sweet compared to Randall's, curling gently under his nose. He longed for the candies she hid deep within her apron pockets, slipping them to Davey when he made it through a verse without stuttering, the look of pride on her face when he recited the Ten Commandments. Davey remembered his father's words.

"I've got to go." Davey stood abruptly and paced towards the door before turning around. "I don't think you're a bad person."

"Neither do I."

His mother wasn't home when he came in through the door. There weren't any sweet rolls cooling on the tiled counters or pots simmering on the stove. A single cigarette lay burning in the ashtray near the kitchen, a single line of smoke cascading towards the ceiling. The room was empty though, as was the whole house. Davey even checked the garage for good measure, although his father rarely reared his head before dinner was set out on the table. Cases of beer were stacked in the corner next to the deep freezer that his father had bought in hopes of storing the massive kills from his failed hunting career. Davey grabbed a few bottles, stuffing them in the fat pockets of his wool coat and left through the garage door.

He walked through the field to the rhythm of the bottles clinking against one another. The sun had disappeared behind the trees and the cows were locked safely away in the barn for the night. Through the grass hissing with cicadas, he pushed on further into the night, absentmindedly traipsing over branches and roots that exploded under the added weight of alcohol. The cabin door was swinging lightly, emitting a yellow glow that wavered every few seconds. It beamed on and off like a beacon calling to Davey who answered it, only a few feet away from the porch steps.

"Randall!" Davey called into the house as the door swung open to greet him. *The only thing a man has to fear is what lies inside him.* The room was emptier than it had been before except for a half-empty container of schnapps that sat on a shelf out of his reach. String hung suspended from the rafters, thick and knotted. The bottles that had once hung lightly in the breeze were gone and the cabin was filled with an eerie silence. From his pocket Davey pulled out one of the bottles of beer; the cap had been torn off with his father's pliers and he had filled it with lighter fluid used to burn kindling in

the colder months. It flowed out of the bottle with ease, splattering across the floor in sweeping arcs. The twenty-six acres around him suddenly felt infinite as he stepped out onto the porch, striking the match clenched between his fingers. The house illuminated before him and the forest, stinging his cheeks and threatening to choke him with the thick black smoke cascading out of every orifice. The trees adjacent to the cabin lit up like a halo around Davey and somewhere in the distance a train whistle blew, signaling that it was time to go.