

Newton's First Law

Let me tell you a little something about physics. You see, when an object is in motion, it stays in motion until something or someone stops it. So if you set some ball rolling on a perfectly smooth surface and think somehow that it isn't your problem to alter its course, that ball will continue rolling until it rolls right off a cliff. Balls and physics don't give a damn about personal history, education, income, feelings, or psychological trauma. They roll because the good Lord bade them, and it's up to the balls to take personal responsibility for their speed, direction, and velocity. Isaac Newton said that bit about the physics, but I'll bet my left eye he didn't know that what he said applies to life too. Geniuses like Newton never realize that what they discover in physics always, without exception, applies to life.

Anyway, say your ball is your life, your mass, your soul, etcetera, put into motion by God's burly forefinger on some smooth surface. The smooth surface is your free will, because let's say for the sake of simplicity that you are a Methodist and believe you have a free will and that God didn't predestine you to be an idiot, because I don't have time to explain how physics proves Calvinism.

Let me get into balls a little. See, some balls are little and shiny and silver, like ball bearings. These usually go moderately fast and pretty easy in a straight line. No problems. These are your middle-class Catholic white kids who get degrees in psychology or something, marry kids with degrees in business, and live middle-class, happy, productive lives and have more middle-class white kids of their own and emerge in their 50's believing that life is about recycling, holidays with middle-class family members, and never talking about that creepy uncle who slanders their smooth vanilla ice

cream with jalapeños. Those don't interest Isaac Newton or God, so they just keep going, as if God gets so damn bored watching them live happy, perfect, straight-toothed lives that he falls asleep and forgets to pull a fast one on them.

There are marbles (artists, mostly), and wiffle balls (Methodists), and bowling balls (construction workers), and those dumbass beanbag balls kids kick around that'll roll two or three times and then conk out and smoke weed until another ball clears them out. God makes them all shapes and sizes, and yes, colors. That part you can't choose. You're just kind of stuck with it. God'll set you in motion, rolling away, and eventually you'll get smart enough to stop yourself or to keep going or to go in a new direction. They call that experience. Believe me; I've had plenty of experience.

So say your ball is rolling on this boundless smooth surface which allows it to go anywhere at any time by its own volition, and thinks that it'll die without having to be dependent on anyone, with a beer in its hand and a tractor in its barn. This is where it gets complicated, because inevitably, that ball will meet other balls, drink a few too many beers, tell a few too many people what it thinks of them, spend a little too much money on gun ammo and not enough on haircuts, and end up married. That's right; sometimes while you're rolling through life you'll meet other balls, made of lead for instance, who'll be so pretty, red-headed, and goddamn stubborn that you just can't sleep until you conquer their objections to your hygiene and narrow-minded opinions. This done, you get to eat the best blueberry muffins in the world, knowing full well that no other bastard ball will ever get a taste. That compensation for being tied down almost makes you happy.

Well, I raised six daughters with that red-headed ball of lead of mine, believe it or not. We met in the 60's in California when I was the only proud Republican at Berkeley,

and as such, unambiguously single. She used to annoy the hell out of me, like every other woman at that University of Gomorrah. She'd come around our house to talk woman fluff with my sister Gwen all the time, and the two of them would start chirping about their male professors at college and about their psychoanalytic menstruation dreams and all the other confounded, pointless things women talk about. One day I told the both of them, not the first time, that they were two nitwitted females with nothing to better to do than gossip and chase after people with brains who were too old for them anyway. Gwen just shot me a look like usual but Kate (that was her name), she came over and punched me in the mouth, as matter of fact as can be. I never was punched so hard by anyone before, and it near broke my jaw. I hated that woman, but as God is my witness, I couldn't get away from respecting someone with an arm like that.

Well it happened that Kate was dating this French major fag, who used to comb his hair in store windows and eat tofu, and he got her pregnant one day by some feat I never imagined him capable of, probably after drinking Pinot Grigio and playing chess. I remember hearing it through the almost-closed door of my sister's room. It was the one and only time I ever heard Kate's voice shake. She said she was scared and that she didn't know what to do. Well to my sister's credit she had gotten Kate involved in religion (even if it was only Methodism) and turned her from a bra-burning bitch into a muffin-baking bitch. So my sister suggested praying to God, and Kate, because she'd become a new Wesleyan (I'd settle for that, I guess), said she would. So the two of them started praying away on their knees. I'll never forget the look on Kate's face, with her head bent and her eyes closed, as if she were truly sorry for seeing that guy. Her hair fell all around her shoulders and back like a red, weightless veil, and I noticed for the first

time that she was beautiful, and that I could really value an arm like hers. I suddenly felt it wasn't right of me to be standing there, so I went to clean my gun in the shed and drink a beer.

After a half hour passed, I imagined they'd be done, because that was as much time as any reasonable person needed to be talking to any other reasonable person, including God. So I went down the hall again looking for my hat. All of a sudden, I heard this horrible gasp and a high-pitched, bloodcurdling, "That can't be right! God may be vengeful, but how can he be stupid, too? Is this what I get for dating Andre?" Kate rushed out, her face all red like her hair, and smacked me again. I asked her what the hell she thought she was doing and she said, "Forget it, Sam! I'd rather die than marry you!" With that for an answer, I stood there just stunned and didn't move at all until she stomped out the door, her hair behind her, the world gradually and gloomily resuming its earth-tone hues.

That night I was up for hours, trying to find out what to make of it. First of all, I wanted my sister to go choke on a bar of tofu for telling Kate I wanted to marry her. Second of all, why would she rather die than marry me? Was I just not smart or old enough like her fag English professors? Was I not good enough for her hoity-toity red-head standards? I still felt the pain from where she hit me the second time. The feelings of angry rage mingled with the feelings of college boy insecurity, until my insides were crying and shooting vegetarians at the same time. I was up all night long, let me tell you, except for a few hours when I was watching a show about France and fell asleep at dawn. When I woke up all bleary eyed one hour later, I drank five cups of black coffee, marched over to Kate's house, and told her she was going to marry me, damn it, because

I thought she was as loyal, as beautiful, as good a cook and as tough a fighter as any loyal, beautiful, talented, and tough woman I'd ever met in my life. Then I said she was in an awful predicament, but that after I graduated I'd take care of all her needs and her baby like they were my own problems, because I was a math major and would get a job, and also because I thought I maybe loved her even though she was a stubborn bitch. She looked a little stunned, even angry, and I thought she'd hit me again, but instead she just looked kind of pensive and said, "Do you want something to eat?" I knew then she had just been pretending to hate me all along.

Of course things weren't easy, let me tell you. Two months later, after we each had learned each other's middle names and all and she didn't smack me quite so much, she walked down the aisle in cowboy boots with that red hair covered with a real veil, her belly faintly round with some French-speaking idiot's only claim to heterosexuality. I knew what people said, and I knew that what they would say if they knew the truth couldn't be much better than the lie. Yet I wasn't willing to let Kate suffer for the mistakes of France and its vineyards, so I just played the whole thing up like it was my baby inside her, because in a real kind of way, it was my baby inside of her. We moved to Wyoming for a fresh start, its open cold expanses and indigenous population more to my liking, and eventually to Kate's, than California's. That May I graduated with my degree in math and got a nice-paying job at IBM, just a month before our first daughter Marie, named for Kate's mother, was born. Much to my relief, she looked like a docile version of Kate and not the least like a grape or a French major.

Kate and I fought pretty much every day, but I grew to respect her for the real man she was. I was sorry they didn't have Kate in Vietnam, because things would've

gone a lot smoother. I'd come home, and she and Marie would be battling over who was actually going to eat the beet mash, both their faces flaming with anger and bright red tendrils sticking up on both their heads. Immediately she (the baby) would turn to me and smile a big smile and take a big spoonful of tasteless gook into her mouth to impress me. Kate, not so impressed, would stomp over to me, hand me the spoon, and tell me I must have quite a way with women or something, because that damn child wouldn't eat a thing without me to watch. I credited myself with being a great father, and Marie and I ate huge meals together while Kate cried and quilted in the bedroom. I always puzzled over how the same woman who left bruises on my arms could take up quilting and baking with the same fiery zeal when she was pissed, as if in trying to destroy me, she had to rebuild something else that was all her own. She made a dozen or so of those big, intricate quilts the first few years we were married, and it wasn't until years later that I figured out how good she must've been at math to do it.

During the next ten years of our marriage, we had a baby daughter every two years or so, and with each new daughter, Kate's expression and figure softened just a little bit more, but never completely. One day as I was cleaning my gun in the shed, I thought suddenly of how now I actually looked forward to coming home now and getting that pert peck on the cheek. I was dumbstruck to find out that Kate and I were husband and wife instead of poorly selected Berkeley roommates who couldn't afford birth control. Our hourly fights had decreased gradually into a mild skirmish every month or so, for Kate was still Kate and I was still usually right. Raising our daughters kind of put us in the mindset of being partners, and I think she began to stop resenting me for saving her

from that French guy. I had my tractor and my gun, and she had her quilts and her cowboy boots and luckily, no gun.

Our daughters each grew up with heads of varying degrees of red hair, varying densities of freckles, and varying shades of blue eyes. In that respect these were the only similarities they had. One by one they went through diapers and winter coats, each girl more different than the next. They attended a small charter school, and most of the teachers ended up later having all six of them for a subject if they didn't quit before the next one came. As the years went by, I became more and more proud of the decision I made to marry Kate, who was as good a mother as any woman could be. Though I was disappointed that no boy ever walked into our home, I wouldn't have traded my daughters for anything. And if I could do it all over, I would've appreciated that woman a whole lot more.

At night after dinner I used to help the girls with homework with Kate's ready corrections handy as she baked in the kitchen. I remember Mrs. Miller, the pointy-nosed middle school language arts teacher, gave as an assignment to each girl a story called "The Necklace," about a woman whose love for jewels and pomp brings her to a fancy ball, where she loses a friend's necklace and works years and years to buy it back, only at the end to find out it was paste. I remember Marie's reaction to the story, her little head cocked a little to one side with that impish smile on her face, the rain coming down outside and the smell of muffins putting us both in a lighter mood. She told her mother that she would've known it was paste all along, because no one would be stupid enough to give a real diamond necklace to a French lady unless she was comfortable with the certainty of never seeing it again. I knew then that Marie had absorbed one too many of

my slurs against the nation of France, and sent her to sit in a corner for saying the things that Kate always sent me to the corner for. She didn't yell at me that time, only smiling as I half-heartedly chastised my oldest daughter. I wish I could've absorbed all the good times Kate and the girls and I had together, because it would be over sooner than I could have imagined.

One December night, Kate went to go buy some cherry flavored Tylenol for one of our daughters late at night in the truck. It was winter and all the kids were getting sick, and one was up with a fever. I remember how she put her overcoat on over her pajamas and slippers, and how she tossed all that red hair up in a bun with a few deft movements of her fingers. She half-acknowledged my order to hurry home, and said she'd buy me some licorice. She hurried out of the room, and I heard the ignition of the truck. Hours passed. I fell asleep waiting up for her and listening to little coughs upstairs, little knowing she'd never be back.

I remember the phone call, the chirpy pseudo-sympathetic voice of some lady cop who was passing by when she saw the accident, as if in some way she was almost proud to be the first one to let me know my life was wrecked for good along with the truck. My hand went a little numb and I'm sure I must've said thanks, like a robot or something, because the next thing I knew the phone was back on the receiver and the room was just kind of spinning. I saw the fridge, the counter, and all the quilts hanging on the wall like they were mocking me, when suddenly I just had this feeling like it was just a mistake. That really almost made me dance or jump up and down, the feeling that maybe it wasn't Kate after all but some other person who couldn't possibly be Kate. I went to the fridge and pulled out four beers, all I could carry, and went to the shed to clean my gun. All of a

sudden I stopped short and dropped all four beers, feeling like someone had just punched me in the back. I had to go to the hospital. I had to go see Kate. I had to move, but I couldn't. As if some demon was inside me, I felt this huge bubble or rage tingling and punched the wall in front of me with all my might. Believe it or not, it was the very first time I'd ever decked any innocent object, and I ran my hand clean through the wall and broke my knuckles. I didn't feel a thing.

I could talk to you about all the misery, about all the nights I was awake thinking Kate was curled up beside me, her red hair floating above her head like a tongue of fire during Pentecost. I could tell you about how hard it was with all those girls in my house who desperately needed a father, but had to settle for a disheveled, confused zombie. I could talk about all the false sympathy I got from church people and neighbors, who pretended to know her like I knew her, who pretended to know how much my soul was split in pieces and how I was a man and couldn't tell one goddamn person about it because I had all these little pixies around me depending on me to be strong and brave and safe, but also because I was too proud to admit to myself or anyone else that I needed that woman to live.

I could tell you about feelings I had and about how I wanted to die to be up with her, but that isn't what I do best. What I do best is talk about why things are the way they are, why objects in motion stay in motion until an outside force stops them and alters their course. When Kate passed on and all our children, cats, dogs, goldfish, and guinea pigs lived with me in that big house, I stopped. That's right. I just...stopped. Without that little red-headed ball of lead in my magnetic force field, I couldn't go on. I stopped. I stopped smiling. I stopped joking. I stopped rambling about mathematics and physics. I

stopped making fun of French people and hippies and Catholics. I got quiet, hard, solemn, empty, weak. My daughters, however, still got up and dressed themselves and took it like the little soldiers I had raised them to be. They all took after Kate.

One night some months later as I was cleaning the tools in my shed, realizing I had this little kingdom of living beings to take care of, I decided I couldn't just stop being alive. Here I was hiding, cleaning my tools like some pansy when all these people needed me. I needed to be a man. I got up, put my gun away and half-assed some dinner for my daughters, the oldest one 16 at the time, and went to bed after four or five beers wondering when the youngest would be old enough to live without me. I did the math. It would be about 10 years before little Dana could safely turn out to be a reasonable sort of person without my help. After that, I could curl up in a big ball and just stop. For now, I needed to suck it up.

My second daughter, Laura, went through that language arts class with Mrs. Miller that fall. There was that story again, about the necklace and the French lady. I read it to her one fine October night, with her frizzy little head of fire resting tranquilly on my shoulder. When I finished she looked up at me and said, "Mom would never have worn diamonds with that dress. She would've worn cowboy boots like in your wedding picture." Sure enough, there on the coffee table, was a picture of my wife on our wedding day, hitching up her dress to show her cowboy boots with her lacy socks. I had this realization suddenly, that my wife had left her loud, red-headed, stubborn, completely and utterly unpretentious mark on each and every one of my girls, and that each and every one of my girls was, in some way, a hard, loud, sparkly, red-headed uncut diamond. For the first time since the funeral, I looked at Laura and all my daughters and saw Kate,

her spirit and pluck fully alive in each of the children she had been so kind as to give to me.

Kate told me repeatedly after we were married that she hit me because God had told her to marry me that day on my sister's bed, and it was like God telling her to be a plumber or something horrible like that. And yet, who knows when or how, but after some time passed, she owned that she grew to respect me a little for loving her unconditionally, and gradually, one day she woke up and realized she loved me. Imagine that. Who would have thought? I admit that God's burly finger sure gave me a good enough start in life, but that it was Kate, and later the six little marbles we had together, who gave me all the reasons I needed to keep in motion along with them, knocking all the French balls out of our way as we passed.