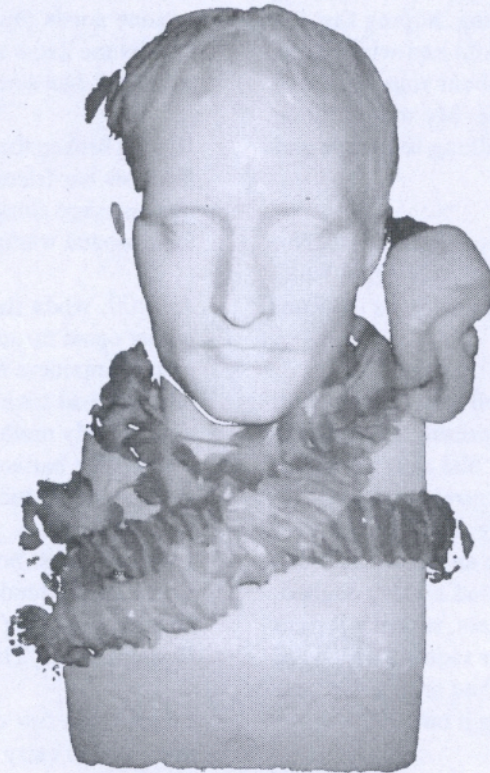


## NAPOLEON

Ric Royer



*At the head of the table* was a plaster bust of Napoleon—a head on a red-and-white checkered tablecloth that covered a pool table. A head twice as big as a head. Traces of makeup from twenty, maybe thirty years ago. An oversized tie. His outer coating was peeling away in chips. In front of him: pizza and wings and cheese and crackers and a veggie plate, and a Buffalo Bills notepad serving as a guest book.

I had arrived late to my father's memorial.

There were people to greet: friends I hadn't seen in years, family I didn't remember. It was decided that someone should say something, everyone was waiting for me to arrive to say it.

The bust had been in the family since I was a baby. My Aunt Clara, my father's younger sister, gave Napoleon to my father as a birthday gift (joke), since her nickname for Nevin was Nappy. Nappy, short for Napoleon because my dad was short and French. My Aunt promised my dad she would cut off his dick after he died, like Napoleon, but that did not happen once the time came.

The memorial was being held at my father's favorite bar, The Wagon Wheel, six doors down from where he lived. He always drove there. I never understood why, but the bartender finally explained it was so other regulars would see his car in the parking lot and know he was there. The Wheel was country-themed,

with saloon doors and two giant wagon wheels on your way in. Outside, an awning stretched in an arch to resemble a covered wagon.

The gathered were separated into two contingents: family and friends of the family in the elevated dining area, and down below at the bar, the Wheel regulars who saw my father more than my family did. Each group was a stranger to each other.

Nobody cared that I was late, Nevin had left a mess in death: no will, a hoarder house, and a bank account from which he had neglected to remove a despised ex-girlfriend as beneficiary—a woman who had left him 25 years ago. \$46,000 that should have been left to me and my sister, had vanished from his bank account. I had to mourn between meetings with lawyers.

"You have to say something," my sister said.

"You have to say something," my mother said.

I wasn't prepared to say anything.

Napoleon was passed around to several family members over the years, a heavy, cursed object. And if Napoleon turned up on your doorstep, he was yours until you found a way to secretly pawn him off onto someone else. He was stuffed in my Uncle Billy's trunk and driven all the way to Florida for the summer; he was found on an inner tube in my sister's pool; he was decorated by



my niece and deposited in my Aunt Clara's garden. Somewhere along the line he ended up back with my father and was sent to the basement. Not sure of the rules when someone dies while in possession of Napoleon.

I was a reluctant memorialist. I went table to table, engaging with all of my distant relatives, I was stalling, hoping that the moment would pass, and the memorial would end without me delivering a speech. Everyone said "Sorry about your dad," and then wanted to talk about the missing \$46k. My mother, long divorced from my father, told me to stop talking to people and go give a speech. Everyone was waiting.

My father was Niagara Falls city champion once. Bowling. Not sure you can be a city champ of anything else in Niagara Falls, NY. I was wearing his bowling shirt, with his name on the front and team name on the back, "Rascals."

Linda, drunk, said she had something to tell me. I knew what she had to tell me, but pretended to be surprised. She was my father's girlfriend for the past seven years. She said my father wanted to keep it private because, "You know how your sister gets." Everyone knew they were dating, she had her own ringtone on my father's phone, "Proud to Be an American." She looked longingly at the name on my/my dad's shirt. Sighed, rubbed the embroidered name with her fingers, stroking it right above my nipple. "Ah, Nevin." Through her sadness which did not provoke tears, she managed to ask if I had seen a dart machine at my dad's house when I was clearing it out.

Clouds overtook the sun, casting shadows across the covered pool table in the already dim establishment. No one mentioned the bust of Napoleon, I forgot to even ask who brought it, but I was glad he was present. I always loved the gag, and would relish in telling friends about it in high school to make my family sound fun. My father was fond of hijinks. There was always a funny hat at parties, a gag gift thrown in for Christmas, and he was the first dad on the block to have a singing fish. Once I tried to joke back with him when I was older by covertly placing a Hillary for President sign on his lawn. He thought the joke was okay.

Lightning outside, but no rain.

My sister, easily agitated, was pissed. People were going to start the leave, she feared, if I didn't hurry up and give a speech. I was the only one capable of doing it, my family believed. I studied theatre.

I stood in front of the railing, friends and family to my right, and the bar crowd below as if I were addressing them from a balcony. I asked how many people in the room had an Amazon Firestick from my dad. So many hands were raised. At 78, he was still jail-breaking Firesticks so the proletariat could enjoy free Netflix. It was his natural evolution— from stealing cable when I was in high school, to burning bootleg DVDs once I got to college, and then finally selling Amazon Firesticks with every streaming service known to man. Even before that he was bartering in stolen sandpaper when he was working for the abrasives plant. "He was a good friend, a good father," I said. "Just wanted to make people happy, and give them a good deal."

I saw an old man crying at the bar— really crying — so I started crying, and my sister cried. I struggled to finish my speech; I repeated myself: "He was a good dad. Just wanted everyone to have a good deal." My sister hugged me in front of everyone. Then Joe from the bar came up to say a few words: "Nevin's son mentioned the Firesticks, and I just want to say that if anyone needs them updated, I know someone who can do it. Just let me know and I can put you in touch with him, his name is Drew." Just some Firestick housekeeping.

Having broken the ice, other short eulogies followed, all of them from his bar friends. There were bowling stories, Firestick stories, sausage stories and stories about how he would move his teeth around waiting for fish to bite. To Nevin. *To Nevin!*

At 5:00, when the memorial was scheduled to end, the bartender came up and started putting whatever food was left into to-go containers for people to take home. By now most of the relatives had trickled out. Those who remained took containers and left. My mother said goodbye, my sister said goodbye, and I asked the bartender if she needed help cleaning up. No. The pool table became a pool table again.

I put the guest book in my backpack and was about to leave when the bartender asked, "Who's taking that?" referring to Napoleon, staring at me stone-faced. "I guess I am." There was no one else left to take it.

I tried out a few different ways to carry it, the bust was more awkward to carry than heavy but heavy too. I settled on wrapping my arms around the neck and pressing it against the front of my body. I left my car in front of my dad's, six doors, which didn't seem so close when carrying a giant hunk of plaster.

I didn't fish for it, but as I walked through the bar towards the front door, I hoped to hear some of the patrons say goodbye, or good speech, or something about my dad, but nobody noticed me. They were all just laughing with each other or staring at the baseball game. The memorial was over. I could hear rain beating against the covered wagon out front.

With Napoleon held close to my chest, I had to turn around and exit backwards. I pushed the saloon doors with my backpack, our faces staring at the backs of the bar patrons as we slipped out.



RIC ROYER is a writer, performer, performer or writings, and writer of performances. His most recent book, *Niagara Falls, NY*, was published by Pig Roast Publishing in 2024.

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