

WAINWRIGHT & I

Lexie Kelly!



Wainwright & I

(For Judith Rivera)

“Trying to get my mansions green
After I’ve Grey Gardens seen.
Honey, won’t you hold me tight?
Get me through Grey Gardens tonight.”
-- Rufus Wainwright, “Grey Gardens”

“Good night, sweetheart, I have to clean my rifle.”
-- Loudon Wainwright, Jr.

IN THE BEGINNING, IT WAS JUST ME AND KELLY. After all, that’s what it said on the birth certificate – Alexandra McKim Kelly, born May 2, 1993 at Lennox Hill Hospital, NY, NY, 5:28 AM, 7 lbs. 6 oz., and if any one of you cretins asks me how you get “Lexie” from “Alexandra”, I might just have to barricade myself in my room and never leave this island. The interwebs inform me that Wainwright didn’t rear its head until a year had nigh gone by – at which point Wainwright Incarnate, the patriarch himself, stepped in and made his presence formally known. As I grew, the concept remained somewhat aloof, and by the time I turned school age and struck out to blaze my own trails through the hallowed halls of Public School 9, it was still so foreign and intrinsically abstruse that my K-102 journal entry for June

6h, 1998, on the assigned topic of our father's day plans, reads – scrawled in an untidy hand not so unlike the subject's itself –

Tomorrow my dad Lowdin Waneright is picking me up.

I don't think my father has ever seen it, but if he ever does, I don't expect him to find this misspelling too offensive. It sits as just one in the long line of creative botch-jobs he's encountered over the years, ranging from "Louden Wainright" to "Lou Don Don Wain" to plain old "Wayne Wright", true Christian name cast aside altogether.

The point is, I know I spelled it "Lowdin Waneright" because I still have the composition book.

Wainwright has a book, too. It sits, for most of the year, collecting dust on the staircase bookshelf of our family home on Shelter Island, between six or seven annotated versions of Ulysses and enough Freudian tomes to scar an unsuspecting child like myself for life. Bound in brick red artificial leather and splashed with gold lettering, every time I dare remove it from the shelf – not often, because apparently it helps to hold up the Ulysseses, which must remain erect at all times out of respect for Mr. Joyce, I am told – I hold my breath before I turn it over, half expecting to see Chairman Mao's fleshy, globular face beaming up at me. Instead, up at the top, it says

THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US

Wainwrights, Mayhews, Stuyvesants, and Others

J. Mayhew Wainwright



I have to concede, Round One goes to Wainwright; objectively speaking, it is a much better book title than "Lexie's Kindergarten Journal, K-102." The smell of the

volume, not so much; bluntly put, leafing through its 203 pages, I can't help imagining that Tollund Man has taken a dump. Still, I soldier through, inspired by the stately, stalwart posture of Colonel J. Mayhew Wainwright (1846-1945), Assistant Secretary of War, Member of Congress, 25th New York District, immortalized in oil painting opposite the title page. Colonel Wainwright was a brave man; he wouldn't turn in disgust at a little bit of peat-stench, I think, so why should I?

To be sure, Wainwright's book is not the sort of fare they peddle at airport terminals. You wouldn't find it in Barnes and Noble, or on Amazon, and certainly not at the Shelter Island Library, or even the John Jermain Memorial Library just across the pond, which I've heard has a [relatively] extensive collection of these kinds of local family histories. The current Patriarch estimates that there were only ever 15 or so copies in print, and that this is one of the last. It's made quite clear in this volume that the writings are for "Your Eyes Only" – providing, of course, that you are Wainwright. It's addressed to you. Case in point: The Foreword on the next page, written by one Fonrose Wainwright Condict.

"My father," it says, "your uncle, during the last years of his life, spent long and often weary hours at his desk in the Milton Point house, working on family records. He found great satisfaction in the character and accomplishment of our ancestors – but his reason for writing our family history was something more than pride in the past. It was rather, expectancy of the future; the belief that knowledge of those who came before us would serve as inspiration to us and those who came after us.

"My father died on Milton Point, June 6th, 1945, before his undertaking was completed. Except in the case of General

Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright, whose history reaches beyond any family record, it has seemed wise to let it stand where he left it.”

When my father was coming up – note that I have abandoned the moniker of “Wainwright Incarnate” for something less flippant and easier to type – it was the General in whom everybody was so interested. “Wainwright?” they’d say, their necks snapping around at the mention of the name. “Like General Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright IV, Commander of the Allies in the Philippines at the time of their surrender to Japan during World War II?” To which my dad would blush and rub the back of his neck, and say, yes, sir or ma’am, the very same. That’s what they did back then.

I wonder what it says about our culture, that nowadays people ask you if it’s Wainwright like the “Dead Skunk” guy, or his son, the self-proclaiming gay messiah. God only knows what “Skinny” (as he was known in his 82nd regiment days) would have to say about that.

But, really, back to my book. It was just one in a whole series of marble composition notebooks I was forced at gradepoint to keep throughout my elementary years. Now, going through them years later, I can trace the progression of it, the slow trickle of Wainwright into my life.

Take, for example, this entry, in my 1st Grade notebook:

This weekend my mommy and I are goeng to Shetler Island with my daddy. We are goeng aple picking and there is a Haloween Carnival!

This was around the time that we started going out to Shelter Island, I believe. I remember being excited at first – I knew that lots of kids had country houses, in Westchester, and Nate Pennebaker even went to Sag Harbor on the weekends, though it would be several years before I came to understand what exactly that meant. My memories of those days are foggy, at best. When I thought of the country, I thought of country children and country schools. Sag Harbor Elementary and Aquebogue School looked the same to me – big brick buildings seated on grassy knolls, which we didn't have in the city. Pretty soon, I realized that the country was the country. Halloween Carnivals were often rained out. There were moths there. It was gross.

But Wainwright loved the country. That was one of our first points of disagreement, in fact. Wainwright chose to associate itself with a spirit of adventurousness, ruggedness. Wainwright took chances. Kelly preferred to stay home and watch *Rugrats* and have her mom put her socks on for her.

Still, Wainwright was always in control. That's another thing about Wainwright: it has sway, that ineffable, irreducible quality of *je ne sais pas* that holds the power to control the tides and the primaries and everything else that needs swaying. So, to the country we went, more and more frequently; the entries in those notebooks grew farther and farther apart, and came to cover two or three trips out in a row. In my head, during those long, lonely hours inside the house on North Ferry Road, with nothing to do and nowhere to go, I imagined that being on Shelter Island was somewhat akin to that scene in *Sorcerer's Stone* where Vernon Dursley takes the whole family out to a rock on the sea to get away from the endless stream of Hogwarts letters that keep coming in the fireplace. That was the kind of thing Kelly was reading

that year. By the time we started coming out in the summers, I was growing dangerously comfortable in the isolation. Then, one summer, we came out and we never left.

I thought, at the time, that my father had just done what Dursley'd done; spin around, or ask around, and come to rest on a place that seemed so randomly remote that it was as good as any and better than most for what he needed. It wasn't until I was watching *Grey Gardens* that summer, the one when we came out and we never left, that I realized that the Capital W was at work.

Grey Gardens, for those of you who tend to gravitate towards jollier fare, is the 1975 documentary depicting the daily lives of the mother-daughter Bouvier-Beale duo as they wither away in their – you guessed it – dilapidated East Hampton mansion. Sitting in my rickety wooden chair in my guest-room-turned-personal-bedroom, I watched in horror as the Beales paraded around their ramshackle Lily Pond Lane residence – so these were the year-rounders? God almighty, these were the kinds of people alongside of whom I would be expected to live for the next two years – and drowned my sorrows in goldfish crackers and rainbow chip frosting, a Kelly family delicacy. Then, about fifteen minutes into the movie, Big Edie and the documentarians are pouring over warped sepia-tone photographs, and they come upon one of Big Edie in a dress, and somebody – David Maysles, presumably – says to her, “Edie, that’s so beautiful,” and she turns to this unknown speaker and replies, in her slightly deranged upper class drawl, “Mr. Wainwright did that. He was an artist from a very good family. He was in the social

register. He did it in the solarium of Grey Gardens. David, look at this. I was in a fashion show.”

Suddenly, I aspirated a goldfish cracker. My door flew open with a bang and my mother rushed in. “Are you alright? What’s happening?” she demanded.

I slammed the laptop shut and bent over to clear the airways. “I’m fine,” I wheezed. “Nothing’s happening, I’m fine.”

And I was. I didn’t care about Wainwright, or even Kelly for that matter. I was starting at a new school, in a new part of the world. I was sixteen years old; I could handle myself.

The trouble, of course, started in mid-December, by which time I had been at Ross for two whole weeks and still had not yet won the hearts and minds of my comrades. And so, I caved. One particularly blustery morning I sought refuge in the café and found myself seated at a table between one Juliet Garrett, a fellow Shelter Islander, and Jenn Ortiz, who had engaged David Kaner in an animated discussion about her little brother. I waited for an opening, and then I sprang.

“I have a brother,” I remarked, looking up at the ceiling and bearing what I hoped would come off as a whimsical look on my face.

Juliet furrowed her brow. “You do?”

I nodded. “Mm-hmm. But he’s much older. Much older. He’s my half-brother.”

“Oh,” she said, and went back to stirring her tea. My heart skipped a beat. For a moment I worried that she wasn’t going to ask the next question. I ran through all the alternate scripts in my head and came up empty. I was just about to abort the whole mission and pull my chair away from the table when she turned to me and asked, “Where does he live?”

I smiled a little in spite of myself. Hook, line, and sinker. Every single time. “Well, I guess the city, technically, but also in Canada... look, he travels around a lot. He’s a singer-songwriter.”

This sparked her interest. “Well, what’s his name? Maybe we’ve heard of him.”

“I doubt it.” Here I inserted a gaping yawn, for disinterestedness’ sake. “Rufus Wainwright?”

At this point in the dialogue one of two things will happen. The more common response, by the numbers, is unfailingly a variation on “Huh?” “Rufus Wainwright?” the confused parties will stammer, cocking their heads a little, like a hungry spaniel. “You mean that naked mole rat from *Kim Possible*?”

Over the years, though, I learned how and when to most effectively play the Wainwright Card, and through use of a complex audience litmus test, I now hit the target nine times out of ten. What ensues then is often even trickier to navigate than the alternative, and it is this: I am simply accused of being a liar.

It’s weird, growing up and not being believed about who you are or where you came from. Sometimes I feel I must have a lot in common with the lesser-known branches of the Saxe-Coburg dynasty (“I know I don’t look like royalty, and no, I’m not technically a hemophiliac, but I’m one of them, I swear!”). Perhaps more fitting would be a comparison to the Beales, who remained staunch regarding their distant relation to Jackie O. even as the squalor piled up around their ankles. I wonder if they were ever told, “Get out!” by anybody other than an East Hampton town eviction officer.

“I don’t believe you,” said Juliet, and I died a little inside on a couple of different levels. Everything was going according to plan.

Eventually, I got my instant popularity – I usually do – but nothing’s free in this world; I’d let Wainwright back into my life in a big way, and consequently, subtle reminders of the connection Big Edie had hinted at started cropping up left and right. Upon our first encounter, Rima Mardoyan-Smyth cheerily informed me that she’d had dinner with my brother “numerous times”, and then proceeded to inform me of his likes and dislikes when it came to the many and varied culinary options Sag Harbor had to offer. Juliet began asking me if I knew a Mitten Wainwright, who taught Mondays and Thursdays at Yoga Shanti and could do an excellent trikonasana, even at the ripe old age of 65. I told her I thought trikonasana was what you got from eating uncooked pork. Everything was getting too weird.

One night, my mounting curiosity got the better of me. I got up to go to the bathroom and ended up back at the bookshelf, flipping through *The Wainwrights*. Blankly, I opened it up to the last page, hoping to find some kind of recent genealogy that might provide some clues as to what a woman named Mitten was doing parading around the Hamptons and claiming to be related to me. Instead, a folded piece of paper fell out and tumbled to the ground.

I stooped to pick it up. It was a single typewritten sheet – a letter, addressed to my father:

March 27, 2001
Dear Loudie:

Again many thanks for being the real treat at my 80th.

Your father was among my most respected cousins. He was especially kind to my brother. They were the same age.

Don't lose this book, and pass it on to whomever you want. In the family!*

Affectionate regards,
Stuyvesant Wainwright II

P.S. As you know I am retiring from the practice of the law. I have your papers regarding the purchase of your house. Let me hear from you regarding what you would like me to do with this file.

My eyes traveled back up the page to the header. And there it was, clear as day:

LAW OFFICES
Stuyvesant Wainwright, II

Wainscott road
Wainscott, L.I., N.Y., 11975-0199
631-537-1122

A bona-fide Wainwright living in Wainscott, the very same hamlet that spawned Lucie K. of the ever-present smile of wonder! Small memories rose to the surface now, faint but insistent, of those times in my youth when my father had left my mother and I on the Island for East Hampton, “to go for a swim and to drop by Uncle Stuyv’s”. These sudden recollections caught me off-guard and made me feel uncomfortable. Thinking about them crossed the line in the sand that I had unconsciously drawn upon starting at Ross, the line between my year-round life and my youth as a “summer person”. Furthermore, it was Wainwright what had been the instigator of this forced transgression. Wainwright, I was beginning to understand, can do awfully funny things to a young person’s mind.

At any rate, armed with this newest piece of information, I picked myself up and got back on the old Google machine. “Uncle Stuyv”, as it turned out, was nowadays technically not so much living in Wainscott as he was resting there. He had died in March of 2010. “He was 88 and had been in failing health”, said the East Hampton Star. What exactly “failing health” meant, the obit wouldn’t say. I did learn, however, that he had been elected to Congress in 1952, representing the fine Republican people of the First Congressional District, that he had served on the foreign affairs committee, the education and labor committee, and the Merchant Marine committee, and that he was almost single-handedly responsible for creating the Fire Island National Park. I also learned that he enjoyed golf, squash, tennis, hunting, and sailing his yacht, “Wainscott Wind”, between Newport and Bermuda, when he had the time. All four of his marriages ended in divorce, he was an upstanding member of the Yale citizenry, and, before opening the aforementioned Wainscott

office in 1975, had served as a partner in the firm Walker, Beale, Wainwright, and Wolf. The Beale in question was, as it turned out, first-named Bouvier. He was the oldest son of Big Edie.

According to the Star, the other East Hamptonite who'd died that week was Judith B. Rivera, a 71-year-old former home health aide who'd attended East Hampton schools and gone to work at the old Bulova factory in Sag Harbor for a time in her youth, making watch cases for people who could afford to buy them, like Stuyvesant Wainwright II. Her obituary didn't say that outright, but I'd be surprised to find out that I was the only one thinking it.

What ancient connection did we hold to these people? I pondered this as I wandered the family plot at Cedar Lawn Cemetery in East Hampton, weaving in and out of the headstones of Wainwrights I had never known. Stuyvesant Wainwright II was buried here, in a fresh grave a little set apart from the others, where Stuyvesant Wainwright I, presumably his father, lay, as well as his wife, and between them a smaller, grayer marker for

FLASH
1956-1973
Our Dearest Friend

As Wainwrights, were we beholden to the sacred family trust to bury our dog here, too? Harry didn't hunt or fish; he had never been on a yacht. He seemed like the kind of dog that Judith B. Rivera and her six children might have owned,

to tell the truth. I wondered what the going rate for dogs in Cedar Lawn was, and if they gave discounts for mutts.

On the way back from the cemetery, I asked my father if he would be buried there, too, in the family plot. "I assume so," he said, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "If they've got room for me by then."

A small silent stretch of road went by, and then he dared to glance at me before returning his gaze straight ahead. He cracked a smile. "What about you?" he asked. I told him I wanted to be buried in the catacombs of the deconstructivist cathedral in downtown Los Angeles, in one of those huge marble filing cabinets, right under Gregory Peck. He laughed, and I relaxed.

And only then did I realize that, up until then, my heart had been pounding, and my muscles had been tense, as though I were an animal looking for a fight. This is how I usually am, when I ride alone in the car with my father. As a general rule, Wainwright Incarnate – pardon my temporary re-adoption of the moniker – and I do not "talk". He is an artiste and thusly laconic by nature, and this combined with the strange circumstances of my upbringing – that he did not rear his head until a year had nigh gone by, that he popped in and out of "the picture" until I was six years of age, that my mother and I went along with him to California three years later, that they married when I was thirteen – make us uncertain of where to begin. We are something considerably less than bosom buddies.

With my mother, it is a different story altogether. She is warm and friendly and loquacious, and we have a whole lifetime – mine – of common experience. We are both women, and this gives us yet more common ground on which to expand (I am told that normal girls' relationships with

their fathers do sometimes grow rockier during the teenage years). The final nail in the coffin of otherness was, of course, the unassailable truth that she and I were Kelly. He was Wainwright, and he always would be.

Yet now, as my father and I drove away from that silent, sullen cemetery, I felt, somehow, that the old distinctions were becoming dangerously blurred. The development of the litmus test had only maximized my play of the Wainwright card, to the point at which I was pulling it as frequently as several times a month. I'd started using Wainwright as an addendum-surname in my professional life; I was writing under the pseudo-pseudonym of Lexie Kelly-Wainwright, and I'd even changed my Facebook display name to Lexie Kelly-Wainwright-When-Convenient – an ironic, self-reflective comment on the nature of the disease that was turning out to be only half a joke.

And in that moment it seemed to me very much a sort of creeping disease, a genetic disorder like Huntington's, or maybe a Trojan-type-time-release trisomy of some secret chromosome. I had watched a he-cousin and two sisters before me succumb to its effects after long years of fighting and denial. Eventually, they had changed their names and picked up guitars. They began appearing in the newspapers shortly after.

You have sensed that this was coming, yes?

I was the last holdout, and here I was parading around the Hamptons, doing what? Sinking deeper and deeper into a vat full of concentrated essence of Wainwright. I was using that name; I was strumming that guitar. I was sleeping with that book under my pillow.

When you realize you are sick in this way, you have two choices: turn tail and flee, only delaying your slow descent, or

run headfirst at the thing and see what comes of it. What's one thing I could not do if I were still Kelly on the inside? I asked myself. A number of options popped into my head, but I decided that if I were going to do finish this investigation, I had to pick the hardest task and launch myself at it. I didn't legally change my name or record an EP. I went for the heart of it. I decided to talk to my father.

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My father, Wainwright Incarnate – the man I think of and refer to as the Patriarch, though even now that Uncle Stuyv is dead there are other living Wainwrights, older and richer, I'm sure – spends most of his time in the basement office of this family home on Shelter Island. It is his dragon's den, in which he locks himself for hours on end, a plastic DO NOT DISTURB sign nicked from some hotel or another swinging ominously from the doorknob. Typically I am not allowed into the dragon's den because once I forgot to plug his printer back into his computer after I used it, and that got me banned from almost the entire basement of my own home. But I agreed to brush that slight aside temporarily; this time, I was there on business. I had asked to come.

I sat on the edge of his loveseat and watched nervously as my father rootled through a cardboard box. "I know I just saw a picture of Uncle Stuyv's house in here somewhere, not too long ago..." He rubbed his forehead and continued to search through the mound of old papers and photographs. He was nervous about having me there, too.

"It's okay," I said. "We can just, um, discuss you. Um... do you think you had a happy childhood?"

I told you we don't talk.

He sat down across from me and leaned back. “I would say I had a really happy childhood,” he said. “Until the age of ten.”

“Really.” I frowned. “Why’s that? Well, why was it so happy, first of all?”

“Oh, you know, I did the things that kids do... ride a bicycle and all of that. What happened at ten was that we moved back from New York to California, and that was also in my mind the beginning of the break-up of my parents’ marriage. And despite the fact that they remained married for another twenty years, I would have to characterize that marriage as an unhappy one, from my point of view. And then later I started to go away to school – I don’t regret that, but it was difficult...”

I was still hung up on the parental piece. “Do you think that it’s possible that they were unhappy before then, and that you just didn’t notice it until you were ten?”

He shifted in his seat. “I think the problems that they had started to get really serious around then. Alcohol and infidelity – those were the sort of generic problems they were going through. I don’t think my parents were suited for each other, either.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “They were from two different ends of the social spectrum. My father grew up on the Gold Coast of Long Island, in Cedarhurst and also out here in East Hampton. He went to boarding school; there was plenty of money... country club, blah blah blah. My mother was from dirt-poor Southern Georgia. She was what they used to call ‘white trash’.”

“Really.”

“So, they were attracted to each other when they met as young people, but I think once they got over that initial kind

of sexual attraction, the problem was that they didn't... they didn't... they weren't... they were mismatched."

I tapped my pencil against the side of my forehead. "Do you think that people from two different worlds like that are always mismatched?"

He hesitated before answering. "No," he said carefully. "I don't. But I think that my parents were.

"We only went down to South Georgia once. I remember it was a Thanksgiving vacation... I was about fourteen, and I couldn't even understand what my cousins were saying, their accents were so thick."

I thought about the annual Kelly family Christmas celebration – the mad flurry of wrapping paper, the platters of frozen chicken nuggets set out for the kids, the mad games of Catch Phrase, the raucous karaoke contests running late into the night. My father always sat in the next room, watching a football game or flipping through one of my uncle's books.

"My father told me I was going to private school, and three years later he told me I was going to his boarding school."

"Did he care about your grades at all?"

"Mm... not really. But he had been there, and so it was important to him that I go. He'd been unhappy there – he tried to run away, once, while he was there – but he thought it was... important... that I go."

My stomach lurched. I thought about my own experience at boarding school. I wondered if Loudon, Jr. felt that marble slab pressing down on his chest in the mornings (i.e., "I'd like to get away from earth a while and then come back to it and begin over").

"Afterwards, I didn't want to go to college, but he said to me that I was really going to want to have a college education, that he thought it was important that I have one. And I said, I

hate school, I want to be a performer, and he said, well, what about acting school? Of course, I only lasted a year and a half at Carnegie Mellon, but again, it had been important to him. My father went to UNC, but my father's father went to Princeton. My mother's people did not go to college. That was another thing.

"I dropped out of college and – you have to remember that it was 1968, and the Vietnam war was going full tilt, so dropping out of college was a risky thing for a boy, but I was determined. I wanted to be out in the world. I just wanted to hitchhike across the country. It was rebellion, and it was fun, too. That's around the time I wrote my first song."

It was strange to think of my father as a hippie. I thought about rebellion, the things I'd done, the work I was making, both under the Wainwright name and anonymously. "Did you ever see any of it as power play against your father?"

"Well, to get Freudian, I think it's natural to want to compete with your parents. I felt like I was definitely in competition with my father – we had the same name, we went to the same boarding school, we were both writers... it's an Oedipal thing, I think. There's nothing unnatural about that. I certainly think in the case of Rufus that's what's going on, and I imagine it's going on with you and me, too."

I flushed red.

"I think it's a general thing, though," he continued. "I think everyone experiences that."

"I'm not sure," I said. Ideas were forming at the base of my brain. "I mean, I guess maybe on the inside, or on a subconscious level – but not everybody reacts like that. Lots of people are more submissive. It has to do with personality types... although I don't know where personality types come from..."

“Look, I don’t know why anybody ends up the way they end up – Rufus, or me, or you, or any of us, or anybody else in the world at all. It has to do with how you’re raised, and genetics, and luck. I never thought – I mean, a career FELL into my lap. I wasn’t even – I was just messing around. I played a little guitar. I had a record deal within a year of writing my first song. The universe just got in a line for me –” he moved his hands parallel to one another “ – and I don’t even know why. I had no big struggle in the beginning of it, like a lot of people I know. I was good – but a lot of good people don’t get noticed. Mostly, I was lucky.”

Since I began this essay, it has occurred to me that, for the majority of my short life – the life I share with my mother – I have had it all wrong about my father. At least, I know now that I had it all wrong about what Wainwright was all about. Because people have been asking me if I was a musician since as far back as I can remember, and because I read *Vanity Fair* as a young child, I grew up believing what the press and the popolo alike were saying: that to be Wainwright meant to be part of a ‘modern musical dynasty’. But Wainwright, it seemed, was something much older and deeper – a legacy of determination, talent, aggressive personality, and, perhaps above all, luck. It had undergone a redefinition in the 1960s when my father had taken the reins and steered it off into a whole other direction altogether, and the result of this was that nowadays nobody much bothered to think about the centuries of military victory, academic prowess, and accumulation of capital that had preceded this. At the time of his supposed divergence from the straight and narrow, my

father might have been seen as a “hippie”; immediately following his unexpected success, I imagine there was a period in which he could have been called a maverick for his swift redefinition of what it meant to be a Wainwright. In actuality, though, he was not so different from his forefathers; he continued their legacy of achievement, and instilled a sense of its importance in his own children through his preoccupation with and imposition of the Freudian. As for the press and the popolo, they prefer pretending that it’s got to do with the ineffable genetic power of music, a misconception I find both asinine and somehow disrespectful to “those who came before us”. In the modern Wainwright sphere, music has become what’s in vogue, but that will change one day, if not with me than with my own children, or their children.

The frightening conclusion is, of course, that there is no cure for the disease. Can anyone ever really free himself from his parents? I’m inclined to say no, but then again, as I’ve said, I was half-raised by a Freudian. I look at *Those Who Came Before Us* through the populist lens of a Kelly and I find it a ludicrous, elitist attempt at maintaining a precarious foothold at the top of a defunct and now largely imaginary socioeconomic ladder. The generalships, the family plots, the string of Roman numerals desperately and urgently affixed onto the ends of the names of the sons – these things serve as symbols of the arbitrary patriarchy that rankles my working-class sensibilities. My father himself will agree that the Wainwrights have often been luckier than they have been determined or particularly talented, and the Kelly in me finds this pathetic.

But the Proddy Wainwright in me is proud of this luck, because I take it as proof that we have been granted certain advantages because we are inherently worthy of them. On the wall at the top of my father's basement stairs is a weathered needlepoint family crest:



Wainwright

And along the bottom of the needlepoint are stitched the words:

Spes Mea in Deo

In Latin, it means, "My hope is in God."

"Funny thing about that crest," my father told me as we stood up, our first real conversation in a long, long time coming to a close. "Years ago, I was looking at it, and I realized that – well, the lion is holding an axe, which is slang a guitar, right? And he's sticking his tongue out, just like I do when I perform, and he's got one leg back. And I often kick my leg back when I'm on stage, singing and playing the guitar. Isn't that funny?"

I blinked. It was funny. It was especially funny coming from my father, a man who scorned my Rugsrats and told me to put my own damn socks on and more often than not had to leave the room when my mother and I talked of Santa Claus or the American Dream. My father was a rationalist. He may have been a hippie once, but he was not the kind to spot omens in his Earl Gray tealeaves or ciphers encoded in the dashboard of his Volvo S40.

I looked at that lion for a long time after I had gone back upstairs and he had retreated farther into his cave. The symbolism wasn't obvious; the lion really seemed more to be kicking its leg forward, and at first glance the so-called axe could have been a flag or a smudge. I wondered how many hours he had stared at that lion before he had finally hit upon that picture of himself. I wondered if Stuyvesant Wainwright II had spent a long time looking at it, before he died – he wouldn't have had much to do, those weeks he spent in bed, in "failing health" and all. I wondered if he saw the lion holding a gavel, or maybe the deed to a second or third yacht. I wondered if his father, Stuyvie I, had looked at that crest and seen not a lion at all, but rather Flash, his dearest friend, standing there on his back legs, pawing the air, smiling up at him, immortal. I wondered what meaning I would give to it and take from it one day.

But enough now; I have said too much. I have told you I am sick, and I am refusing to go on anymore about my illness. I have an old disease in an old part of the world. I am seventeen years old; I cannot handle myself. I let the lion be and walked away to go lie down. I dreamt about Sag Harbor Elementary and Aquebogue School.

“I walked on Rosewater. I dug holes for Rosewater in Rosewater. I lived in Rosewater houses. I ate Rosewater food. I’d fight Rosewater, whatever Rosewater is, and Rosewater would beat me and leave me for dead. You ask people around here and they’ll tell you: this whole world is Rosewater as far as they’re concerned.”

-- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*