

Burns & Falls

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Here is my father during his final scene in the 1979 B-classic, *Deadly Husband*—a long shot up a wooden staircase, a door opens and swings wide, a tuxedoed man in flames rakes at the air, coming towards the camera. He bear-paws the smoking space in front of him before angling into a dead fall off the top step. Halfway down he rolls and pinwheels, shudders once off the brick wall, then bursts through the banister. As the son of a stuntman I know he's holding his breath to avoid burning his throat, that his ribs are taped with packing foam and that his skin is slathered with fire gel made from sheep's wool fat. I also know this is his last movie stunt—a splintered banister punctures his right lung and he spends the next six weeks on a ventilator. A few of the studios send flowers and tropical fruit baskets but when he gets out they refuse to take his calls since he can no longer somersault or hold his breath for more than three seconds. Over time, he gets most of his athleticism back, but pretty soon his embossed business card—*Dick Spades, Burns & Falls*—languishes in the rolodexes that matter. Because this is Hollywood in the pre-Blackberry age, his rejection is analogue and oddly personal—an army of interns, first readers, and secretaries invent golf games, vacations, and obscure illnesses on behalf of their bosses.

What follows is a swift decline. There is the drinking, the tattered racing form guide in his back pocket, the failing stunt gym where overweight, part-time security guards hurl themselves through smoldering tires. By 1985, he runs aground and I am not far behind him. Our respective marriages dissolve. He loses my mother to cancer and I lose my wife to negligence. After years of living as an itinerant academic, teaching film studies in the “directional universities” of the Midwest (the likes of *Central Southwest State* and *North Upper Midwestern Plateau*...) I return to LA an untenured bachelor.

When I first get back, Dick invites me to breakfast at a Denny's in Glendale. It's the first time we've spoken since my mother's funeral a few years earlier and he's wearing pleated khakis and a shirt with zippered air vents under the arms. He's aged the way heavy drinkers do in warm climates—his face is puckered and sun-ravaged, his eyes, without the protection of his aviator sunglasses, look tender as bruised stone fruit. He flirts with a waitress who has the laugh and pallor of a career smoker. I watch as he swivels his coffee mug and I sense he's going to ask me for money, long before it surfaces in the dead waters of our conversation. Over his Lumberjack Slam, chewing to avoid his shoddily capped front tooth, he tells me that German Shepherds are the dogs most likely to bite and that December is the worst month for armed robbery. Like many stuntmen, he's obsessed with numbers and chance and fate. When he rides in an elevator he stands near the controls as a precaution against free fall.

"They might want me to do a commercial," he says, bifurcating a buttermilk pancake with a steak knife.

They is a stand-in for the networks, the suits, the man.

I nod slowly, sip my coffee. "That's great, Dick."

I started using my father's Christian name the second time he quit AA, when I was a junior in high school. I quickly discovered that it worked to drive a conversational wedge into any unwanted conversation. It acted like an appeal to authority during a debate—I was invoking higher powers. But it was also shorthand for: *Dick Spades you are a grown man out in the world so don't ask me for any favors or money.*

My father doesn't seem to notice his own name. He continues eating methodically, keeping both knife and fork in active service, an affectation he picked up during a London shoot twenty years ago. Dick still prides himself on being able to pronounce Worcestershire as *woost-a-sheer*. He looks down at his left index finger, which became a knuckle shorter during the filming of a civil war

biopic in 1965. I've always maintained that his calling the finger a stub is misleading, that a one-knuckle abbreviation is not worthy of that kind of melodrama. He tells me my worst injury was at childbirth and that I have no right to judge. At bars and parties, he tells people that he feels barometric pressure changes, even seismic shifts, in his stub. This is known as a Dick Spades conversation starter.

“It’s a car commercial so I’ll drive off a ramp and flip it. Remove the door handles and cigarette lighter first, all potential projectiles. Maybe even the windshield, depending on the shot. It’s been a while but I think it’s doable. Shit, I’ve flipped hundreds...”

“When is that?”

“Could be a month or so...”

I sip my coffee, waiting.

He obliges with, “The thing is, I could use a floater...”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means two hundred dollars.”

“You do know I live in a studio apartment and adjunct, right?”

“Because you got yourself divorced and now you’re back with the rest of us slobs. I always liked Judy in a bikini...”

I shake my head in disgust and he blows some air between his lips and slumps slightly. I don’t know where he’s living and I’m afraid to ask. I reach for my wallet and give him \$65 and a coupon for discounted Thai food in Venice Beach. He takes the cash but slides the coupon back in my direction and whispers, “Worse than rotgut.”

We finish the meal in relative silence, neither of us mentioning my dead mother. During coffee refills my father makes the waitress smile and cough. When I pay the bill at the table he re-handles the cash so it looks like he’s the one leaving the tip.

Then there's an upswing, the surprising plot point in the middle of Act II. But unlike what I teach my film students, the hero has not overcome obstacles and faced down his demons so much as received a cosmic handout. Lester Summers, a retired actor who Dick doubled in a dozen spaghetti westerns in the sixties, takes my father in. After four failed marriages, Lester buys a property in Laurel Canyon and needs someone to look after his horses. He puts my father up in the converted carriage house and my father, when he isn't drinking twelve-year-old scotch with Lester, trains the horses to walk backwards, jump barrels, fall from a gallop. Dick's big plan is to rent stunt horses to the studios and split the profits with Lester—never mind that in the films of the late 1980s horses are outnumbered by motorcycles, helicopters, planes, and cars by about a hundred to one.

Two years into this tidy arrangement it all comes undone after Lester thoughtlessly suffers a heart attack in his diamond-shaped swimming pool. My phone rings in the thin blue hours of a weeknight and it's Dick Spades on the line in a state of drunken bafflement. It's the same wheezy roughneck who called me five years earlier in Central Indiana to ask me if I had a black suit that didn't smell like mothballs he could borrow for my mother's funeral. My father, it turns out, has been largely sidelined from Lester's will and the movie star's sister, the executor of the diminished estate, has given Dick 30 days to vacate the property.

A little breathily, he says, "...you know how many broken ribs I took for Les and that, in fact, my left eye never focused right after that one horse fall concussion...fifteen thousand dollars and a palomino with a bung foot is not my idea of Even Stevens..."

I take the cordless phone out onto the narrow balcony of my studio apartment. By this time I've fallen a rung lower on the academic food chain and am teaching extension classes, revealing the mysteries of three-act structure to dentists and paralegals. Since my ex-wife has remarried a West Hollywood orthodontist I often imagine that he will end up taking my class and writing a box office

hit. I don't know his name—or can't remember it—but I picture him as a weekend warrior, one of those guys who doesn't shave until Monday morning and who rides a paid-in-cash Harley in leather chaps. I hear my father take a pneumatic pull of air and it makes me think of his morphine days on the ventilator. My mother would stand by his bed for hours, the chrome of an LA summer flaring behind the window shades and my father's heart pushing a green scintilla across a small black screen. Just six months away from her own death she didn't tell us about the cancer until Dick was back on his feet. She was never one to upstage him.

On the phone, Dick says, "You know I actually dragged him from the pool and tried to bring him back to life."

"You did CPR?"

"One man operator. Two breaths to fifteen compressions...a chest like a goddamn Christmas ham."

"So what are you going to do?"

"*What am I going to do?* Let's see...for the next thirty days I'm going to live in every room of the big house, sleep in his waterbed that is big enough to have its own tides, and I'm going to use all five bathrooms and piss in the swimming pool...that's what I've got so far."

I hear the measured exhale of cigarette smoke and I let his drunken rant peter out a little. Growing up, I could predict the future based on the color of what was in his glass. If it was colorless and odorless, then his mood would burn nostalgic and end in tears. He'd come into my room, slump down on the mattress and kiss me on the forehead. If it was brown and smelled of smoke, then he would throw a plate or yell at the television before falling asleep in his recliner or staggering out into the suburban street. My mother once found him asleep in the neighbor's doghouse. On summer Sunday afternoons he would nap on the roof of our house in Venice Beach, drinking and listening

to baseball games from a tiny transistor. Sometimes we left him up there for hours. Now, on the phone, there is an edge to his voice and I picture him drinking Lester's highland scotch.

"Then what?" I ask.

"I might need a stopgap. Might need to crash on your couch for a spell..."

"Jesus, Dick."

"Preciate it."

"You have the money he left you. You could rent something."

"Probate could take a while..."

"Listen, I'm going back to bed. I have to teach in a few hours."

"Sounds like a tough day, Aristotle...It hurts my feelings, it really does... Lester spent fifteen grand on a suit..."

I lie in bed for a few hours, unable to sleep, so finally I turn on the television in my bedroom. Naturally, as I flip channels, I see an old western my father worked on. He doubles Hank Tyler, a shorter, B-version of John Wayne. There he is in a cowboy hat and spurs—seen from the back—jumping from a water tower onto a fast-moving train. When the credits roll I see that *Comanche Sundown* was made the same year that I was born.

Two weeks after the phone call, and against my better judgment, I drive up into Laurel Canyon to pick up my father after the going away party he's thrown himself. Tomorrow, I'm pretty sure, Lester's sister will arrive with a locksmith and a sheriff. In the meantime, all weekend long, Dick and his pals from his stunting days have been marauding the house, pool, and grounds. On the way out there, I stop in front of my ex-wife's house (an address I know from legal correspondence). Her new husband—let's call him Charles—straightens teeth in West Hollywood but they live up in the canyon. Commissioned by Charles, the house is an apparition of glass and steel, perched up high

and cleaved into the canyon wall. It's a house built by someone who thinks earthquakes are a rumor, who routinely cheats on his income taxes and fudges the ten-items-or-less grocery checkout line. He might even vote libertarian. I can tell all this just by looking at the house and it puts me in a bad mood as I continue up the hill.

Lester's property is a rare five-acre tract in the canyon. I visited my father here once before, when the former star was still alive. Back then, the place possessed a weary art-deco charm—the three-story white stucco house rose above the canyon and slate-tiled swimming pool, the cabana had a canvas awning painted in bold stripes, and the gravel drive was lined with antique rosebushes. Inside, the house was full of brass fixtures and nut-brown leather club chairs. The rooms were spacious and cool, smelled of wood, and frequently coursed with the chinking of ice cubes and billiard balls.

The first thing I notice as I pull along the drive is that the horses are grazing on the lawn, some of them saddled and bridled. I park my ten-year-old Datsun between a white pickup and a camo-painted Jeep. When I get out I can hear men's voices from the back of the house so I walk around to the pool. My father once told me that a stuntman's body is a map of his career and this thought comes to me as I see Dick and four other retired stuntmen gathered poolside. Dick is standing on the diving board, above the tannic-looking water, with a martini glass in hand, his shortened finger raised in the air like a pilot checking wind direction. In the drowsy sunshine of late afternoon, I can see the burn scar across his abdomen, the metal-pinned kneecap that raises slightly away from the rest of his left leg. The other men are holding glasses of liquor and smoking cigars in mustard- and ale-colored swimming trunks. Their bodies haven't fared much better. A hundred westerns and thrillers and sci-fi movies are studded into the constellations of scars and welts or the dogleg set of an arm broken many times. Dick throws back his head, empties his glass, and throws it off towards the canyon. The other men cheer boozily and then Dick throws his arms up, bounces

off the edge of the diving board, and swivels in midair like a marlin wrenched from the ocean. His landing lacks some grace—too much surface area hitting the water—but it’s still an impressive feat of athleticism for a drunk in his sixties. The other men clap as Dick surfaces in the brackish water, his teeth clenched. When the applause subsides, each man holds up a scorecard and one of them records the total.

When my father sees me he looks to the others and his face sours. “You boys remember Martin, don’t you?”

There’s some perfunctory nodding and handshaking. They have names like Depression-era boxers—Benny, Lou, Colt, and Hal.

Attempting to bridge the sudden silence, I say, “Who’s winning?”

Benny, a hand on his scarred chest, says, “The games have been going all weekend. This is just one event out of ten. Judge will have to tally the numbers to determine the outright champion. You wanna bet on your old man?”

“I was supposed to pick him up today.”

My father runs a dirty towel—embossed with Lester’s initials—through his wet hair. He digs a finger into his right ear and cocks his head to the side, hopping on one leg. “We have until midnight. The actual legal documents say that.”

I briefly consider my options. It’s six o’clock on a Sunday evening in June. I could leave and come back, but that would mean more driving and I worry about what I will find in six hours. I imagine Lester’s sister suing my father for damaged property and him losing the \$15,000. I decide to stay and the men return to their drunken decathlon. My father tells me there is some home-made guacamole in the house and I should have some, then bring the bowl poolside. “Pronto,” he adds briskly, like he’s talking to a trick horse.

A lot of good horror movies have the moment where a stranger enters a house and we see him from a high angle, looking down as he enters the aftermath of some debauchery. From up high, the character looks vulnerable and small as he takes in the mayhem around him. I actually have the presence of mind to think about camera angles as I survey the wreckage of my father's bender. The cherrywood floors are strewn with wet towels, lamps are knocked over, paintings are askew. In the open-plan kitchen there's a metropolis of liquor and beer bottles jutting from the granite countertop. Around midtown, I see a bowl of browning guacamole strewn with corn chip shards and as I prepare to empty it into the garbage disposal I notice there is a brown loafer obstructing the drain hole. Judging from the scuff marks on the toe, it looks like the shoe was used to push another item down into the disposal unit. I remove the shoe and scrape out the bowl and open the door to the dishwasher, revealing a living grotto of mold and fungus. Never mind a cure for cancer, this fluorescing chaos contains everything I've ever felt about my father.

I spend the next two hours cleaning a dead and forgotten celebrity's house while my father and his stunt pals test each other's stupidity, dexterity and inebriate skill. Every now and again I hear a Cherokee war cry or a hooligan's alley whoop. Nobody remembers the guacamole and since they're all pissing in the pool, nobody comes into the main house. All I can think of, as I scrub the dishwasher out with bleach and load the washing machine with towels and fill a dozen trash bags with garbage, is that I will not let my father lose the \$15,000 he inherited. I see him sleeping on my fold-out couch, smoking on my balcony for months on end. This apocalyptic vision comes, frame by frame, like a montage—brooding, discordant jazz plays below jumpy shots of him padding around in a threadbare robe. He calls me *tiger* and *kid* and *Aristotle* and tells me I should install grounded power sockets in the kitchen. I will help him push his case with social security, follow up on his decade old worker's compensation claim with a defunct studio, drive him to part-time job interviews. I see him in the lumber aisle of Home Depot, wearing an orange apron and a nametag,

smelling of wood shavings. Who wouldn't want their lumber cut by a sober and avuncular Dick Spades? This is all I want for my father—a lunch pail and a nametag.

Around eight o'clock I go out on the balcony to check on the progress of the AA Olympics. My father sits bareback on the palomino, smoking a cigar, and the horse stands in the shallow end of the pool, its bridle askew. The other men sit under the cabana awning, illuminated by a sconce, their faces hangdog and slightly yellowed. I try to work out how my father got the horse into the pool, how I could have missed such a commotion, but then I see that there's a cement ramp along one wall, perhaps installed for the ageing actor's planned decline. My father makes the horse walk backwards in the water while both his hands are in the air. This gets a sloppy round of applause from the cabana. I find myself returning to the kitchen and calling the police, pretending to be a neighbor complaining of noise. I tell the operator that I'm unwilling to give my name because people in the canyon hold grudges. I'm proud of this flourish and I go back out on the balcony and wait for the growing wail of a siren. But when a police cruiser prowls up the gravel drive, there are no lights or sirens. Two frat boys in uniform get out and walk around to the pool, flashlights drawn. They stand at the edge of the deep end, training beams of light across the water at my father, who is still on horseback. I hear one of them say "how fucking cool is that!" and that familiar feeling of being the killjoy comes back. I want the waitresses, life guards, cops, and commuter passengers of this world to let my father sleep on their fold-out couches and see if he's just as charming. Some mild-mannered discussion ensues with the two cops, during which I hear laughter and at least one "I love that movie!" Eventually, the cops disperse and the stuntmen call it a day. I lock the back door so that none of them can reenter the house. What few possessions I've found during my cleaning frenzy have been lined up on the front porch.

The first surprise of my father's stint with me is that he doesn't sleep on the couch. He rummages through a hallway closet and finds an old sleeping bag, from my college camping days, and spreads it out on the narrow balcony. On several occasions, when I ask him about it, he uses the word *bivouac* to describe his nights spent on the fourth-floor balcony above a busy Sepulveda. As I dress and prep for classes, he studies the racing form guide, watches boxing and Nascar. He has the good sense to drink while I'm gone and get rid of the evidence before I come home. By five in the afternoon he's asleep on the couch—napping is apparently the furniture's highest calling—and sleeps off a daytime hangover until midnight. He describes his midnight suppers, during which I try to sleep against the clatter of pots and pans, as “dinnertime for Spaniards.” After a few days I begin talking about part-time jobs and offer to drive him to interviews. He tells me he has plans brewing and the lawyer says the check will come soon.

My neighbor from across the hall, a cute anthropology grad student named Chelsea, naturally takes a shine to my father. On several occasions I find my father eating cupcakes or cookies that she has made and brought over. This wouldn't irk me so much if Chelsea and I hadn't nearly dated on several occasions. A year ago, we began watching Hitchcock movies on my couch because I chided that she'd never seen any film made before 1980. We did this for a few weeks, but then she fell asleep during *Vertigo* and this provoked an argument. After that, we were standoffish with each other and the romantic tension fizzled out. Chelsea claimed, later, that in the heat of the argument I'd called her movie nap a *terrible moral failure*. Regardless, I now had to contend with my apartment being filled with Chelsea's baked goods.

One night I wake to see my father standing a few feet from my bed, swaying slightly. A pungent wave of bacon and onions streams off his clothes. It occurs to me that the combined kitchenette-bedroom-living room area is designed either for a single person or to incite domestic violence. I want to ask him if he knows, off the top of his head, what the statistic is for family

homicides in efficiency apartments. He shuffles over to my bed, sits down on the edge, and says, “I can’t find the butter. Also, I’m sorry that I’ve been such a colossal piece of shit as a father.” For a moment I think about what to say but nothing comes to me. I feel something thicken in my throat, but then I say, “Middle drawer. You’ll have to open a new one.” He nods, mulling it over. Then I hear a single snuffle and that’s how I know he’s stashed some gin somewhere in the house.

He gets the check six weeks after the probate hearing and moves out the following day. On the sunny apron of a weekday morning, one of his stunt pals—Benny? Lou?—picks him up in a rusting Lincoln Towncar, the engine gurgling like an outboard motor. I picture them cashing the check at a pawnshop and driving to Vegas or Los Alamitos, so I’m hesitant when I ask him where they’re headed.

My father looks at his accomplice, grinning, and it’s clear that now we’re in a buddy road movie. I see a small cooler of chilling beer, its lid already cracked, in the cavernous backseat. He says, “The Inland Empire.”

“What’s out there?” I ask, playing along.

“We’ve procured a business. Equal partners.”

And with that the Towncar sails down the street.

I don’t hear from Dick Spades for three months and then he calls me to invite me to the grand opening of his new business venture. He tells me he’s given up liquor and that beer is next. I ask him what the business is but he won’t tell me over the phone. So I’m forced to write down an address and map out directions to a small town twenty minutes shy of Barstow. On a Saturday afternoon, it takes me a little under two hours to get up there, passing around the pine-studded San Gabriels and heading northeast towards the Mojave. Appropriately, I pass through the town of Pearblossom, where a rest stop sign reveals that this section of US-138 is known as the Deathtrap

Highway. I drive carefully along a two-lane blacktop, the landscape turning scrubby and treeless. Eventually, I branch off onto a washboard road and see a hand-painted sign for *Tiki Stardust Ranch*. A chain link fence comes into view at the base of an eroded mountain escarpment. There's an enormous billboard on a metal tower and I see that it's been whitewashed. My father has gone into the billboard advertising business, I think, and then I mentally count the number of cars I've seen within the last twenty miles. I pull into a gravel turnout, where a car and a van are parked, and go to find my father. It's not until I'm standing well inside the compound and my father bounds from a battered Airstream that I see a concession stand and rows of drive-in speakers. I look back up at the screen and feel slightly embarrassed that I thought it was a billboard—it's much too broad and white.

“You're early,” Dick says. “Showtime isn't till sundown.”

The word *sundown* seems like an affectation, but I let it go. I shake his hand. Something about three months and the desert air makes me feel cordial towards him. Maybe he *has* given up liquor. I get the grand tour. He and Hal are equal partners, I learn, and have borrowed money from a local bank, which has taken the compound and Airstream as collateral. Hal and Dick share the trailer and it has its own A/C unit. The concession stand is a Tiki hut, complete with bamboo walls and a grass-thatched roof. My father tells me that because the nearest town is unincorporated they are permitted to sell beer without a license. I feel my mouth open as I squint in disbelief. The speaker stands look like white crosses as we move among them. The projection booth is a cinderblock shed positioned on a mound and, off against the fence, there's a kind of makeshift sideshow area for use during intermission. It's roped off and contains an aquarium tank with a couple of snakes inside, a sandpit for games of horseshoe, and several folding chairs beside old-fashioned standup ashtrays. As Dick and Hal show me around, I can hear condescension settling into my voice. Over in the corner of the compound, grazing among tussocks of scrub grass, is the

kink-footed Palomino. I feel some old familiar sadness wash through me—I'm Jonah in the belly of another doomed Dick Spades enterprise. Part of me wants to get back in the car and return to LA, avoid the humiliation that is to come in a few hours. But I don't. I ask what I can do to help and spend the next few hours hanging streamers and balloons along the roadside fences.

When darkness begins to settle the air grows cool and clear. A few early stars pinhole the sky above the dogtooth rim of the mountains. We see headlights dotting towards us from the highway. There's a minivan from Barstow, crammed with teenagers, and they've cut out a coupon from the local paper. There's a few muscle cars and a vintage Ford Pinto with a heavily tattooed woman driving. A single-looking dad shows up with a backseat full of boys. By 8:30 we have all of fifteen people inside the compound, parked and waiting. I see my father's slouching silhouette as he walks up the hill towards the projection booth. I go sit inside my Datsun and recline my seat so I can see better. Silver pales of light break above the car rooftops and they land on the big white screen in a grainy approximation of white noise. The speaker sputters and clears and a tinny soundtrack fills my car. For a brief moment I am expecting a new release—*Top Gun* or *Platoon*—but then it makes perfect sense when I see the opening for the 1975 heist movie *Getaway Charlie*. A hotrod guns down a narrow street as a contrail of exhaust clouds the shot. A martial drumbeat swells. Both Hal and Dick performed stunts on the film, a plotless sequence of car chases and waterski jumps that culminates with my father standing atop a Chubb safe as it's dropped from a crane into the ocean.

During intermission I watch the teenagers taunt the snakes inside the glass tank. I'm briefly terrified by the thought that my father and Hal will perform halftime stunts and estimate we are thirty minutes from the nearest EMS. Thankfully, nothing like that happens. I see my father lead a boy around the compound on the back of his horse and I can hear him talking to the kid about movie stunts. The boy's father is also walking along with them and both the boy and the father are entranced. My father keeps repeating, *Yes, I did that*, again and again. He tells them to see if they can

spot him during the final shot and lifts his shirt to show them his keepsake—a rope burn so deep that it left a permanent welt.

Everybody returns to their cars and the movie starts back up. I disconnect my speaker and watch the action unfold without sound. I can hear the muffled and heavily-percussive soundtrack vibrating in the other cars, but I feel cut off and removed, like I'm in a submarine at the bottom of the ocean. By the time the crane drops my father and the safe into the Pacific I have fallen asleep. I remember waking to the empty compound and seeing my father walking away from my car with two plastic cups of illegal beer in his hands. I keep trying to re-edit the mental footage, but I'm left with the conclusion that he'd come over to commiserate with me and seen that I was asleep. I'm sure it wounded him, because he didn't call me for a full year. By then, the hipsters and vintage car enthusiasts and weekend road warriors had discovered the kitschy dreamland of *Tiki Stardust Ranch*. They showed up in droves, camped overnight, took pictures beside beaming, retired stuntmen. The place got write-ups in local and then regional newspapers with headlines like *Drive-in Renaissance*. *The Hollywood Reporter* did a piece about stuntmen showing their own movies and that attracted industry people looking for a way to kill off a Saturday evening. One Sunday morning, Chelsea showed up at my door holding a copy of the *LA Times* and told me I had to see this. She came inside and splayed open the newspaper on my coffee table. There was a full-page write-up about the ranch and a large, color photograph of my father. In one corner, you could see the drive-in screen and one of my father's stunts playing out (a high, burning fall) and in the foreground was the real Dick Spades, grinning at the camera, standing on the back of his horse, his arms raised in the air like a man resurrected.