

2015

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Recommended Citation

Blum, Isaac. "Ketchup and Bananas." *The Iowa Review* 45.2 (2015): 22-29. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7560>

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Ketchup and Bananas

Generally, when something absurdly tragic happens to you, the world just keeps on going. *Your* world may halt, but nobody else's does, and you learn just how insignificant you really are. Unless your freak tragedy coincides with the death of a ketchup mogul and United States senator. In that case, shit shuts down. The flags fly at half-mast. Important people make speeches. You get your picture in the paper.

On April 4, 1991, ketchup mogul and United States senator John Heinz was killed when his airplane collided in midair with a Sunoco helicopter. After Heinz's little passenger plane smashed into the helicopter, the fiery wreckage fell onto the playground at Merion Elementary School in suburban Philadelphia and killed two children. One of them was my sister Rachel. I don't know who the other one was.

My father has a box of magazine and newspaper clippings in the basement, and every April—going on twenty years now—he sits me down and goes over them with me, like I'm studying for some kind of exam: "What was the destination of the plane?" "How many former presidents attended Heinz's funeral?" "How much did Sunoco settle their lawsuit for?" "What was the name of the student teacher the school sent out to identify the bodies?" "What did we eat for dinner that first night?"

My dad wants me to mourn Rachel as he does. But she was six. I was two and a half. I do not remember her.

Most people do not have the benefit of newspaper archives documenting the loss of their loved ones, and I do enjoy—or not enjoy, but appreciate—looking over the black-and-white photographs.

There's one photo in particular, a picture of mourners at my sister's funeral, walking from a car to the grave. The photograph shows my family: my parents, my aunt and uncle, my grandparents. I wasn't at the funeral—a funeral is not a great place for two-and-a-half-year-olds.

In the photo, my family's wearing black. Their heads are hunched, and they look miserable. But when I look at the picture, I can't concentrate on them, on their faces, on their grief. I look instead at a plastic grocery bag my father carries in his left hand. It's in the foreground of the image, and the local photographer has mistakenly focused on the bag.

The caption reads, “The Blum family mourns the loss of their daughter.” There’s no mention of the bag, but it demands attention. The bright, bulging plastic monstrosity leaps out from the photo. It has life in a way that the man holding it does not. My father’s face is vacant, like he’s not really there. And I always think, when I hold the picture up under the fluorescent basement lights, that if you want to find my father in the photo, you can’t look at him. You’ve got to look at the bag. To know Larry Blum, you have to understand why he brought a bag of bananas to his daughter’s funeral.

My father hates telemarketers. And since people have been telemarketing things to him for decades now, he’s come up with a number of ways to fuck with them.

“Hello?” he’ll say. “Yes, this is he. Oh, okay. Could you hold on a minute, please?” And he’ll put the phone down. He’ll go cut up some fruit for us to snack on, and when ten or fifteen minutes have passed, he’ll return to the phone. “Oh, you’re still there. I’m sorry, but could you hold another minute?” After watching the first quarter of the Sixers game, he’ll return once more. “Oh, too bad, they’ve gone,” he’ll say to me, and laugh.

There is, however, an exception to my father’s ill-treatment of telemarketers. Sometimes when he receives a telephone solicitation, you don’t hear his usual sarcasm. “Oh dear,” he’ll say, and he’ll sit down on the couch and lean forward to listen, phone pressed to his ear. “Oh my, oh dear,” he’ll continue, and you know that the call is about hunger.

People can call asking for donations for animal habitat protection, cancer research, or arts initiatives, and even though he usually supports these things, he’ll treat the caller like crap and torture them into taking his name off the call list. But if the caller informs him that somebody somewhere is hungry, he cannot muster even trace amounts of cruelty. He *must* help.

“The hungry children...” the telemarketer begins, and Larry Blum’s stomach begins to grumble, and his heart begins to ache.

“They haven’t eaten in how long?” he asks. What would it be like to go days without food? What about weeks? *Months*? What would that feel like? He cannot know. He can only imagine, and his imagination leads him to his wallet. As he walks to the kitchen for an emergency snack, he donates several hundred dollars to help feed the children, or the earthquake victims, or the war refugees.

“Larry,” my mother pleads, “you can’t give money *every time* they call.”

“But they don’t have *food*.”

“I know you care, and you’re just trying to help, but if you give all of our money to *them*, there won’t be any more to feed *us*.”

Years after Rachel’s death, when our next-door neighbor died of an unexpected heart attack, my father didn’t really know what to say. What could he *say* to a family of five suddenly reduced to a family of four? But he did know what to *do*: he made sure that Sidney’s widow and children wouldn’t go hungry. Each day after work, he went right to the kitchen and prepared enough food to fill a decent-sized silo. He would then take half the food next door. Sometimes if he was running late he would call me, so I could do some prep work. “Cut up two onions. Yes, finely. And please peel and slice eight carrots into about quarter-inch pieces.”

We ate very well when Sidney died. We had garlic bread, roast lamb, rosemary chicken, baked shells: all the things my father makes best, all the things I usually begged him to make but that were either too unhealthful or too time-consuming for our normal dinners. It was food fit only for the grief-stricken.

My father’s need to care through food is not limited to humans. Our family has a dog, or a “canine friend,” as my mother likes to say. His name is The Honorable Venustiano Carranza, President of Mexico. But we just call him “El Presidente,” or “The President.”

The President and my father have a somewhat adversarial relationship. My father resents the barking in the middle of the night, which keeps him up. He resents the shitting on the floor, which he sometimes has to clean up. And he resents the affectionate, often urinary, bombardment with which the dog greets my father’s guests. “President of Mexico?” my father says. “More like President of Nuisance. How do you say *nuisance* in Spanish?”

“*Pesadez*,” my sister replies. “And he is not a nuisance. Look, you’ve offended him now that he’s heard it in Spanish.”

“The dog does not speak Spanish.”

“Then he’ll have trouble ruling Mexico.”

“He has trouble not defecating on the rug. I don’t think he’s cut out for executive leadership.”

There is one exception to my father’s ill feelings toward the dog. He insists on feeding him. He personally ensures that the dog is *never* hungry. “*Tienes hambre*, El Presidente?” he’ll ask. “Yes, of course you are. It’s dinnertime, after all. How’s kibble sound tonight?” The dog barks with excitement and bounds at my father’s knees. “Oh, what a hungry

doggie,” my father purrs as he dumps the kibble into the dish. “What a hungry President we have.”

I was once in the car with my father and The President when my father pulled into a McDonald’s drive-through. My father never eats fast food. “Why are we going to McDonald’s?” I asked.

“The President is hungry,” he replied.

I looked at the dog, who’d just awoken from a nap in the backseat. He didn’t look hungry to me. “How do you know?”

“He just is. I can tell.”

“Do you have some kind of sixth sense to detect The President’s hunger level? We’ll be home in ten minutes. Can’t he wait?”

“I don’t want him to be hungry all the way home.” Then he turned toward the microphone next to the drive-through menu and said, “Yeah, hi, I’d like two double cheeseburgers, please, but without ketchup. Ketchup on neither.”

Since 1991, nobody in my family has eaten Heinz ketchup. Not even the dog.

My parents didn’t sue Heinz after the accident—he was dead—and our family boycott of the H.J. Heinz Company isn’t official. Heinz makes everything from condiments to sauces, soups to pickles, taquitos to bagel bites. But I’ve never seen one of their products in our house. It goes without saying that my father does the family’s grocery shopping. And he does it diligently. For most people, the grocery store is a place where they might spend an hour or so on Sunday, to stock up on food for the week. For my father, the grocery store *is* Sunday. He can spend the whole day there.

When most people grocery shop, they walk down the aisles, and when they see something they’d like to purchase, they place it in their cart and move on. My father, when he sees something he’d like to buy, cannot simply put it in his cart and just keep going. He’s not capable of such a brash, uninhibited act. When he sees something he’d like to buy, he has to read the ingredients, considering fat content and brooding over sodium levels. He then reads the ingredients of every other available brand or variety of that product. Then he examines the price, and if it all checks out, he places it in his cart.

I once asked my father to buy a snack called Dunkaroos. Dunkaroos are tiny cookies that come in tiny individual packages. Each little package also contains a small well of frosting, into which one dunks the cookies. The cookies come in different flavors, and each flavor comes with a different frosting.

My father said that he would buy them, despite their apparent “moral and nutritional depravity.” When he returned from the grocery store and began to unpack the bags, I watched with anticipation for the colorful box of depraved cookie snacks, but they never emerged. “Dad, what happened to the Dunkaroos?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I tried to buy them.”

“What do you mean you *tried* to buy them? They wouldn’t let you? They didn’t have them?”

“I’m really sorry,” my father said solemnly. “I just couldn’t do it. I read the ingredients.”

“I told you not to read them.”

“I had to. I’m sorry.”

In moments like this—when living under his health-food autocracy has sent me to the edge—I’ve been tempted to remind my father that his daughter didn’t die of heart disease or malnutrition. But he knows. We both know that low cholesterol is a poor defense against a falling plane. And if I said it out loud, it would hurt us both a lot more than it would hurt me not to eat Dunkaroos.

Once, my father was sick. I don’t remember precisely what he had. Some kind of stomach bug. And this made it impossible for him to go to the supermarket, as neither the ACME nor the Pathmark had a public restroom. So I volunteered. I’d just received my driver’s license, and I drove to the grocery, list in hand, to buy the family’s weekly supplies. I felt like Ken Griffey, Jr. must have when he signed with the Mariners. Or maybe the way one of those Bach kids felt writing music.

Desperate to win my father’s approval, I marched up and down the aisles, adhering exactly to the detailed shopping list. But I ran into trouble when the only low-sodium yellow mustard was Heinz.

I plucked the bottle off the shelf. The price was right. And it would probably taste like any other mustard. But the bottle itself was uncomfortable to hold. It was like the name on the label made it heavier in my hand. I didn’t want my parents to have any condiment-driven flashbacks, so I put it back and went with a store-brand Dijon that was on special.

Everything else went swimmingly until I got to the fruits and vegetables. With non-produce—with grocery items that aren’t alive—you know if they’re good or not, because they’ve got expiration dates printed on them. With fruit, you have no such luxury. What does a ripe cantaloupe look like? What does it feel like? What does it smell like? The only sense by which I could identify a ripe cantaloupe was taste, and that’s the only one you’re *not* allowed to use at the grocery store. I’d seen my

father test fruit ripeness before, picking things up, sniffing them, turning them over in his hands. I tried to emulate these steps, feeling for some sort of sign or signal. But when you don't know what to feel for, groping fruit is just that: it's groping fucking fruit.

Despite my very real anxiety, I managed to select some produce, then paid for the groceries and went home.

My father helped me unpack the food in the kitchen. When he pulled the bananas from a brown bag, his proud smile became a concerned frown. "Isaac," he began slowly, "all of these bananas are yellow."

"Aren't they supposed to be yellow?"

"Well, when they're ripe, yes."

"You wanted rotten bananas?"

"No," he said with a sigh, "but when you buy bananas, you have to buy some in anticipation. You buy some that are ripe, to be eaten immediately, and some that are not quite ripe. These can be eaten later, when they ripen."

"They're not fine wines, Dad," I said. "It's just a few pieces of fruit." But I was wrong to pick a fight about bananas with my dad.

"A banana," my father says, "is the perfect food. It's cheap. It's mobile. It's good for you—loads of potassium. It's delicious. It's easy to eat. It comes in a biodegradable wrapper. It's God's snack food."

"You don't believe in God," I remind him.

He picks up a banana, handling it as you would a religious relic: with care and reverence, his head bowed as if in prayer. "Yes," he says wistfully, holding the fruit before him as Hamlet holds Yorick's skull, "but the banana's perfection almost makes you want to, doesn't it?"

On the most recent April fourth, I was playing tennis with an old friend from the neighborhood. I have a master's degree, but it's in the fine arts, so I still live at my parents' house.

My cell phone rang. The caller ID read "Home," and I answered, figuring it was going to be about something mundane. But my mother informed me that I should come home. The wavering in her voice and the spring breeze that swept across the court reminded me of the date. I always forget. I don't have an anniversary-of-sister's-death reminder set in my phone.

"Hey, asshole, you going to keep playing?" Aaron asked from the other side of the net. For once, I was beating him, and I could hear the frustration in his voice. "I want to get my comeback started. This is fucking embarrassing."

I put the phone down and tried to give him a this-is-the-anniversary-of-the-accident-that-killed-my-sister look. I didn't really want to talk about it. I wanted Aaron to see in my eyes that I had to go, so no explanation would be necessary. But life is not a feature film, and without a soundtrack my meaningful look probably just seemed like fatigue. "Come on, let's go," Aaron prodded.

"I can't, man. I've got to go."

"For what?" he asked, leaning on the net.

"Dinner."

"Dinner? It's 4:30."

I checked my watch. It was indeed 4:30, which made dinner a poor excuse. "You know how my dad is," I said.

Aaron chuckled. "I do indeed. Your dad and his fucking dinners." Aaron paused, walked lazily to the edge of the court, and started packing his stuff. "You want a ride?" he asked. I shook my head and started the short walk home.

As I walked, I tried desperately to think about my sister. I tried to dig up any distant memories, even fake ones: stories I'd been told enough times that they seemed like memories. But I couldn't come up with anything. My mind kept bringing me back to the tennis match, and I found myself wondering if I could beat Aaron more consistently if I kept him on his backhand and stopped him from getting to the net. If I improved my approach shots, I could keep him on the baseline and dictate the points with my own net game.

I could think about this crap, but I couldn't think about my sister. The closest I could come was to think about my dad. The fourth is always a depressing day in our household, and I imagined my parents huddled on the couch together, my father with a bowl of cereal. My mother, maybe, wanting to hold his hand, but having to settle for an arm or knee, his hands occupied by bowl and spoon.

At home, I found my mom asleep on the couch in her bathrobe and my dad in the basement, looking through pictures and newspaper clippings.

This time around, I decided to play along. I found my go-to photograph and stared at the bulging grocery bag. "So what was in the grocery bag?" I asked, though I knew the answer.

My father looked up and smiled. "Bananas," he said. "To help people grieve. It was already so awful. I couldn't stand the idea of people being hungry *too*." And my father kept talking, providing me with a hundred more details: where he'd purchased the fruit, how much he'd paid (per pound), where he'd put the bag down when he'd reached the gravesite.

But I'd stopped listening. I gazed beyond the photograph in my hand and pictured the way my father peeled a banana: slowly, solemnly, the peel divided into four even strips. And I felt a sudden pain welling up, a deep ache you might call sorrow or sadness. But I wasn't sad for the loss of my sister. I was sad because I couldn't mourn as earnestly as my father could peel a banana.