

## Aint Steve

Brooke Champagne

**M**y step-uncle Steve drifted into my mom's house on the New Orleans Westbank, that 2010 Thanksgiving when the Saints squeaked out a 30-27 win against the Cowboys, with a cigarette in his mouth and a cheetah etched on his leathery neck. Had I known that a few years later I'd give birth to a daughter who'd love cheetahs with an ardency other little girls reserve for rainbows and unicorns, I might've offered a thumbs up, said, "cool tattoo, bro." As it was, I was 30 with a graduate degree in hand but still arrested in my professional development, full of certainty that the key to literary success was to distance myself from all that is neck-tattoo-adjacent. I'd done a month-long study abroad in Prague, for Christ's sake, I'd smoked and mispronounced *Gauloises*, and here was Steve looking like what unfiltered Marlboro Reds taste like. Harsh, unseemly, disconcertingly like home. Just as I had during previous Thanksgivings, I simply pretended Steve wasn't there. Yet I couldn't help side-eyeing the cheetah's pawing towards his Adam's apple every time Steve protested a ref's bullshit call.

The cheetah was fake, I overheard him tell a party of interested toddlers. And despite feeling some relief that future Steve would be cheetah-free, I still wondered, who here is my "real" family? What's a step-uncle, anyway? Like pretentious, advanced arts-degreed assholes of yore, I was ashamed by what I interpreted as the intellectual impoverishment of my family holidays. The cheetah's temporariness almost made it worse, indicative of not only bad taste but failure to commit. Nowadays, Steve's neck tattoo and preferred hairstyle, a spiked mullet, are nearly normalized. Athletes at least can still acquire great jobs with both, like rookie Saints punter Lou Hedley, dubbed by Yahoo Sports as the most interesting 2023 NFL draft pick. Most of his skin is tattooed, and on his neck resides the faces of both his grandparents, with a large, rainbow-colored beetle nestled in between them.

Steve would never see Hedley play, though I'm sure he would've appreciated the Aussie punter's blue-collar background. Hedley had been a scaffolder before transitioning to rugby, then football; Steve was a lifelong mechanic. Other basic facts about Steve: he was 26 when he escorted his 18-year-old girlfriend to

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prom, and he subsequently knocked her up and married her. In the decade-plus before she gained the courage to leave, he terrorized her and their sweet boys aided by his two favorite assists, booze and coke.

After Steve’s death in 2019, during that interregnum when we’re allowed to say lovely things about people who caused much misery or died horrible deaths, (and Steve was a top draft pick for both), I learned that he’d been a preternaturally beautiful baby. Mothers at Schwegmann’s would roll up on Steve’s mother, Lilly, to gush over his doll face. These were women with average-looking children sitting inside their grocery buggies, runny-nosed and ignored. I also hadn’t known that although he’d been a beautiful child, he’d had difficulty making friends. Several teachers noted Steve’s disinterest in socialization, how he’d sit off to the side during playtime and stare into the distance, neither dully nor unkindly, rarely making eye contact. No one even considered “autism spectrum.” Words like “loner” were enough for little Steve of the ’60s and ’70s. No one knew until much later about his schizophrenia and how, left untreated for most of his life, it likely contributed to some of his more appalling behaviors. That time, for instance, when he repeatedly whacked his own head with a hammer, trying to release an idea or a thing no one else could see or understand. I want to say these were reasons I avoided him, that like a cheetah I ran fast from volatile family members. But traditionally I’ve straight up tackled volatility, run smack into it. With Steve, I just thought, “basic” or “incapable of conversation.” Left it at that.

Steve ended his life on the Crescent City Connection, one of two twin cantilever bridges crossing the Mississippi, connecting the Eastbank from the West. But I don’t want to tell you about that just yet, about his jump, his bloated body, or the fishermen who found it days later. How his death wasn’t covered on the news, but perversely, on Reddit; how because of the nature of his death, and his parents’ insistence, no online eulogy exists in his name.

I just want to imagine, for now, if instead of stopping on the bridge, instead of pulling over and taking his last breaths, Steve had kept driving the four miles and eight exits it takes to arrive at Barataria Boulevard and head toward Marrero, to Foliage Drive, to my mother's house. Not because there was a holiday to celebrate — just a boring late May morning — but because Kevin, his brother, would've been home on his lunch break for Napa Auto. We were just days past the 2019 NFL draft! Had the Saints picked well? That question could initiate that evergreen convo Steve was more than capable of. Would our first-round pick, Erik McCoy, turn out a bust? Centers are crucial — could McCoy make the right decisions under pressure, become the hub for the offensive line? Just scrutinizing a single round of draft picks, damn, there's so many pieces to put together. To figure out what fits where. Steve could consider it alone, sure, but why not drive to Foliage, get some prognostications from his baby brother. Like most everyone in my family — yes, my actual family — Kevin likes talking, likes loving and hating the Saints. And Kevin could talk to you, Steve, right now. Instead of stopping, you could take a cue from your bygone cheetah and fail to commit to this forever decision. And at a cheetah's top speed, 65 miles per hour down I-10 West. In those 10 minutes of imagined highway, I watch you in a way I've never thought to before — driving toward a routine family destination in the midday sun.

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