OTIS IS RESURRECTED
by Brady Udall

It was three days after our old man died that my brother, Donald, accomplished the most spectacular deed of his life. I wish I could have been there to see it: Donald taking the Greyhound down to Nogales all by himself, buying the baby armadillo for eight hundred pesos from a pie-faced Indian woman at the Santa Acuna market, tucking the little thing under his arm like a football and running the length of the pedestrian border station, past the heat-struck tourists in their sombreros and loud socks and the guards with their sidearms and walkie-talkies, pushing through the last steel-toothed turnstile into the heart of the Nogales slums.

It was his proudest moment, though it did take him the rest of the day and half the night of wandering among the hookers and street-corner punks to find a bus that would bring him back to Ajo. I don't know how he managed not to get robbed or killed or at the very least his teeth kicked in, but there he was after I came home from hours of frantic searching, sitting stiff-backed on the couch, beaming.

Donald ended up giving the armadillo to me. A present, he said, something to make me feel better. I thanked him, took the armadillo, which clawed at my T-shirt like a cat, and gave it a little squeeze. What else could I do?

My father had worked as a janitor for twenty-one years, but he was also a reader of books, a scholar—if it is possible to be both a scholar and a sixth-grade dropout—and one of his favorite subjects was zoology. He could bore you into a coma with what he knew about the great horned owl or the common mealworm or the laughing hyenas of Africa. But of all the beasts of the animal kingdom, he loved and admired the humble armadillo most.

"Nope, not the smartest or prettiest," he would say when one of them scatted across the highway in front of our old Le Mans, "but the hardiest, you see what I'm saying, the most resourceful."

He often promised he would get us an armadillo for a pet, but he died before he could come through: an end-all heart attack standing in line at the grocery store. His heart pretty much exploded inside him and he went down so fast, dropped with such suddenness, that the other customers thought he'd been shot, victim of a drive-by or some such, and hit the deck themselves to avoid the gunfire.

I was seventeen, Donald nineteen. Our mother—a Guatemalan migrant worker who had married my father under the impression he would one day be a rich man who could buy her a Cadillac and a house with a swimming pool—had run off when we were babies, so it was just the two of us now. It took me about a week to get over the shock and then I did what I had to: I dropped out of school, started working full-time pouring concrete for
Hassenpfeffer's and moved Donald and me to a cheaper apartment near the McComb & Sons wrecking yard, where Donald could watch the cars getting pulverized from our window. We got money from the state that paid for Donald's medication, but the rest was up to me. I toyed with the idea of locating a job for Donald—maybe Burger King or Goodwill could find something for him to do—but in the end decided against it. A few years back our father had tried to help him get a job—he thought it would do wonders for Donald's self-esteem. My brother worked for one day at a taco shop (fired for handing out the tacos free of charge) and lasted about twenty minutes as a restroom attendant at the English Acres Country Club (peering over the tops of toilet stalls).

Donald was really something else. What could be done with a guy who ate his own earwax? Who carried a maroon mini-Bible in the band of his underpants and read random scriptures out loud at inappropriate times? Who could be sashaying about the room one minute, doing a dead-on impression of Sammy Davis Jr., and the next be downstairs in the closet grunting like a pig and trying to tear his hair out?

My father wanted to believe that Donald was some kind of eccentric genius, or at least a savant who had an amazing but as-of-yet undiscovered mathematical or musical skill. By the time Donald turned twelve, my father finally gave in and took him to see a series of doctors, who confirmed for us what we had suspected all along: Donald was seriously messed up. Manic depression, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder—a whole list of diagnoses, none of which solved anything except to keep Donald where everybody but my father agreed he belonged: finger painting and making crafts out of macaroni and popsicle sticks at a special school.

From a distance, you wouldn't have been able to tell him from any other teenager. He had relatively good hygiene, did not usually talk to himself in public, and was something of a handsome devil with his dark hair hanging down over pale green eyes. Sometimes, I would take him to a party or dance with me and the girls would flock around us. He could be as charming as Hugh Hefner in short bursts, quoting from his scriptures or doing a dead ringer for Perry Como, before he'd have to run off and hide in the bathroom.

I remember once when I was nine or ten and we were playing in the backyard. He kept pesterling me, saying, "I am the Indian, you are the cowboy, okay?" I told him to shut his trap, I was busy building a cave for my army men. He wouldn't give up. "Me Indian, you cowboy, okeydokey?" Over and over. "Dammit, Donald, you freak!" I hollered. "Do whatever you want, but just shut up for a second!"

"I'm not a freak," he said, sticking his chin out.

"All right, then," I said. "You're a goofball extraordinaire."

The next time I looked up Donald was on top of the doghouse with the bow-and-arrow set my father had bought for him at a garage sale. He had the arrow notched and pulled back to his ear, just like the Indians on TV. I hadn't noticed before, but now I saw that he had taken off his shirt and tucked it in the elastic of his shorts so it looked like he was
wearing a loincloth and had used a little blood from the scab on his elbow to make fiendish red streaks across his face. He was doing it perfect, really, just like a TV Indian, an honest-to-God savage. I didn't believe he would really shoot me, so I just sat there like an idiot, my hands full of dirt. I didn't see him let go of the bowstring but I certainly did hear the thop! the arrow made when it hit me in the chest, dead center. More from the surprise than anything, I fell flat on my back. It was only a target arrow, but it pierced my sternum just enough to stand upright from my chest, waving around sluggishly like a reed in a river.

I lay in the grass and stared up at the neon yellow fletching of the arrow. My hands were still full of dirt. Donald jumped down from the doghouse and stood over me. He was smiling an odd, satisfied smile, as if he was expecting to be congratulated on his marksmanship. He looked at me for a long time before he gently put his hand around the shaft of the arrow without pulling it out.

He said, "Right smack-dab in the heart, white man."

I told Donald I wanted him to name the armadillo. After several days of deliberation he decided to name it after Otis, the happy drunk on The Andy Griffith Show, who our father had resembled in almost eerie detail.

The first time we saw The Andy Griffith Show was the day we got our first TV, a little black-and-white Zenith with a twelve-inch screen. When Otis, unshaven and blubbing drunk, walked into the courthouse to allow himself to be incarcerated for the weekend, Donald grabbed his ears and screeched, "Oh no, it's Pop!" Half-terrified, half overjoyed at this development: our own daddy showing up on television. But it wasn't long before Donald understood that it wasn't our dad at all, just somebody who could have passed for his identical twin. Still, he never missed an episode of Opie and Aunt Bee and Barney Fife and all their many hijinks, and he would whistle that peppy theme song until I had to lock myself out of the house just to keep from throttling him.

I got used to taking care of Donald alone—I had no choice—but Otis was a different story. First of all, Otis smelled. He gave off a musky odor that intensified whenever he was nervous or hungry and no matter if we scrubbed him raw with industrial soap and water, the smell would come back in an hour or so. And then there was the furniture. Armadillos are burrowing animals—this is something I learned from my father—and in the confines of our small apartment, Otis didn't have many opportunities to burrow. Instead, he would march through the house like a tiny gray tank and move the furniture around. One of his favorite tricks consisted of wedging his body between the wall and refrigerator and puffing his sides out, moving the whole refrigerator inches at a time. Bored with that, he'd waddle into the living room, put his blunt forehead against one of the legs of the coffee table, and bear down, inching it around the room, his little squirrel claws scrabbling on the wood floor. At least once a week, without fail, he would crawl between the mattress and box springs of my bed and take a dump. My father was right
about armadillos: they are hardy, they are resourceful, and, if Otis is typical, are as dumb as donkey crap. Sometimes, in the course of his incessant apartment wandering, Otis would find himself trapped in a corner and would spend the rest of the evening attempting to claw his way out.

I never considered getting rid of him, even though it was like living with a large, dimwitted rat. Otis was technically my pet, but Donald cared for him, worried over him, tormented him, teased him, then made up with tearful professions of regret and affection. While I was away at work they would do things together. Donald would carry Otis around outside, conversing with him, rooting in the weeds in the vacant lot, searching for earthworms or crickets for Otis' dinner. He also liked to build obstacle courses in the apartment with pillows and end tables and couch cushions, all of which Otis could bulldoze through in a matter of seconds. Sometimes, while Otis was going about his business, oblivious to everything else, Donald would hide behind the recliner and when Otis passed by, would jump out and shout in a high soprano wail, "Look out, Otis!" Poor Otis would spring two feet into the air, like a startled cat, his leathery body twisting, his claws clutching at nothing, and once he'd landed he'd scurry into the hallway, looking back for Donald, embarrassment in those little piggy eyes.

This kind of living arrangement was no boost for my social life, I can tell you. If I ever wanted to bring a girl home, I figured I'd have some difficulty explaining why the apartment smelled like a bear's den, why the furniture was strewn around as if a hurricane had blown through, why my brother was naked and hiding behind the couch waiting to scare the daylights out of an armadillo.

It took five years before I found someone I loved enough to bring home. Allison was good about everything, told me I was a saint and a Christian to be taking care of Donald. She was so wonderful and beautiful and good-smelling I could barely stand it, and we made out that first night on the floor of our apartment while Donald snored happily under his bed and Otis watched us like a little night-devil from his special spot behind the refrigerator.

About a week later I proposed to her, after which I went home to talk to Donald. It was springtime in the desert, the smell of cactus blossoms everywhere, and I was so full of love and desire I could hardly see straight. Allison and I had decided that we would get an apartment nearby, that with my new promotion at Hassenpfeffer's and Allison's job at the county courthouse, we could afford our own place and, with the help of the government, support Donald. Donald would be all right as long as we checked in on him daily, made sure he was taking his medication, occasionally washed the place down with ammonia so the smell wouldn't bother the neighbors.

I have to admit the thought of escaping from Donald and Otis and that cave of an apartment was almost as enticing as the thought of being with Allison. I loved my brother, but that night I felt a weight lifting off me; I had caught a whiff of the sweet scent of freedom.
At home, when I sat Donald down to explain things to him, I could barely get a word out; I stuttered and stammered, kept wiping my mouth. When I finally made myself clear, Donald whipped out his mini-Bible and frantically paged through it but couldn't seem to come up with anything—the first time I had ever seen him at a loss for a scripture. He yanked at his hair and ground his teeth together until they squeaked. Finally, without saying a word, he snatched up Otis, who had been napping under one of the couch cushions, and went into the laundry room, slamming the door behind him.

I felt like kicking that door down and wringing his neck—couldn't he at least try to be happy for me, to think of somebody other than himself for one minute? I went outside by the stairwell to cool off a little, settle my mind. There was a fat moon out, and in the junkyard a coyote, white and gliding like a ghost, passed between the tangled mountains of ruined cars. No, I did not want to be here anymore. I wanted only to be with Allison, and I hated Donald for making it so difficult, hated him for the years of responsibility and obligation and lost opportunities, hated him in the way only a brother can hate a brother.

I had taken a few steps toward the stairwell to leave—I didn't care, I was going to stay at Allison's, my first night ever away from Donald—when I heard a splashing noise from inside the apartment. The laundry room door was locked and I shouted Donald's name, but got no response. I tried to kick in the door, which was made of something like cardboard; my foot went right through it. Once I had my leg free, I looked through the splintered hole and could see Donald hunched over the utility sink, both arms submerged up to his biceps. The back of his neck was purple and pulsing, full of angry blood, and it took me only a moment to understand he was trying to drown Otis.

I unlocked the door and grabbed him from behind, but he resisted, grunting and plunging Otis deeper into the water. I wrestled him out into the living room, where we fell sideways against the couch. Donald twisted away from me and stood up, the water dripping off his elbows, forming a puddle around his shoes. Otis was curled up in a ball, just like when he slept, and Donald began to shiver so badly that he lost his grip and let Otis' body slide out of his hands and hit the floor with a wet slap.

Donald's face twisted into a mask of concentrated grief. "See?" he wept. "See what I did?"

Looking at my brother, I felt all the parts of me that had been opening up since I had met Allison collapse on each other like so many empty rooms. It would have to be me and Donald, brothers, inseparable, no one else allowed.

I don't remember if I looked away, or if it was as sudden as it seemed, but one moment Otis was a sad, wet corpse, as dead as an armadillo could be, and the next he was huffing and twitching and scrabbling to his feet.

Donald let out an arching shriek which sent Otis zigzagging into the kitchen where a mad chase ensued, Donald slipping and flailing, knocking over chairs and pulling down the drapes, still choking and sobbing, now with relief. He finally herded Otis under the table
and once he had pulled him out, he held him up, his fingers locked in a death grip around his little body, and cried, "Otis is resurrected! Otis is resurrected!"

A fair trade: Donald got his armadillo back and I got to marry Allison. Never again did Donald show any sign of jealousy or resentment; he was the best man at our wedding, read a long section from Zephaniah at the reception, even brought us a gift: a book called Hot Dates for Cold Fish.

Things went well those first few years. We saved enough to buy the concrete business from old Hassenpfeffer, who retired to ride his Harley around the continent, and Donald and Otis seemed to thrive together. We stopped in to visit as often as we could—Allison cooked dinner for them on Tuesdays and Thursdays—and we paid a housecleaning service to scrub the apartment down every week, put the furniture back in place, and steam the carpets.

Donald had his first episode one night while I was in Phoenix at a heavy equipment auction. They found him digging up the lawn in front of the City First Bank, blabbering about how difficult it was to find high-grade earthworms on the south end of town. When the cops tried to approach him, he pelted them with dirt clods and threatened to eat a fistful of worms if they got any closer. He spent most of the night in the holding tank before Sheriff Brasky figured out who he was and gave me a call.

We took him to a doctor in Tucson who told us there was nothing to worry about as long as Donald took his medication faithfully. A few months later, at the city park, Donald climbed an old elm which branched out over a sidewalk. He managed to pee on a few passersby before the groundskeeper knocked him off his branch with a well-thrown rake. "Habakkuk two-eleven!" he read from his Bible as two deputies wrestled him into their cruiser. "Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood and stablisheth a city by iniquity!"

We tried a different doctor, who adjusted his medication and suggested that Donald be put in a home, where he could get the care and attention he needed, where he could socialize with somebody besides an armadillo. I brought up the subject with Donald, but he told me he would rather die than leave Otis to live in a house with a bunch of half-wits and knuckleheads. The only other option, we knew, was taking in Donald and Otis ourselves. Allison was eight months pregnant with our second baby, the business was really starting to take off—it just wasn't a good time, we told ourselves, we might be able to work something out in a few months when things had settled down. By the end of the summer, Donald was dead.

The call came in the middle of the night, like they always do. Sheriff Brasky told me that Donald had been hit by a car on 87 near the refinery, where all the construction was. He had run through traffic completely naked, dodging cars and sprinting down the median, until an old couple in a minivan clipped him with their bumper, knocking him over a
temporary steel divider and onto a concrete platform where he was partially impaled on a jutting piece of rebar. He bled to death before the ambulance arrived.

After I went to the hospital to identify his body, I drove out to the accident site. For half an hour I combed both sides of the highway without a flashlight until I found Otis, cowering under a piece of discarded plywood. His left foreleg was mangled, nearly torn from his body, and he was bleeding from the soft flesh of his belly. I could tell by the distant, cloudy look in his eyes that he was in shock. I drove him over to the only veterinarian in town, Larry Oleander, and pounded on the door until he answered. Larry was an old retired cowboy with a glass eyeball and a dent in his head where a mule had kicked him.

"Jesus Geronimo Christ," he said. It was four o'clock in the morning. I held Otis out to him and he said, "What you have there is an armadillo."

"Fix him up," I said.

"Son," he said, "I don't know what you think..."

"Do it."

Larry Oleander peered at me. He wasn't wearing his glasses, but I guess he could see the look on my face, even with only one good eyeball. He sighed and held the screen door open. "Come the heck on in."

Larry amputated Otis' leg, stitched up the wound on his underside, bandaged him until he looked like one big wad of gauze. When I tried to pay him he waved his hand in front of my face, took a slug off a bottle of vodka he kept under the operating table. "Jesus, Richard. Just promise me you'll never make a peep about this to anybody."

I took Otis home and he has been a part of our family ever since. Over the last few years I have added on a wing to the house just for him. He has a room with a skylight and two bay windows, his own pillow-bed to sleep under, and a bunch of old furniture to push around. I put a little doggy door in the wall and now he can go out and tear up the back yard any time he wants. As far as I am aware, he is the only three-legged armadillo on earth with his own personal wading pool.

Allison is not thrilled about having an armadillo in her home, never has been, but she knows it's important to me. The kids—we have four of them now—can't stand Otis either. They want another pet: some kind of happy, slobbering dog or an albino snake to impress their friends. Otis is not only real, real dumb, they argue, but also smells like doo-doo; they're not sure which is worse. I tell them they are correct, they'll get no disagreement from me, but Otis is our pet, and we're going to love him no matter what.

I try not to let myself forget how blessed I am: my beautiful family, my dream house up in the hills, a successful business that pretty much runs without me. I am happy and
satisfied most of the time, but every once in a while, something will come over me, a
dark mood that I can't shake, usually at night when everyone is asleep and the house is as
quiet as a tomb, and I'll get Otis out from under his pillow-bed and take him upstairs. I
run a bath, sitting on the lip of the tub, holding him close to my chest the way he likes it.

The first time, I actually held him under the water for a moment—hoping, maybe, to
witness that same miracle of resurrection once again, but I couldn't go through with it, I
didn't have the strength, and lifted him out of the water after only a few seconds. Now, I
just let him swim around for a little while, his legs paddling, his sides puffed out so he
bobs like cork, until he gets tired and tries his damnedest to scrabble out of the tub.

I don't know if it's the splashing sound or having Otis wet and dripping in my arms, but
I'm always overcome with the same vision, sitting there on the edge of the bathtub:
Donald clutching a newly revived Otis, his face slick with tears, transformed from a man
twisted inside out with grief to someone awestruck at the realization that our worst
mistakes can be retrieved, that death can be traded in for life, that what has been
destroyed can be made whole again.

With a sudden surge Otis struggles to get out of my lap—he is an armadillo and there is
exploring he needs to do. I let him down and watch him slide around on the linoleum and
try not to push the toilet off its base and I feel a small, bitter joy lodge in my heart. "Otis
is resurrected," I whisper, careful not to wake anybody up. I carry him to his room and
make sure he is comfortable under his pillow-bed and only then will I be able to walk
peacefully through the dark, quiet halls of my home, kiss each of my children goodnight,
and lie down next to my wife to sleep.

BRADY UDALL is the author of Letting Loose the Hounds and The Miracle Life of
Edgar Mint, which has won many awards and been translated into eighteen languages. He
lives with his family in Illionis and Utah. "Otis is Resurrected" originally appeared in
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Some modifications have been made to this copy to render it appropriate for middle
school.