

Eulogy for Embry Cobb Rucker Jr.

By Rudy Rucker, December 7, 2024.

Embry didn't like Algebra and Latin. He did like cigarette lighters, the old Zippo kind with flints and fluid. He'd squeeze a puddle of lighter fluid onto a page of his Latin book and light it, and watch the flickering blue flame as the puddle shrank, leaving the Latin book unscathed. A wizard.

The long, fabulous parade of Embry's cars began with a Ford Model A, found in family friend's barn, wonderfully quaint. Embry was immediately adept with tools and manuals, showing a steady focus that Latin books could never arouse.

He'd drive me to our school in this red Model A, which had a rumble seat and a mysterious control called magneto—good for producing magnificent backfires. Sometimes Embry would take his hands off the wheel and yell, "Steer, Rudy, steer!" I wasn't good at that. I was better at Algebra and Latin.

In high school Embry was a 1950s classic. He wore a black suit with a pink shirt and a black tie with a horizontal pink stripe. He had stacks of hot rod magazines. He subscribed to the beatnik *Evergreen Review*. I greatly admired him.

Embry went to Kenyon College for a couple of years. He had a Greek friend with a name that impressed us: Zeis Papanikolas. And he brought home a couple of paintings that he made. But I think he rarely went to class.

Kenyon sent Embry home. Pop took Embry to meet an army recruiter, a man named Willoughby. Willoughby, signed Embry up. Embry had wrestled in high

school, and in basic training he'd wrestle with other recruits on the red dirt. He usually won. They called him Bad Ass.

A bonus of Embry joining the Army was a slot at the Army language school in Monterey. They taught him German, and stationed him near the East German border. His job was to listen to short-wave radio, noting what the East German officers said. His base's barracks were overcrowded, so they found him a room above a German pub. A pleasant tour of duty.

During this period, Embry and I took a memorable road trip around Europe in his tiny Fiat 500. I was 18 and he was 23. Our interests were approximately in synch. A high point was singing bluegrass songs as we toiled over an Alpine pass. "She's No Angel" in Kentucky accents. Honoring our heritage.

After the Army, Embry set his mind to becoming a pilot. He went after his goal with focus and determination, working his way up to full certification. And he found a job with a small airline in the West Indies, eventually becoming the general manager of Turks & Caicos Airways.

He was in the islands from age 26 to 36. Early on, he met Noreen Smythe, an utterly charming woman who was visiting her sister on Grand Turk Island. Noreen was the first datable woman Embry had seen in a year. And she was wearing a bikini. And she had that lilting Irish accent. Embry proposed.

Noreen would prove to be a wonderful partner, with a will and wit of her own. One classic saying of hers. Embry was trying to lay down the law about something, and Noreen disagreed. Quoth she: "What did you want then, a wife or a cabbage?"

In the islands, Embry and Noreen were blessed with two children, Síofra and Embry III, happy with the island life, playing on the beach, with a nanny, completely at ease. Embry himself was admired as a pilot. He and Noreen were well-loved by the locals and by the ex-pats.

As a pilot, Embry encountered anomalies. There was a client who never grasped that the plane went up into the air. She thought it transported you simply by roaring and shaking.

And the landing strips were rudimentary. One strip was too short to land on, because one end was cut off by the wall of a graveyard. The trick after landing was to steer the plane into a skidding turn before it hit that wall. Embry was good at this.

Embry took up scuba diving. I got diving lessons from him and from his friend who acted as a guide. After my first or second dive, I had blood in my mouth. The friend told me that I was about to die and that it was too late to do anything. Embry was frantic. He always looked out for me. And I didn't die. The scare was Viet vet humor.

After their decade in the islands, Embry and Noreen were ready to move on. Our father, Embry Senior, owned Champion Wood Products, a furniture-parts business. The company was failing and badly managed. After some hesitation, Embry agreed to step in. He and our father shared a special rapport. They were happy with the succession, and it was fine with me.

Embry brought Champion back to life and more, once again demonstrating the depth and power of his mental focus when working on something he cared about. He was liked by his employees and respected by his business partners.

Embry and Noreen became an integral part of Louisville society, with friends across the board. Their children Embry III and Siofra grew and bloomed, each finding their own unique paths, just as their parents had. Embry was so proud of them both.

Embry stuck with his business career for about twenty years, then sold off Champion and retired when he was 58. He was good at the game of running a business, but he didn't want to overdo it. He wanted to go back to doing what he wanted. I followed my big brother's example. When I was 58, I retired from being a professor to write full time. I didn't want to work harder than Embry.

So what did Embry do after he retired? He built, he traveled, and he hunted.

Construction was one of his delights. He'd lived in a house for about five years, all the while upgrading it—and then he'd flip to planning his next dwelling. Being Embry, he'd make a good profit on the move. But the process arose from deeper motives. For Embry, building was a creative and problem-solving process. He loved working out the details, and he relished the human contacts with his workers, tradesmen, and engineers. And legal hassles stimulated him. An endless game of Monopoly.

Regarding travel, Embry and I took a wonderful journey together after we'd both retired. We went on a long dive trip in Micronesia and Palau. We chewed betel nut, saw the stone money of Yap, and floated beneath a manta ray the size of a barn door, with brilliant cleaner fish busy in its gills, amid gently drifting manta dung. Not to mention the sea horses, and the lake of ten million jellyfish.

The peak was the insanely great Bue Corner of Palau, where the Philippine Sea meets the Pacific Ocean. We were seventy feet down, hovering above a vast,

slow cyclone of enormous trevalley fish, ringed by sharks bigger than our bodies, with sea turtles and eagle rays high overhead.

It was the trip of a lifetime, and a true bonding experience. It meant a lot.

Embry loved travel, and he especially loved hunting. Here is his description, taken from his second memoir:

“Hunting has given me much satisfaction and provided me with a multitude of unique experiences: the professional hunters, guides, and trackers I’ve come to know; the unique places I’ve visited around the world; the thrill of stalking dangerous game; the finesse of instinctive shooting; communing with nature in the wilderness; quiet moments with friends and family in the field; and the ability to demonstrate courage while facing danger.”

At age 69, Embry lost his dear Noreen. Two years later, he married Joanie MacLean, who remained his devoted and loving companion for the rest of his life. Joanie warmed Embry with her kind heart and bright spirit.

As time went on, Embry grew ever more compassionate and loving. At first, being his younger brother, I was slightly suspicious. But it was real.

He adored his four grandchildren Tinsley, Bella, Embry IV, and Ennis. He was deeply shaken by the loss of Tinsley in 2020. And yet he went on, like the rest of us, one soul among many. Love is the only way out.

Embry and I always liked to reminisce about our big dive trip in Palau. Indeed, we were recalling it the very last time I saw him, the day before he died, me sitting by his bed for several hours, our two hands clasped together. Two little boys facing the unknown.

My brother was a complex and remarkable man. Bold and dashing in his pursuit of adventure. Warm and protective to his friends and family. Serious about his projects, but quick to laugh at life's quirks. His journey was a road trip, an exploration, a swoop through the sky.

He loved us well.

He goes with God.

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For fuller information on Embry's life, see his two memoirs, published via Rudy's Transreal Books.

* *Coming in for a Landing: Ten Years Flying in the Islands*

* *Snowy Mountains and Dusty Trails: Hunting from Alaska to Zimbabwe.*

Both are available on Amazon, and both can be read for free online.

<https://rudyruicker.com/embrybooks/>