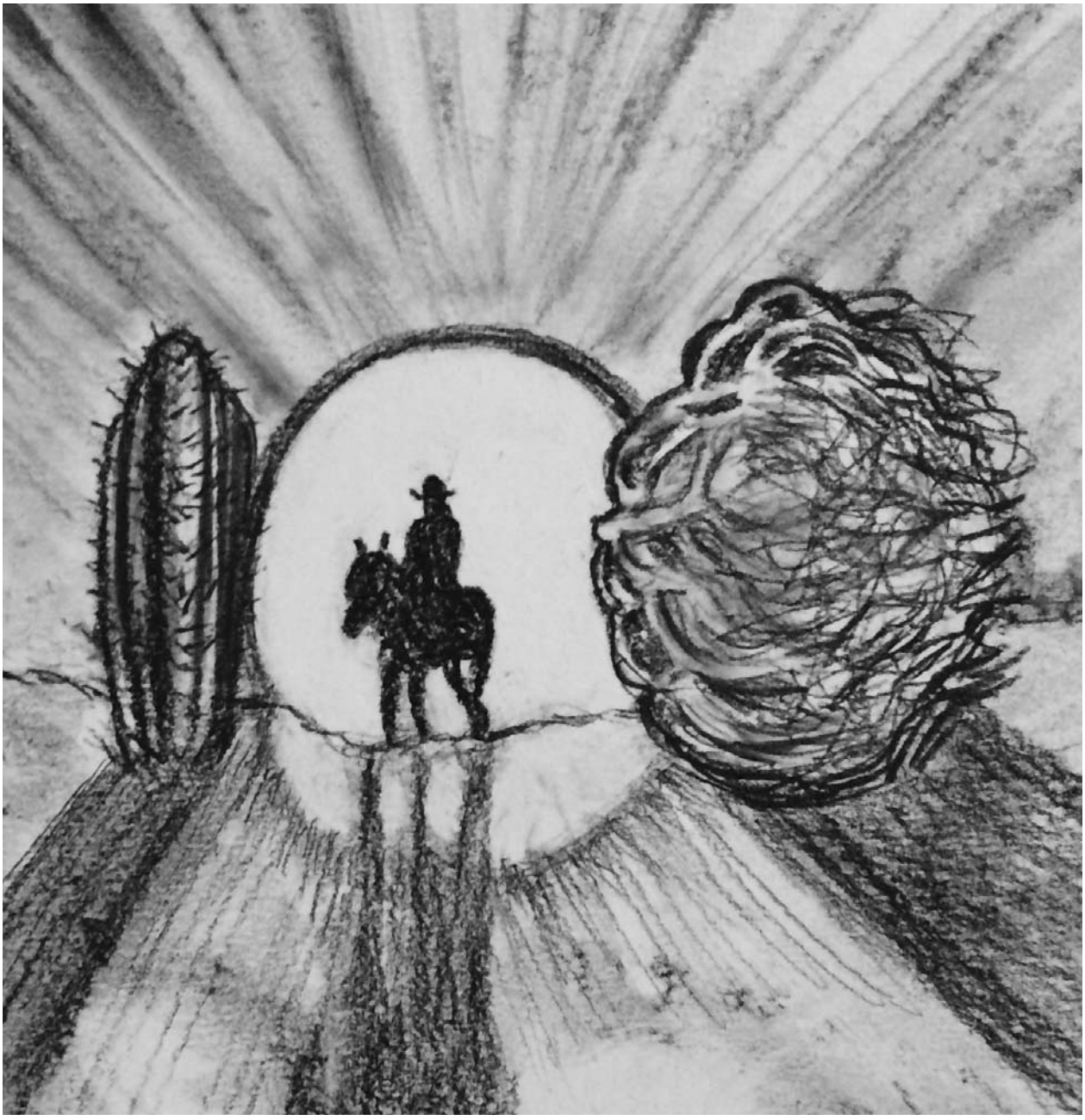
Ten Spurs



Introduction by Dave Tarrant

The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference

Vol. 10, 2016

EST. 1890

FRANK W. & SUE MAYBORN SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM UNT

Ten Spurs

Michael J. Mooney, editor
Neil Foote, associate editor

The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference
Vol. 10, 2016

FRANK W. & SUE MAYBORN SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM UNT

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Foreword

by Michael J. Mooney

Placeholder

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Acknowledgments

It takes a village to tell great stories. This village comes together every year to celebrate and study the works of talented writers from around the country at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. These writers devote weeks, months researching, reporting, writing and rewriting stories that they hope have meaning and impact. They quibble over words, phrases, quotes, rhythm, flow, scene and character. As I write this, I realize there are no words that could express the passion, the joys (and pains) of writing these reported narratives and personal essays featured in this publication. There are no words that could thank the judges who carved out time in their schedules to read, review, discuss and debate which pieces should be featured as *"The Best of the Best Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference."* So, as futile an effort as this may be, let me try.

Let's start with the writers. There's Jonathan Auping, *The Fat Blind Man and the Podcast*; Amy Burgess, *Teens Rule*; Christen Dennis, *Addicted*; Kathy Floyd, *Living Without Water*; Philip Kelly, *Candles*; Timothy Miller, *My Encounter With Koresh*; Amanda Ogle, *A River Trickles Through It*; Shannon Randol, *Married In Blue Jeans*; Virginia Riddle, *Crossing the Line*; and Chris Vognar, *The Trip to Nowhere*.

Our team of unpaid judges pored through hundreds of pages of stories over many weeks. There's no amount of coffee, donuts, snacks and other incentives that could capture the great care and attention that each judge took to ensure that they choose the best collection of works. They all are writers so they understand that every writer has injected their personal soul into these pieces. They know that each word represents a snapshot of time, emotion and thought. There's Doug Swanson, Zac Crain, WK "Kip" Stratton, Jim Donovan, Ronald Chrisman, BJ Robbins, Tim Rogers, David Tarrant, Joanna Cattanach, Bill Marvel, Katie Fairbank, Brantley Hargrove, Andrea Valdez, David Mann, Tom Huang and Charles Scudder.

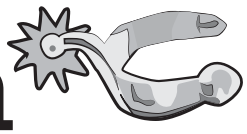
The other team of dedicated souls is our workshop leaders. These individuals spend the day with these writers "workshopping" these stories on the first day of the conference. They huddle themselves away in the usually windowless meeting rooms. They navigate their ways through emotion, personalities and specialize in the graceful nuances of helping the authors reimagine their stories. What happens during these sessions is magical. Yes, there are tears. There are intense debates. The workshop leader, folks like our good friend, Skip Hollandworth, might ask a writer, "Let's go to page 19. Read that paragraph aloud. Tell us what you're trying to do here. What do you want readers to feel here? To see?" Writers defend why they described a person or place in a certain way; why they used those specific quotes. "It can't be written any other way," they declare. Then, other writers in their workshop chime in. There's a point where there's a rat-a-tat-tat of comments and criticism. You could see the look on the writers' face. *"Why are they doing this to me? Why are they so mean?"* Then, the workshop leader finds the perfect moment to offer an anecdote from his or her personal experience writing a story. You can see the writers exhale. There's, in fact, a sense of relief. "How come I didn't see it that way?" There's gratitude from the writers. There's an excited, humbled sense of pride that reassures them that they can make their piece of work – even better. Thanks to Skip, Peter Simek, Bill Marvel, WK "Skip" Stratton and Susannah Charleson.

The other critical piece of Ten Spurs is what most of us writers typically don't pay attention to, but what I've learned over the years has become a signature element of our book. Artist Kate Green reads through our essays then pulls out her pencils and charcoal to create memorable cover art and additional illustrations that are sprinkled throughout the publication. Thanks to James Dale, the Mayborn School's marketing director, who juggled completing his course work as a graduate student to work with Jake Straka, a talented graphic artist and designer to do all the production work for the book, including the layout and design for *Ten Spurs, Vol. 10, 2016*. My co-director, Mike Mooney, who does an amazing job of juggling his intense career as a writer, often traveling around the U.S. and world to report his stories, to edit these essays to get them ready for publication. He recruited Dave Tarrant, the intrepid Dallas Morning News journalist who specializes in immersing himself in his stories, to write the introduction. Dave, of course, is a member of our Mayborn Conference Board, who also has served a contest judge, workshop leader and moderator of our panels.

Two other key people have been critical in helping me keep it together. Sarah Whyman, an Archer City alumna, set me on the right path before she took some time off, then handed the baton to JoAnn Livingston, a Mayborn alumna, who has been corralling the essays and reported narratives so that we can stay on task – and on deadline. Like I said at the outset, it takes a village to produce Ten Spurs – and this conference. Thanks to all those who may not have been specifically mentioned to help us achieve such excellence.

- Neil Foote, Co-Director, Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference

Introduction



by Dave Tarrant

Lessons from Archer City

Standing on the northeast corner of Center and Main streets in Archer City, I pondered my next move.

Was I going to stick my thumb out and commit to this hitchhiking adventure?

And was I dressed OK?

I remembered a few things from my hitchhiking days more than 30 years earlier, when I lived by the slogan "Have thumb, will travel." Hoping to make a good first impression, I wore a black T-shirt with the words Archer City Wildcats emblazoned in neon yellow letters, bought the day before at the local Dollar Store.

I also brought the square of cardboard that came with the T-shirt on which I scrawled my destination, Wichita Falls.

Now all I had to do was hold up the sign and stick my thumb out. I looked across the street at the Wildcat Café, where a cup of fresh black coffee and a plate of fried eggs, bacon and toast beckoned. Ah yes, those distracting Sirens come in all forms.

It was the summer of 2009. I was 53 years old. A husband with two kids at home. I hadn't hitchhiked since, hmmm.... The best I could recall was one lonesome weekend a few months after graduating from college when I hit the road to see a girl.

I had a job that summer working the night shift in the grimy composing room of the morning newspaper in Bridgeport, Conn., which still relied on clattering linotype machines. Hot lead would yield to cold type, computers, the internet and eventually Matt Drudge.

I was staying at the YMCA, back when they still rented rooms out by the week, mostly to old drunks and recently divorced guys. At night, as I tried to sleep, I could hear muffled sobs and the soul shriveling sound of an old cigarette smoker's chronic cough rattling through the walls.

After eight weeks on the job, I had to get out of there for a few days or I was going to go crazy. Since I didn't have a car, that meant hitchhiking. My ex-girlfriend's sweet and funny roommate lived only a few hours away in Asbury Park, N.J. She'd always been nice to me. I decided to go see her. And that's all the thought I gave it.

Son of Sam dominated the headlines that summer, and I keenly followed the saga of a psycho, serial killer causing panic in New York City, just 50 miles down the road. Jackson Browne's Running on Empty was my soundtrack. When it wasn't on the radio, I was singing it to myself. *Looking out at the road rushing under my wheels. I don't know how to tell you all just how crazy this life feels.*

***

I don't know how I got to telling my classmates and fellow writers at the Archer City narrative workshop about my hitchhiking days. Evenings, outside the Spur Hotel, we'd sit out under the stars, drinking beer and talking stories.

It was the summer of 2009, and I was taking a graduate-level course on narrative writing at the University of North Texas' Mayborn School of Journalism. The course included a week in Archer City, hometown of Larry McMurtry, whose stories seemed pulled whole cloth from this dusty town two-and-a-half hours northwest of Dallas.

It was taught by the Maharishi of the Mayborn, George Getschow, a University of North Texas professor whose fiery, pentecostal sermons on narrative both delighted and scared the wits out of us. A good story had to be great. A great story... well, as George the Evangelist would say, we all needed to revise, revise, revise.

I was working on a story about the drought and brushfires that had recently plagued the area, and I'd interviewed some volunteer firefighters. It was a good story, but I wasn't really feeling it. It seemed like the kind of newspaper feature I'd been writing for years.

Now that I think of it, bringing up my hitchhiking days made perfect sense in the context of a writer's workshop. The classic narrative structure is a journey. It can be a physical journey -- Huck Finn taking off down the Mississippi River, encountering adventures -- offering insight into our hero and the world around him or her. It can also be a journey of the mind and soul, a peeling away of the layers of conceit and fear to discover...what? What's underneath all that defensive armor anyway?

A few steps outside the Spur Hotel, where we stayed, was a four-way stop, the kind of crossroads that figures in American mythology. It was said that legendary bluesman Robert Johnson, sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in exchange for success. There's also the intersection in the final scene of the movie Castaway, where Tom Hanks' character, Chuck, is trying to decide what direction to take in his life and one way seems as good as another.

Maybe I was at just such an intersection. Mid-career. Mid-life. The newspaper business, where I'd worked all my life -- even throwing a route as a boy -- was imploding. I had no better idea of where I'd be in a year than Chuck did at the end of Castaway.

One night, as our class mingled with the locals at the American Legion bar, Getschow took me aside. He put his arm around me and, yelling over some wistful, wailing warbler on the juke box, said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Why aren't you on the road, hitchhiking? That's your story, dammit! If I were you, I'd start hitchhiking to Alaska, tonight. That's your story. That's your book!"

I thought he was pulling my leg.

He stared back at me. There was no twinkle in his eyes.

At that moment, inside the American Legion Hall, I decided to go hitchhiking. Sure, I was afraid. Hell, I'd never pick up a hitchhiker. Anyone who did must be crazy.

But Getschow was right about one thing. What was I doing here?

***

At 8 the next morning, at the crossroads of Main and Center, I stuck my thumb out.

Amazingly, five minutes later a car stopped. I opened the passenger door. A young guy, mid-30s, a little beard stubble, wearing jeans, a t-shirt and an expression not that different from Getschow's look that said: *What are you doing here?*

A cup of black coffee cooled in a cupholder. A lit Marlboro rested in his hand on the steering wheel. As we pulled back on the blacktop, I told him I didn't think anyone would pick me up. He told me he hadn't seen a hitchhiker in years. He didn't offer any more explanation for why he pulled over. I told him I was with the writers' group staying at the Spur Hotel and explained what I was doing. I thought it sounded foolish, but he nodded like it made sense.

A few miles down the road he opened up. His family had owned a ranch in the area for several generations. But with all the vicissitudes of cattle ranching, including periodic droughts, it had gotten harder to make ends meet. He father finally lost the ranch to the bank. Now, instead of cowboying, he rode herd as head of a maintenance crew for an apartment management firm in Wichita Falls.

Thirty minutes later, he let me off in a Wal-Mart parking lot on the outskirts of Wichita Falls and wished me luck.

It wasn't even 9 yet. *Hell, at this rate, maybe I should go on to Alaska,* I thought, and immediately pushed that idea out of my head as I imagined calling Sharon and explaining to her how I'd decided to hitchhike around the country for two or three months and to give the kids a hug for me. As much as I'd always loved the idea of Huck Finn, I wasn't about to "light out for the territory" with so many responsibilities at home.

I got a cup of coffee at a McDonald's inside the Wal-Mart and then decided to buy a bottle of water in case I got stranded. The temperature was already in the mid-80s. I looked at a map I'd brought with me to figure out my next move.

My eyes settled on a dot about 30 miles southeast of Wichita Falls, with the German-sounding name of Windthorst. After living for two years in Germany, I loved visiting German towns in Texas. That was my plan. I just needed to get to Route 281, about a mile east of the Wal-Mart as the crow flew. I walked there in about 30 minutes, wishing I'd bought two bottles of water.

Once again, I didn't have to wait long. A man about the same age as the first driver stopped. He had his son in the passenger seat, so I hopped in the back. Again, I told him I was hitchhiking for a story and asked him why he'd picked me up -- especially with his son in the car with him.

He didn't have a good answer. Just that I seemed OK. He talked a lot. He'd been laid off -- along with millions of others that spring as a deep recession hollowed out the economy. He was taking care care of things at home while his wife worked. He loved the idea of what I was doing but thought it was very unsafe. Again, I thought, what was I doing here?

He dropped me off in Windthorst at the crossroads of Route 281 and State Highway 25, which I could take east back to Archer City -- only about a 20-minute drive. But what was my hurry? Why not have a look around? I didn't want to get back too soon.

I soon learned that the Windthorst was known for St. Mary's Grotto, an outdoor shrine paid for with money sent home by 64 World War II service members from Windthorst.

All of them made it back home safely. It was a reminder of how much small-town America contributes to war -- then and now. Windthorst, with fewer than a thousand people, lost one of its own in Iraq. Sgt. Gary Johnston, a 21-year-old Marine, was killed in 2007 by a roadside bomb northwest of Baghdad. The son of dairy farmers, he played football and other sports for Windthorst, even playing part of his senior season with a broken arm.

After a few hours of walking around and getting a sandwich at the general store, I decided to head back. I crossed 281 over to Highway 25 heading east to Archer City, and stuck out my thumb. I figured I'd be back home in 30 minutes or so.

Two hours later, I was still waiting. The thought crossed my mind to call Getschow to come get me. But what kind of ending would that give my story? I'd boxed myself into this and I had to finish.

It reminded me of writing projects that remained unfinished. Finishing requires some magic combination of faith and fortitude, of which I often seemed lacking. What I'd learned to do was a trick of the mind: *Just hang in there for another minute,* I told myself. *Give it another 5 minutes. That old man who just went into the general store? When he leaves, he'll come this way and pick you up.*

My reverie was interrupted when a pickup truck pulled over. An old man smiled as his white poodle barked at me through the partly rolled-down window. "Don't worry about her, she'll just lick you to death," the man said.

I squeezed in next to the affectionate poodle and thanked the man profusely, telling him I'd been waiting for at least two hours.

"That shirt isn't helping you," the man said, nodding to my black and yellow Wildcats T-shirt. "Archer City is our big rival!"

The man was a retired dairy farmer from Windthorst. He was heading home but offered to take me back to Archer City. "I don't think anybody around here is going to give you a ride as long as you're wearing that shirt."

The kindness of strangers. I was back at the Spur Hotel in 20 minutes.

I wrote a story that afternoon, or part of one.. But it never seemed quite finished, somehow. I've thought about that day of hitchhiking off and on ever since. I thought of it again a few months ago when Mike Mooney asked me to write an introduction to Ten Spurs. What was that little adventure seven years ago all about? Why had I left it unfinished and why did it keep coming back to me?

***

Over time, I came to understand the lessons of Archer City. Lessons of place. Lessons of immersion. Lessons I learned by hitching rides, listening and observing. Listening was a lesson I'd picked up while hitchhiking as a teenager. People gave you a ride because they were bored or tired. They wanted to talk to someone. Without knowing it at the time, I learned something that would help me later as a journalist: the secret to great interviews was to be a good listener.

I learned a lot about Archer County by listening that day. The first driver taught me not only about the hazards of farming but his own yearning for that kind of life. Just as his family had been displaced a generation ago, the next driver was also displaced by

global economic forces beyond his grasp. I had tried to blend in by wearing an Archer Wildcats T-shirt. But the third driver informed me that T-shirt wasn't much help to me in Windthorst, Archer City's arch rival.

The lessons of Archer City helped me grow as a reporter and writer at *The Dallas Morning News*. A few years ago, I put these lessons to use while covering the tiny community of West, in central Texas, which had been badly shaken by tragedy. An explosion at a fertilizer plant blew up half the town. Among those killed were 11 first responders, including six from the West Fire Department. The surviving firefighters remained out of sight, in mourning.

After a week or two, most of the media had left. Those of us who remained got to know the town. This was a Czech community, stubbornly self-reliant. They took care of their own and mistrusted outside media. I wanted to talk to the firefighters. To talk to them I had to get to know their home and that took time.

I spent time in places like the local barbershop, where old Sam Pinter would offer a cut but not a wash. His tiny shop was a museum filled with yellowing snapshots, guitars gathering dust on the walls and other mementos from West and surrounding towns, including Abbott, where Sam's old friend, Willie Nelson, grew up.

My fellow reporters and I had heard about a popular lunch spot where the locals would go for a plate of sausages and sauerkraut with potato salad. We ate there, too. And we quickly learned that the best place to buy the most delicious kolaches was not that spot right off the highway. No sir. It was the little bakery on Oak Street, just a few blocks off Main. The bakery was along the route taken by the firefighters who drove the pumper and other firetrucks to the explosion.

The bakery was close to a drug store, where one of the firefighters worked as a pharmacist. We should try there, suggested the woman who owned the bakery. We did, and he suggested another firefighter for us to meet. Over time, we talked to more than a half-dozen of the firefighters and their families, including the old chief, a Vietnam veteran whose PTSD symptoms, including nightmares, had returned after the explosion.

Some stories arrive right away like that first car at the four-way stop. Others seem to take forever, like those two hot hours standing beside the road in Windthorst. But if you're a writer, you can't pick up the phone and call for help. You wait. You stick out your thumb. You feel a nervous excitement mixed with uncertainty. Will I get there? How long will it take? What if I get stuck?

Then, you remember the lesson of Archer City: Relax. Get to know the place and its people. Sooner or later, the story comes.

Best of the Best

Ten Spurs

The Fat Blind Man and the Podcast

by Jonathan Auping

Fifteen minutes into the 89th episode of the *Gut Punch Podcast* things are already getting heated. The agitation is palpable. The cursing isn't necessarily increasing, only because every episode seems to operate under a baseline of F-bombs and A-holes and bull shits. The targets and sources of such frustration are multiple.

Bill Nye.

"This guy is a fucking idiot."

Bill Mahr.

"Bill Mahr, being a huge Democrat, just lets bullshit go."

ISIS.

"Personally, I told someone the other day, 'Even if we kill innocent people, why don't we drop a nuclear bomb in the middle of Syria?'"

Environmentalist.

"What a bunch of retards."

All of this and there is still an hour and 25 minutes left in this episode. The *Gut-Punch Podcast* claims to be the place where "things get hairy." It is one man speaking into a microphone. There is no one else in the room or on another line for him to argue with, and yet he mostly seems on the verge of losing his patience.

The person behind the microphone is the Fat Blind Man. He's just not the one that I know.

***

The first time I met Chris Chandler, everyone around me already seemed to know him. I had decided to pick up a few shifts a week waiting tables at a bar and grill to help pay the bills. On my first day, a short, overweight man wearing a Hawaiian shirt walked into the restaurant with a guide dog that led him straight to a small corner table with just two chairs.

The table was in my section. A waitress next to me handed me some silverware to set down. "That's Chris," she said with an almost sinister smile on her face, aware of my general greenness waiting tables. "Good luck."

It's not that Chris is a rude customer. He is far from it. It's not that he is a bad tipper. He's a great tipper. It's just that he, well, never shuts up.

All Chris needs is an introduction. You'll say something that he'll manage to segue into a story or a joke, which will lead to another story full of new jokes, mostly self-deprecating. It took me five minutes to get an order out of him.

His order was the most specific I had taken in the 45 minutes I had been employed as a waiter. A cheeseburger, sub the burger meat out for bison meat. No bun. Pepper jack cheese. Chopped up serrano peppers on the burger. A side of blue cheese dressing and a side of the buffalo wing sauce. Chips. Oh, and no veggies. A diet Coke.

Unlike with most customers, getting Chris' order wasn't the end of the interaction. He kept going for another five minutes, like he had known me for years. Behind me, customers were seating themselves in my section. Other customers were ready to pay their bill. I looked around, nervously, and realized that I was "in the weeds," a service industry term I had only learned that day meaning I was falling behind on my tables. Behind me, the smile on the face of the waitress had only become wider. This is what she meant by "good luck."

Chris will react accordingly to context clues if you make them clear enough. But he's blind, which makes it tough to be subtle. Plenty of times I can remember slowly backing away from him in a way that would normally imply I have to go. He just kept talking, forcing me to nearly yell across the room to avoid impoliteness.

And once he knows a little about you then you're really screwed. He'll ask you about an update on your family, or your other job, or your phone call with your ex. You'll respond in full detail. Maybe you're humoring him. Maybe you actually want to talk about it.

Over the next five months, Chris came into the restaurant about five times each week. I continued to have similar conversations with him. Even when someone else was waiting on him I would stop by to catch up with him. Over time, these ten-minute chats accumulated into hours worth of talking. About me. About him. About everything.

I pretty casually opened up to him, telling him things that would typically only come up in conversations with those closest to me. I can't say exactly why. Perhaps it's because he wants to listen. He'll deconstruct the topic in a straightforward way that would normally be irritating and patronizing, but he'll take your side from the start, making the experience feel validating and refreshing.

There's a part of me that wonders if I subconsciously considered him a safe confidant because he is blind. As if that fact disconnects him from society and makes speaking to him like a therapeutic release without consequence, the way one might journal their thoughts.

While I was not wrong to trust Chris Chandler as a friend, I was very wrong to assume that his lack of vision meant a lack of voice. He has a voice, and a means to broadcast it.

***

Podcasting is one of those things that is too simple not to be a phenomenon. It's

basic in its concept and innovative in its practicality.

A podcast is essentially just recorded audio available for download. It's not entirely different than a segment on radio except for the fact that it can be listened to at the consumer's time and leisure. While you might only listen to a radio segment in the car, you can listen to a podcast on the subway or at the gym or at the grocery store and you have the freedom to pause it and pick back up exactly where you left off.

It turns out the human voice is still enough to captivate an audience. This American Life's breakthrough podcast, *Serial,* proved that much by garnering millions of downloads since debuting in fall of 2014. *Serial* tells the story of a 1999 murder case in Baltimore, Maryland, which sentenced a teen to life in prison despite disputable evidence. The podcast is both investigative and cinematic and its success has many believing that podcasts are the future medium for storytelling.

But even before *Serial*, podcasts gained popularity through another old niche: people talking about stuff. Comedian Marc Maron multiplied his popularity with the creation of the *WTF Podcast* in 2009, which has fostered a cult following. Sports writer Bill Simmons strengthened his brand with the growing success of the *B.S. Report* since 2007.

Citing Edison Research, The Hollywood Reporter claimed "39 million Americans listened to at least one podcast in March [2015]." They're a venue for interviews or free form discussions or rants about anything and everything. There are podcasts for sports, comedy, movies, television, politics, technology, religion and everything in between. It's not a matter of liking podcasts; it's a matter of being interested in one of those things. iTunes offers nearly 300,000 different podcasts for download.

Some people – very few – make a living off their podcasts. Others use it to promote their career. However, pretty much all podcasters have one thing in common: they have something to get off their chest, and they assume someone wants to hear it.

***

For as many anecdotes as Chris could pack into the moments before and after I took his order, I still knew that if I wanted to get his story in full I would have to meet him outside of work.

We agreed to schedule lunch and I suggested a little Mexican restaurant near my apartment called E-Bar. I picked up the self-proclaimed Fat Blind Man outside of his apartment where he was waiting. I opened the back of my Toyota 4Runner so that his guide dog, Westin, could jump in. By the time I was settled in the driver's seat I turned to him to make sure he was buckled into his seat. Immediately, I noticed his navy blue hat. It read, "E-Bar Tex-Mex."

Once there, he and Westin led the way as we navigated to a patio table. En route, waiters and bartenders greeted him with, "Hey Chris, how are ya?" and asked about his wife, Marty.

Asking Chris to open up about his life means clearing your schedule for the day. Asking anyone in their forties to sum up the events that led them to where they are now is a broad task, but Chris understands that so much of his world is a reaction to a specific period in his life around age 28.

"This all happened in a matter of about 10 months," he said. "I had lost my sight. Lost my job. Lost my wife. Lost my baby. Had my income cut by [75 percent]."

We had barely touched the chips and salsa.

Chris was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. His father was a business owner who worked outside with his hands and his mother dished out an intense combination of love and discipline.

At nine years old he was struck with a sickness that had been spreading around town. His body didn't respond well to the illness. So badly, in fact, it "killed his pancreas." This left him vulnerable. On September 13, 1978, he was diagnosed with what at the time was called Type 1 Diabetes. Before the eventual progress of insulin in medicine this was considered a likely death sentence. He wasn't allowed to leave the hospital until he could give himself a shot. Nurses demonstrated the process on an orange. At nine years old, hours after a diagnosis he barely understood, he taught himself how to take a needle to his body to maintain his own survival. While trying to master this terrifying practice he overheard the doctor say to his mother, "You know, he won't live past 20." It began a trend in Chris' life of people around him talking about him like he wasn't there. It was a trend that continued far past the age of 20.

Improvements in medicine and attentive parents didn't make living with diabetes easy, but they allowed for a better alternative than waiting to die. Preparing for the future was a reasonable notion, so upon graduating high school, he enrolled in Christian Brothers University, a small Catholic college in Memphis.

For all that would be placed on Chris' shoulders or taken away from him in his life, the first tragedy that he could really grasp as a potentially world shattering moment was actually pretty relatable.

"I met a girl my freshman year of college and I was just so in love with her," Chris remembers. "We had a bad breakup and the rest of my college career was just fuzzy, at best."

The hangover of his first big breakup eating away at his rationality, Chris turned into a bit of a campus weirdo. He walked around everyday in overalls and work boots. He and a friend invented a game called "extreme badminton" and played on the courts near the classrooms instead of attending class.

Natural smarts and a desire to eventually get a job and move on with his life pushed him through and he graduated with a degree in civil engineering and a math minor. His first job out of college was as a furniture salesman. It wasn't long into the job that he was engaged in an expletive-fueled argument with his boss in which he claimed he could sell as much furniture as his superior if he too were allowed to discount products whenever he wanted. Already, this was Chris: a smart ass, a stirrer of the pot who refused to accept things as they were told to him.

He got out of furniture, but kept the salesman hat on, this time applying his education. He began his career in engineering sales working with civil engineers on wastewater treatment plans. Part of his job was writing reports for certain plans. He noticed that the engineers were simply copying his reports verbatim before sending them off to their superiors. He playfully tried to call them out on this by sprinkling random words into the reports. They were again copied exactly and passed on. Instead of reveling in an office prank, he was called into the boss's office where he was both reprimanded for his behavior and thanked for the revelation he provided about his co-workers.

With engineering sales he found the sweet spot between building things and making a deal.

"It's guys like me that make sure the bridge goes up the right way, meaning you can't just sell them anything," Chris says. "It's very specific things. After the engineer designs it, you still need someone to build it and supply all the right stuff and I was that guy."

But it was the lighting business where he found his true calling. He sold lighting systems to large buildings and big factories, assessing what was needed and making his pitch for why his company was the one to provide it.

"I did that for years," Chris reminisced. "I would have worked for free for the rest of my life. I was actually very good at it."

The kid who was supposed to be killed by diabetes before his twentieth birthday was in his mid-twenties with a thriving career as well as a wife by his side.

But then on Good Friday, April 15th of 1995, he went to the gym to play racquetball with a friend. His goggles were broken so he made the decision to play without them. A few minutes into their match the ball struck him square in his left eye. He fell to his knees and felt around on the ground for the eye he assumed had popped out of his head.

Once the initial shock wore off and he could confirm his eye was located in the same part of his face it had always been, he refused to go to the doctor for 10 days despite pain and abnormal coloring in his vision. "It was like being on psychedelic drugs." When he finally went to the doctor, one thing was made clear: he should have gone sooner. On April 27th he had surgery on his left eye. When he came out of it, the next day, it was his birthday and he had some vision out of that eye. It was the last time he ever saw out of it. In total, he had four operations on it before accepting that it was not getting any better; it was actually getting worse each time. Nine years later the eye would be removed due to pain.

It was during these trips to the optometrist that something else was revealed. At one point the doctor was taking a look at his right eye (his good eye) when he suddenly said, "Oh my God." He then broke the news to Chris that he was going to lose vision in his right eye in the next three years. There was diabetic retinopathy slowly damaging his vision.

The story is thick with irony. The racquetball accident had nothing to do with the impending loss of vision in his right eye. Though it's hard to measure, Chris currently has approximately five percent vision in his right eye, allowing him to

read at a close distance with a magnifying glass. Chris claims that noticing the diabetic retinopathy as a result of his injury perhaps allowed doctors to better prepare for the blindness and preserve that miniscule five percent. Even so, his doctors believe that his eye will continue to worsen and he will eventually have no vision.

He has had a total of 12 surgeries between his two eyes. The University of Tennessee Medical Hospital teaches his case because of its uniqueness dealing with accidents to the eye and diabetic case studies. Interns from the hospital have met him and declared, "You're the one. We study your case."

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The *Gut Punch Podcast* recorded its 100th episode last May. In its original conception in 2013 it was not a one-man show. Chris' friend, Steve, was a founding member of the podcast and brought a little financial acumen to the show.

"He was the good guy and I was the asshole," Chris said about the dynamic.

In fact, that was the original title of the show, "The Good Guy and the Asshole" but you can't get a podcast on iTunes with the word "asshole" in it so they settled on Gut Punch.

The two of them would get going on a subject and Steve would nervously sweat through Chris' hot takes on politics or borderline offensive jokes about current events.

But when Steve accepted a job with Guide Dogs of Texas, a position that he had sought after, Chris told him, "You're no longer allowed to do the podcast." When Steve asked why he responded, "You know how rough I get sometimes. I'm not dragging you down with me." Despite Chris' politically incorrect banter, he is not unaware of the culture we live in; companies have fired employees for less than some of the things said on the *Gut Punch Podcast*. So Chris carries on alone and with free rein.

"People have a hard time getting through my podcasts," he says. "People come out and tell me, 'I don't want to think that hard.'"

It's true that engaging in the *Gut Punch Podcast* requires thought, and Chris' opinions from one topic to another are unpredictable. But is that really what makes it hard for some people to get through them? Or could it be that they are sometimes over 100 minutes of ranting?

Chris' inspiration came from the *No Agenda Show*, a popular podcast hosted by Adam Curry and John Dvorak that takes no corporate sponsorships in order to maintain its credibility as unbiased. Chris emailed Curry the first episode of the *Gut Punch Podcast*. Curry's advice was blunt: "You need to get a better microphone and you need to figure out what the hell your podcast is about."

Now, you could argue skepticism is what Chris' podcast is about. "THERE'S. SOMETHING. GOING. ON. HERE." Chris probably doesn't realize it's basically become his catchphrase because he uses those five words all the time in everyday life.

There's a lost *Gut Punch Podcast* out there that features myself as the rare guest with the topic being the ethics of college athletics. Unfortunately audio troubles deemed it unusable. My microphone volume was far too loud, while, ironically, Chris' voice could barely be heard.

The day before the recording we did a trial run, which turned into a forty-minute debate about the effects of civil protest, the necessity of political correctness, and whether or not we are all born with empathy. "I just wanted to see where you would take this stuff," he said smiling, satisfied with my ability to verbally spar with him. It was supposed to be a microphone check. He had lured me into his world of questioning everything. He wasn't the authority; he was the Devil's Advocate.

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Chris' wife was pregnant when he started losing his vision in 1998. When his son, Ryan, was born he couldn't hold him because of a diabetic restriction on lifting things. What led to the separation of Chris and his ex-wife is ultimately between the two of them. It certainly wouldn't take much effort to paint a vilified image of her, but a woman getting married in her twenties would never think of the possibility that she is signing up as one man's caretaker for the rest of her life. Therapy couldn't salvage a relationship between a man who had so much ripped away from him and a woman with little interest in holding his hand through his new life. Communication meant hostility between the two of them. Chris understood that this would take a negative toll on Ryan's life so he made the conscious decision that he would give Ryan's mother space if it meant less conflict. Now Ryan is 17 years old and Chris sees very little of him, but he'll beam with pride when he talks about how "bright" and "gifted" his son is.

Nothing could be done about the loss of Chris' vision. He could put a selfless spin on the loss of his son. He could hold on to a sense of relief over the loss of his wife. But he refused to accept that his career would be just another casualty to his misfortune.

There was no meeting with his company to discuss his newfound blindness. He just showed up and did the work. His mother took a year and a half off to drive him around on sales calls. His father would come with him and tell him the size of the space he was selling lighting to and Chris could do the rest from memory. The lights of any large retail store are typically equidistant from each other. Once you know the measurements it's just a matter of math and knowing the function of the lighting patterns. His father could provide all the details his vision would have allowed him. "This is how dedicated everyone in the family was," Chris remembers.

This process worked. He remembers a particular sales visit early after his loss of vision, which went as follows:

"Are you my sales rep?"

"Yes sir."

"I didn't know you were blind."

"Don't worry about that."

"How are you going to see if it's lit correctly?"

"Well, if I can see it then it's definitely lit correctly."

Of course, he made the sale.

Two years after he went blind Chris hit all of his sales numbers. In fact, at the year-end awards banquet it was announced with much surprise that he had blown his numbers out of the water. He stood up to accept an award (at the time he didn't use a cane or a guide dog) and tripped over a chair and fell down. Still, he received a standing ovation.

Yet when the company was bought by a big conglomerate, Chris started to look remarkably expendable. He was told that it seemed infeasible for him to continue to put up such strong numbers and it was suggested that he take disability. The alternative was a demotion that would pay less than disability. "They didn't really give me a choice," Chris recalls.

But there is still the story of his last big sale. His company did a job for Proctor and Gamble. It concerned a Pringles potato chip factory. He remembers meeting with the woman heading the engineering group on a picnic table in 104-degree heat. "I sold the damn thing," he says. It was a 10 and a half million-dollar sale, the largest in his company's history.

There was a commission on the sale worth approximately $300,000. "I never saw the money," he claims, a technicality of his pending departure from the company.

April 1st, 2000, was the last working day of his life in a career he can now only think back on. "No one wants a blind man in the lighting business," he says.

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Every sensationalist voice of the media provides his or her share of controversial sound bites. The *Gut Punch Podcast* is full of them. What is so frustrating about most agenda-based talking heads, though, is that their anger seems like an uninformed charade.

Chris rejects the notion that the goal of his podcast is to expose the liberal media. He considers himself a moderate who has voted on both sides of the spectrum. When he explained to me the thought process behind the topics of each episode, he used gay marriage as an example: "Logically, either we're all free or none of us are." Mid-explanation he switches subjects completely. "Let's use Russia as an example. Everyone wants to make Putin out to be the bad guy..." He believes, based on economics, that raising minimum wage to 15 dollars is ridiculous... because it's *too low*.

This is what makes the *Gut-Punch Podcast* so hard to label. Chris doesn't stand behind an agenda, a party or an ideal. He's all over the place. He discusses things based only on his reaction to them. Despite only five percent vision in one of his eyes, he reads constantly and is well educated, especially on the subject of technology. He seems to believe that *everyone* is trying to pull the wool over our eyes and so aligning with one faction would be foolish.

His shows are full of clips from other shows or platforms, most of which he refutes after playing. "I can scream until I get blue in the face, but I never interrupt the clip. I let it play all the way through. Some shows cut if off so they can get into

their thoughts. I hate that. If you can't hear the clip all the way through then you can't make an opinion."

It's true that he plays clips – even ones he vehemently disagrees with – until their conclusion. It accounts for why the episodes are so long.

Opinions berate our sensibilities from countless sources. Our society is informed based on reactions to reactions. Bias does not have to be intentional. People unknowingly have agendas based on disproving other people's seemingly harmful agendas. Chris maintains that he is not trying to back an agenda beyond providing information that is not being provided elsewhere. "I'm not trying to change your opinion."

The 59th episode of the *Gut Punch Podcast* was recorded on the one-year anniversary of the death of Chris' mother. The tone was quite apparently softer. It allowed for more self-deprecating humor about his size – "(When I was born) I kind of looked like a football." He spent over an hour telling stories about the impact his mother had on him from the time he was diagnosed with diabetes to the year when he lost everything. "She never told me what to do, all she did [was] be there for me when I needed it."

For listeners of the podcast, it was surely a different side of Chris. When someone unwaveringly asserts opinions with the confidence that Chris exudes it's often easier to simply ignore that person. The podcast about his mother, though, was a reminder that talking into a microphone alone for over an hour isn't easy, and Chris is actually quite good at it.

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It isn't that depression never hit, but anger was the prevailing emotion during Chris' initial years of blindness. His life was taken away from him. It was during that time when he met Marty in 1998. He would attend programs with the Alliance for the Blind where she worked for the state of Tennessee, assisting blind people and teaching how to help them live better and more independent lives. He was one of the few non-seniors in the program or as he put it, "the only one under 100 years old."

They were both in the final stages of doomed marriages when they met. Having gone through a divorce before her, he provided advice and comfort when she eventually ended her relationship with her first husband. He remembers the exact date of their first date and second date, which was at the first T.G.I. Friday's ever built – the type of fact that could only be interesting to someone whose love story shares ties to it.

They were married within the year and they eventually moved to Dallas, Texas, together where she is a certified low vision therapist. Marty is 20 years older than Chris, but their support of each other makes this number seem insignificant. "She has calmed me down, makes me think more...and I gave her more strength to stand up for herself."

People try to applaud Marty for "taking care of Chris" – in fact, they'll often say it in his presence, as if blind people are also deaf. She'll just respond, "He's better to me than I am to him." He and Marty are in the process of launching a joint podcast

together about fountain pens, surely a less hostile subject matter than the ones he normally covers.

Now, you could pick a restaurant in Dallas and there's a decent chance one of the waiters will know Chris or, more likely, he'll know something about them, being the conversationalist that he is.

At the point when his career, and thus part of his identity, was slipping away from him his next move would be calculated. "Why don't I take the disability and start helping other people. That's what I dedicated my life to." Chris knows the power an hour of conversation can have on someone who truly needs it. So he's there to listen and give his support to people who aren't quite sure what they did to deserve it.

"I had very few people that wanted to help me and a lot of people that walked away from me," Chris remembered. "I decided I couldn't live my life like that."

Between that mission, Marty, and the podcast, Chris' life seems to have a lot more purpose than it used to, even before his blindness.

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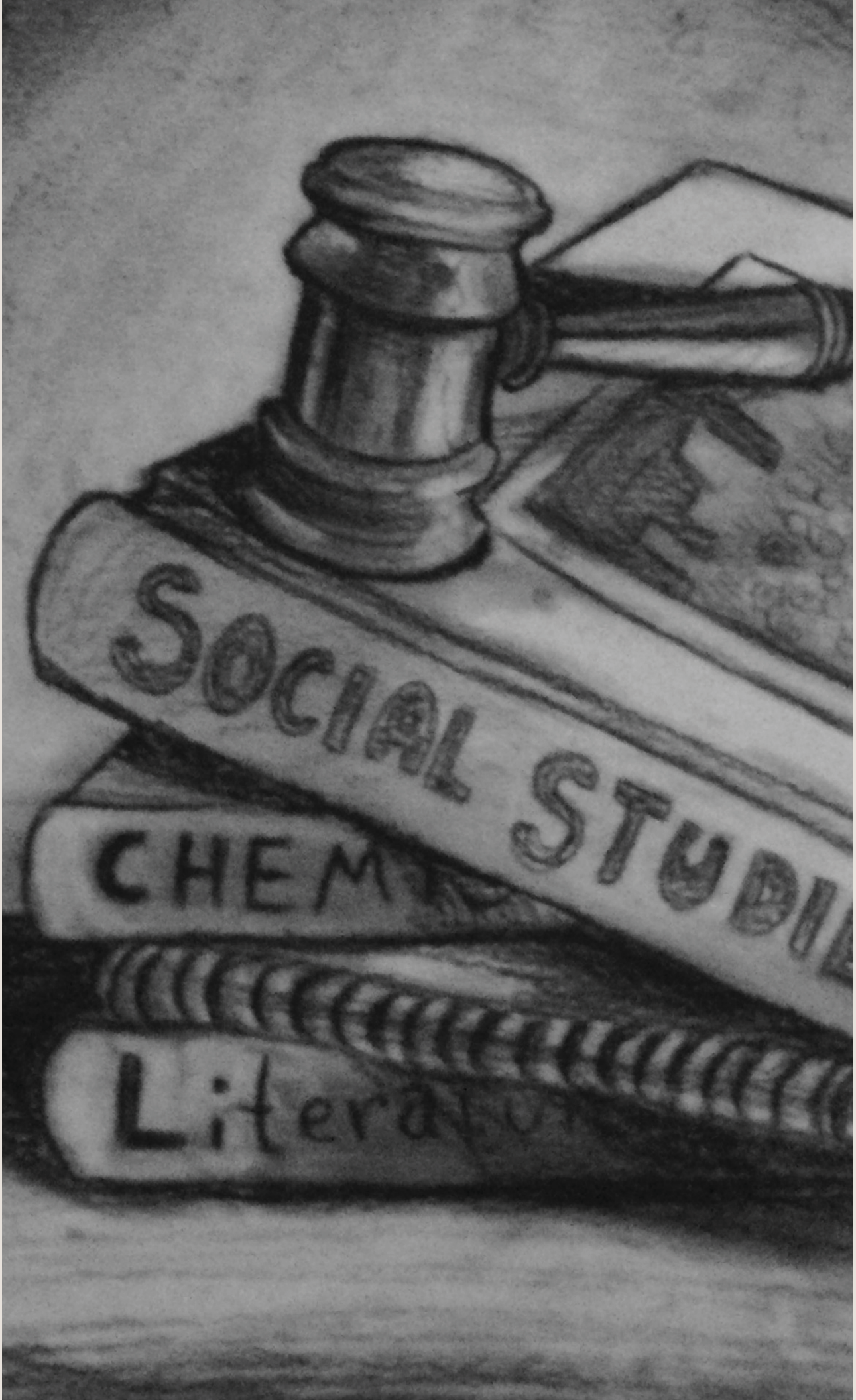
At some point since I met Chris, his weight became a potential issue. Surgeries loomed as a possibility if a healthier lifestyle wasn't adopted.

He still came into the restaurant. Westin still grabbed a seat next to him and wagged his tail when I came over because he knew I wouldn't resist petting him at the risk of my other tables seeing me touch a dog. Chris still brags about the podcast. "I'm on in 45 countries. Some countries like me more than others: China, Australia, Germany..."

But his order has changed: Half of a spinach salad with chicken. Dressing on the side. Diet Coke.

He lost 75 pounds in an astonishingly short amount of time, his clothes now hang off of him. He and Westin cover more ground by foot than a lot of Dallas residents do in their cars.

So technically he isn't the Fat Blind Man anymore. It sounds wrong just calling him the Blind Man, though. That would be selling him short because his ears still work. So does his mouth. To do what Chris does, that's all he really needs.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Teens Rule

by Amy Burgess

The first time Sasha* walked through the metal detectors at the Southwest Municipal Court, she did not realize she was entering an alternate universe of sorts, a subsection of the judicial system populated almost entirely by teenagers. Sasha, 17, pled guilty to fighting at school – it didn't matter that she didn't start it – and the judge sent her here, to "Teen Court." She expected it to be a court session designated for teens in trouble with the law, and she was right about that part. What she didn't expect to see was teens serving as prosecutors, defense attorneys, bailiffs, and even judges.

Sasha says she was completely caught off guard by the teenagers running the show at her sentencing hearing. "I seen some kid younger than me defending me, and then I seen some kid younger than me prosecuting me, I was like, 'Wow, this is crazy.' And I was like, 'Well, this is Teen Court, and I'm guessing this is really, *really* Teen Court. I started laughing."

Tonight, Sasha drops her purse and phone into the gray plastic bin on the conveyor belt. A wide white headband holds back her long wavy black hair. A fitted, white button-up shirt sets off her flawless brown skin. She looks more like a bright-eyed young starlet on the Disney channel than a juvenile delinquent who allegedly pummels other girls in the hallway at school.

She keeps on her purple sneakers as she walks through the metal detector. This is just a municipal courthouse in the suburbs of Fort Worth, after all, not a high-security federal courthouse. Or a prison. That's the idea: Start them out here in Teen Court, in a civil and respectful environment, and maybe they won't end up *there*.

Sasha doesn't even glance up at the incongruous mirrored ceiling and Reagan-era globe lights hanging above her as she climbs the winding staircase. She's a Monday-night regular. She actually likes coming here now. She might even come back as a volunteer once she's done her time.

At the top of the stairs, Sasha bends over to sign in at the desk, then she tucks her phone in her purse and walks confidently down a hallway out of sight. In the makeshift waiting area, teenagers slouch in poses of feigned nonchalance, stealing sideways glances at Sasha, searching for clues about what is to come for them. *Who is she? Is she in trouble, too? What's down that hallway? Am I going down there later? And who are these kids coming out wearing suits and ties, and dresses and high heels, walking around with files like they're...*

"Dominic Morales?" A 13-year-old boy with spiky blond hair raises his eyebrows at the group of waiting teenagers, all of whom are older and taller than him. He wears light grey slacks, a charcoal shirt and red tie, and stands casually holding a legal file at his hip. A look of confusion passes over Dominic's face but he stands and makes his way toward the boy.

"Hi," the 13-year-old says, thrusting his hand out, leaving Dominic no choice but to shake it. "I'm Blake Smith. I'll be representing you tonight. Right this way." Blake strides off toward a glassed-in conference room and Dominic stands rooted in place. His eyebrows furrow and he looks back over his shoulder for any indication that this might be a joke, then shrugs and follows Blake to the conference room. Like Sasha, he had not really known what to expect at Teen Court.

Dominic and the other teenage defendants in the waiting area are here because they pled guilty or no contest to Class C misdemeanors in Fort Worth. Instead of paying fines and carrying criminal records, they opted for Teen Court and a shot at a fresh start. Most of these kids shoplifted something worth less than $50 (usually from Walmart), or drove without a license, or got caught with beer (often right after they shoplifted it from Walmart). On any given night at Teen Court, there might also be teenagers holding citations for traffic violations, domestic violence, or fighting in public. There is one girl here tonight who does not want you to know what she was caught doing in the car with her boyfriend that earned her a seat in this waiting room.

Class C misdemeanors are issued as tickets, so they are handled by Fort Worth's municipal court system. More serious offenses are prosecuted for the state by the District Attorney's Office. In 1989 the Texas Legislature decided that the best way to steer first-offender teenagers away from the judicial system was to keep them out of it in the first place. Texas Article 45.052 gives judges the authority to "defer proceedings" to a youth court if an offender is under the age of 18 or is still in high school, and if they have not participated in a youth court in the previous two years. In a youth court setting, a jury of their peers sentences them to "pay" their fines with community service hours – a minimum of 48 hours and a maximum of 64 per charge.

The teen defendants and their parents come from all walks of life. One young man with a traffic citation pulled up to the courthouse in a Corvette. Another has to leave quickly after his hearing so his mother can make it to her evening job. Some barely pass the dress code standards for their court appearance. A young man in sagging designer jeans appears at the top of the stairs and walks with a Pharrell-Williams-esque limp toward the sign-in table. But before he reaches the table, a middle-aged woman barreling through the waiting area intercepts him.

"Are you here for jury duty?" she asks the young man, cocking her head to the side and slowing her pace. He mumbles something in response, to which she replies, "Not in those jeans you're not. Jesse, can you deal with this?" Susan Wolf, Teen Court coordinator, tosses the request over her shoulder to her adult colleague Jesse Medina, pointing down at the young man's jeans as she continues her march onward. Medina peers over his black-rimmed glasses at the expensively-placed rips and holes in the boy's jeans.

"No torn jeans," Medina says, shaking his head, respectful but firm. "Can you get a change of clothes? Can somebody bring you something? If not, you'll have to come back another night. Torn jeans are not allowed for jury duty. See what you can do." The young man gestures down at his jeans as if to protest their obvious superiority over non-torn jeans, but Medina has moved on. There are only three adults working at Teen Court tonight, and they are in perpetual motion. The rejected juror rolls his eyes and pulls out his phone, dragging his feet as he returns to the winding staircase.

The one mandatory ingredient in any Teen Court sentence is jury duty, and teens must be dressed appropriately for their civil service. Every defendant will serve on two Teen Court juries in addition to whatever community service hours they receive for their sentence. This is the first step in their responsibility training – respecting the system, and seeing crime from the perspective of the justice system.

Far from drawing a line between the "good" kids and "bad" kids – attorneys on one side, defendants on the other – the system is designed to make everyone involved more understanding of each other, and of their responsibility as citizens, by giving them hands-on experience with the judicial system. Every volunteer attorney will gain experience prosecuting and defending, representing the government in one trial, and fighting for a defendant in the next. Defendants go from the ones being sentenced, to sitting on a jury and sentencing someone else. The door is always open for defendants to cross over and become attorneys when they finish serving their time, if they are interested.

There are approximately 75 Teen Courts operating in Texas today. Without a system like this, parents are the ones who get punished because they have to pay the fines for their children, says Kristie Dempsey, board president of the Teen Courts Association of Texas. This can be a real hardship for poor families, and the teens don't learn a lesson in the process, which means they are likely to show back up in the criminal justice system later, usually for a more serious offense.

Studies show lower recidivism rates for teens who participate in a Teen Court program, and that ultimately benefits the community. "Once they go through our program, the recidivism rates drop. We try to make it just painful enough so that they want to stay out of the adult court system all together," Dempsey says.

The volunteer teen attorneys come from public schools, private schools and homeschools. Some students earn extra credit for school, and some use it as off-season training for their school debate and mock trial teams. Blake, Dominic's lawyer, is plotting his future career. He is only in seventh grade, but he knows he wants to go to law school one day. He is confident and well-spoken in front of a jury, a Doogie Howser of sorts, if this generation even knew who the TV-prodigy-doctor was.

Some teen attorneys are young and new to their roles, stumbling over questions as they cross examine a defendant on the stand. Others are more seasoned and address the jury confidently, without notes. They use the large paper pads that stand on easels facing the jury to scrawl out the recommended number of community service hours in large numbers to imprint it on the jurors' minds. The prosecution almost always writes the maximum "64," and the defense almost

always crosses it out dramatically. “See this number? Well forget it!” Then they replace it with their own, the minimum “48.”

The best teen attorneys deliver smooth, three-point opening statements that grab and focus the jury’s attention. They make objections on complicated legal issues such as hearsay and relevance. They occasionally write alliterated bullet points as visual aids: “Mistake, Misunderstanding, Misallocation of Justice.” They memorize a few weighty historical quotes to throw into almost any case. Abraham Lincoln is a favorite for the defense: “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.” Or the original line 14-year-old attorney Karika likes to use: “You have to make a mistake to learn from a mistake.”

Sasha expected an adult jury when she first came to Teen Court for her own trial, but she was relieved to see teens in the jury box. She thinks the teens may have gone easier on her than an adult jury. High school students would be more likely to understand her situation, which reads like a Disney-channel sitcom up until the fight part. She was the new girl at school. Her brand new best friend, Christina, used to be best friends with Viv, and Viv didn’t like it when Sasha showed up and stole her BFF. So Viv jumped Sasha in the hallway between classes and they – and everybody else who jumped in – fought until the campus police officer broke them up. The fact that she didn’t start the fight seemed to resonate with the teen jury, and that’s probably why they gave her the minimum of 48 community service hours, Sasha says.

When Sasha returned as a jury member following her own sentencing hearing, things looked different. She wasn’t the one nervously answering the attorney’s questions. She was seeing it from the other side, weighing crimes she had not personally committed. She had to decide, unanimously with five other jurors, what the sentence should be. In one hearing, the defendant was charged with a traffic violation when she backed out of a driveway without looking, which caused an accident.

“She didn’t show no remorse at all, so we gave her the max,” Sasha said. Sasha says she takes it seriously and listens to the stories, really trying to decide how much time people should get. Ultimately she believes all the punishments are good because they teach lessons, and they do it in a fun environment.

Some teen jurors are less invested in the process than others. They spend more time flirting and talking about the sentence *they* got than considering the case at hand. And just like in adult trials, sometimes it looks like the bailiff is asleep in the corner.

Fort Worth’s Teen Court program has a completion rate of about 80 percent, according to Chief Municipal Judge Ninfa Mares. Without this program and the accountability it gives to teen offenders, she could see the juvenile crime rate rising in Fort Worth.

“Payment of a fine alone does not promote a change in behavior,” Judge Mares says. “However, appearing before a jury of your peers, participating as a juror, completing community service hours and answering for your behavior is much more likely to change a teen’s behavior, and in the long run it promotes good citizenship.”

Sasha is a case in point. “I feel like even though I did do something that wasn’t right, which was fighting, I still feel like I’m going to get something good out of this because I’m learning responsibility here while teaching other people about responsibility,” she says. “And I’m getting something good on my resume at the same time while doing it.”

Fewer adults entering the criminal justice system means money is saved on many levels, and that is motivation enough for some cities, like Fort Worth, to operate the Teen Court program with city funds. Fort Worth covers 90 percent of the budget costs, leaving only 10 percent to be raised through donations from charitable organizations like the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. In other cities like Texarkana, the Teen Court program operates as a non-profit, with a director who spends much of his or her time fundraising to keep the program running.

Susan Wolf returns to the waiting area and introduces herself as the Teen Court coordinator to the gathering of defendants and a few parents, then she launches into a speech she has given thousands of times in her 17 years as coordinator. She is comfortable in her tan linen jacket, tan skirt and tan, sensible shoes. Her strawberry blonde hair, streaked with grey, is pulled into a functional ponytail.

She is explaining all the different ways defendants can earn community service hours with nonprofits, government agencies or schools. Goodwill, the Tarrant Area Food Bank, and Boys and Girls Clubs are popular choices. Schools can offer opportunities on campus, which is especially helpful to students with transportation issues. After their mandatory two jury terms, teens can earn four hours any time they want to come back and serve on more juries.

In addition to working for nonprofits, defendants can effectively buy their way out of a maximum of 14 hours by donating a 10-pound bag of dog food to the animal shelter, and either donating toys to the Cowboy Santa toy drive, or donating blankets to the Senior Citizens Center. If they complete their hours within 90 days of their sentencing, their charges are dismissed. If they don’t, they have to appear in front of a “real” judge who can decide if they should receive an extension.

As Wolf talks, a teen attorney walks past and hugs her from behind. Barely turning her head, she pats his hand on her shoulder and smiles without missing a beat. When she finishes her speech, she is instantly back in motion, docket in hand, to orchestrate this dance of teen defendants pairing up with teen defense attorneys to tango with teen prosecutors in front of teen jurors.

In almost two decades as the Teen Court coordinator, Wolf has learned to flex with the Legislature’s ever-changing philosophies on the best ways to prosecute and rehabilitate juvenile offenders. In 2004 Fort Worth had the busiest Teen Court docket in the state, processing 2,600 cases a year. Now, with the Legislature requiring schools to handle more on-campus infractions internally, instead of making them criminal offenses, Fort Worth’s Teen Court processes about 700 cases a year, she says.

Wolf moves down the hall and pokes her head into the jury room to call the first jury of the evening. Ke-Ron White sits on the edge of a desk at the front of the room, arms crossed over his dress shirt and tie. He laughs easily with the 2015 version of the Breakfast Club gathered before him. It is clear they adore him. Ke-

Ron, 22, started out as a teen attorney when he was in high school, and now he works for Teen Court part time while he attends college. An African-American teen in a Hustle Gang T-shirt drapes his long frame across three chairs while he shoots questions at Ke-Ron. The teen is running behind on his deadline to serve 122 hours for several counts, including theft from a Walmart store, and tonight he is working off four hours by serving extra jury time. In the back corner, a Hispanic teen, who looks like he is 25 years old, sleeps with his head against the wall. A smaller boy in jeans, T-shirt and cowboy boots slouches in his chair and glances sideways occasionally to follow the action, but otherwise stays motionless.

Sasha sits up straight in her chair toward the back of the room, laughing at the banter, clearly enjoying herself. She has decided she wants to become a volunteer with Teen Court when she finishes serving her sentence for the fight at school. Seeing those young people using their free time in this way has given her a different vision for her own life.

"I would normally see adults doing things like this, but to see kids my own age doing things like this, it was really inspiring," she says. "It took a toll on me in a good way. It makes me want to do something positive like this in my life."

The pool of jurors stands and files out of the room. Three of them peel off into an office that doubles as a "tribunal council" room. Fort Worth's Teen Court added tribunals as a quicker, more efficient way to move lesser crimes through the system. Three jury members and a "tribunal chief" sit around a table with the defendant and his or her parent and they ask the defendant questions about the crime. Then the defendant and parent step out of the room while the jurors decide the sentence, and return for the reading of the sentence. The entire process takes about 10 minutes.

The rest of the jurors in the pool move on toward a large room on the other side of the staircase that functions as a courtroom. They will serve on six-member jury trials – shortened versions of traditional trials, with opening and closing statements, examination and cross-examination of the defendant, and a judge reading instructions to the jury before deliberations.

If the docket for the night has a sensitive case on it, involving domestic violence, or maybe the girl caught in a compromising position in the parked car, Wolf will schedule it as a "plea in bar." It is still teen prosecutors and defense attorneys handling the plea negotiations, but there is less exposure for the defendant to protect their privacy.

On nights when there is a heavy docket and plenty of volunteer teen attorneys, they will also use one of the more formal municipal courtrooms downstairs. Sasha's sentencing hearing took place downstairs, with Karika as her defense attorney. Tonight, serving as the jury foreman, Sasha is fully engaged on the front row, watching the teen attorneys closely. When she stands to announce the jury's sentence – 60 hours for stealing food from Walmart, when the defendant had money in his pocket to pay for it – she is confident and looks the judge in the eye.

Sasha has heard there is a special competition team that volunteers can be on, competing against other Teen Court teams from around the state. They argue a fictitious Teen Court case in front of real adult attorneys and judges. Fort Worth's

team has won first place in the Texas Teen Court competition two years in a row. When Sasha is done serving her time and her criminal record is clear again, she wants to train to be a Teen Court volunteer attorney, and maybe even a member of the competition team.

Like her defense attorney Karika likes to say, "You have to make a mistake to learn from a mistake." Sasha agrees. "I like coming here because it makes me feel good," Sasha says. "Like a negative is turning into a positive."

At the end of the night, Sasha joins the flow of teenagers winding their way back down the staircase. They laugh and talk and turn their cell phones back on. The line that exists in the courtroom between the attorneys and the defendants blurs until they are all just teenagers again, pushing through the glass doors at the bottom of the stairs and back into their normal lives.

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**The names of all teenage defendants and volunteer attorneys have been changed to protect their privacy and to honor the confidentiality requirements of the Teen Court system.*

Addicted

by Christen Dennis

The sky gently weeps as I drive home from my shift at Starbucks, making the ten-minute commute to my cramped apartment. Something feels weird.

Just go check on him. It's two minutes out of your way.

I look back now on this decision. At the time, I hated myself for being so weak.

He's an adult, I thought. *You're not his mom. Stop caring so much.* He had only ignored a few text messages. Just five. But when the man you love is a closet heroin addict, his decision to ignore a few texts sends chills up the back of my neck.

I call one last time. Another no answer. I try to shun the cold from creeping up my neck.

Just go home, I tell myself. *Maybe he's already asleep.*

Will's addiction is a secret, even to his own family. It's something that seems to always be stuffed under his shirt, plaguing him every day. It makes every room stiflingly hot. Will's secret is mine as well, and it's slowing destroying us both. I am addicted to a junkie, and I'm becoming a junkie myself. I am sharing a human with a drug. A sticky, black mess of heroin is our constant companion. I am unwilling to let go of one for the other.

I never really thought about heroin much before I met Will. His chocolate eyes and quick laughter captured my heart fast. His quirky humor and passion for the arts is something I love about him. He's a terrible liar and can't hide feelings from spilling all over his face. He often surprises me with flowers after work.

I was naïve. I believed I could free Will of his addiction by putting him in a different environment, with different friends and with my undivided attention. His addiction was a math problem I could calculate. I was wrong.

Will has two faces. The Will I love and the Will that scares me. Will is considerate and sincere. Heroin Will lies about where he was at 3 a.m. that morning. Will likes to dance with our 2-year-old kitty. Heroin Will makes me feel childish, and foolish, for worrying if he'll make it home. Heroin Will is slowly killing himself.

Loving two different people in the same body changes you. You wonder which of his words actually hold meaning, and which words are empty promises. You learn to question everything Heroin Will says and does. You learn to accept they could never come home one day. You learn to accept that there's nothing you can do

about it.

Will and I have been together for two years, and even my parents don't know he's an addict. They probably wouldn't believe it if Will confessed that he was. Will's a hero. Heroin Will would have to be a fable. But for me the charade is difficult to bear. The silence is deafening. I am an island, and I've never felt so lonely.

I drive through the rain and pull up to Will's whitewashed brick house off Welch Street in Denton. My feet feel heavy as I walk up the front steps and push the front door open. It's never locked.

"Will, are you home?"

No answer. The house is quiet and dark. He never goes to sleep before midnight. Insomnia and paranoia haunt him like ghosts when he's trying to wean himself off his beloved heroin. Two side-effects that follow Will's regular attempts at "recovery." But "recovery" is a word I don't trust when it involves Heroin Will.

Will has tried recovery centers. None of them have worked. He's read *Alcoholics Anonymous*. He has the "12 Steps" memorized. I feel shame for not knowing how to help, for not knowing how to solve this problem.

My watch screams 10:31 p.m. I dodge clothes, food wrappers, and make my way to his bedroom.

"Will?"

I nudge his bedroom door open with a strained creak. Silence.

And then I see a body slumped over his bed.

There's nothing poetic about heroin. There's nothing poetic about seeing your boyfriend's face a sickly shade of gray. A dead shade of gray. That face stays with you. It bleeds into your skin and makes a home in your bones. I have nightmares about that gray face, those dead eyes.

There's nothing tragically romantic about finding a needle in the arm of the man you love. There's nothing poetic about tears smearing your mascara as you try to shake your cold boyfriend back to life. There's nothing romantic about calling 911 because he's too heavy to carry to your car. I never thought about how my voice would sound, making that call. Shaky and disbelieving.

Frantically, I hide Will's heroin in a suitcase in his closet. My fingers grab burnt spoons and dirty needles, wondering how the hell I ever got here. I untie his favorite blue bandanna from around his arm. I lie to paramedics about how it got there.

There are no beautiful suicides.

Hospitals are too white. Blinding blank walls of white that separate the sickly and the infirmed from everyone else, including me. I remember smelling latex and plastic. Seconds seem to move slower in waiting rooms. I can't help but wonder if

anyone else around me is also waiting on a relapsed boyfriend.

Before he overdosed, Will had fallen in his bathroom, giving him a sickly gash on the head and a nasty concussion before he passed out. The concussion meant he remembered nothing about "the accident."

And a few hours later, we were driving home, pretending nothing happened.

But I remember everything. And something had happened that I could even smile about. I remember feeling almost angelic, that I had actually saved a life. Reassuring myself that I had done the right thing, that hiding Will's heroin was the right thing to do.

I had been in the right place at the right time, I repeat to myself.

Falling in love with Will has been the best and worst decision of my life. Like the promise junkies make when they enter rehab, I've promised myself to take Will one day at a time. There is a very fragile trust that exists between us, something I have had to learn to live with and accept. Will takes every measure he can to hide his relapses.

But I can always tell when Will is high.

He becomes Heroin Will, the untouchable Will, who feels like doing anything and everything, all at once. The Will with bleached eyes and a hyper attitude. The Will who vomits out my car window if we go over a bump too fast. The Will who must sleep for a day to recover from a relapse.

Every time Will has a relapse, I have one of my own. I cry and crumble and feel like I've died for a day. Nothing feels good, and no amount of consolation really works. It just takes time. I can see how it hurts Will when he sees me like this. But sometimes I wonder if that's the price he's paying for what he puts me through.

I've lost my definition of trust. Even when Will is well, I second-guess everything he tells me. And the pain of always questioning the one you love is often unbearable. I feel embarrassed for being so weak. For not trusting him. I constantly wonder how life would be like if I didn't have to worry every time I let him borrow my car. Was he also buying dope? Will he blow all his savings? Is he going to get high and cause a wreck?

Carrying this secret, carrying this guilt, changes me. I've learned how to comfort myself when the secret becomes too heavy. Learned how to button my own dress. Learned how quickly plans and moods change.

I often can't get his gray stare out of my head, even today, when he is rosy-cheeked with chestnut curls, still making me laugh every day. Despite his addiction, despite every lie and every relapse, despite every time we've had to start over, he still holds my heart.

Living Without Water

by Kathy Floyd

The drought is over! Hallelujah, praise the Lord!

Only a month ago, the blue corrugated plastic "Pray for Rain" signs, sometimes the only spot of color in a flowerbed or yard, leaned to one side or another because the dry dirt crumbled around the stake. Now, if they're still standing after all the storms, they lean even more, or have fallen face down in the rain-soaked earth.

Those signs have been part of the landscape in Wichita Falls for the past four years as we prayed and pleaded and looked to the sky for relief from the drought. Radio stations played a daily rain song. Pastoral groups held public prayer meetings. No church service was complete without at least one person praying, "Lord, if it be your will, please bless us with rain." Area cit-ies paid thousands of dollars to seed clouds in the hopes that they would billow up and spill wa-ter out over us.

Time after time when thunderheads built up in the sky, we would keep watch on radar only to see the promising moisture shrivel up before it reached the city or the watershed. Or the colored blobs would part like the Red Sea under Moses's command and bypass us, or slide around one side or another. Moisture avoided Wichita as if there were a bubble over us that kept clouds away.

When this winter let go and fresh buds should have been on the tips of trees and shrubs, many branches stayed brown and dry, lost to the past four years of so little moisture. The dryness didn't just apply to the foliage. It oppressed all our spirits. We needed that rain not only to wash the dirt off the leaves but to refresh our attitudes.

We had a good rain in late April, early enough to bring life back to some of the brown buds. My rose bush that two months ago had only a handful of flowers is now covered with blooms. But it still wasn't enough to help our lakes.

Since 2010, Wichita Falls had been classified by the U.S. Drought Monitor as in some stage of drought. In May of 2014, the combined levels of our two water supply lakes dropped below 25 percent full. On May 4 of this year, they were still only at 22.5 percent full. The drought officially ended May 28, 2015. In less than a month, North Texas received enough rain, more than 20 inches in some places, to take us out of the "exceptional" drought stage, the most severe stage the monitor registers, to no drought.

Both Lake Kickapoo and Lake Arrowhead are 100 percent full for the first time

in more than 20 years. Citizens were out shooting video and photos of water going over the spillways as if it were a major tourist attraction.

The cycle of drought and flood is a global occurrence, not confined to us here in North Texas. With each swing of the pendulum do we learn how to minimize the damage caused by extremes? What do we do in the in-between?

The water shortage changed the way most of us thought of water. No longer do we be-lieve that the stream that comes out of the faucet is endless. Especially during the summer, we tried to catch every spare drop that fell from the sky or out of the spouts. Think of the water that goes down the drain as you wait for the shower to warm up, or the trickle that comes from the spout when the shower is on.

My 84-year-old father carried buckets of water from the bathtub to water his shrubs until he broke his leg. He rigged his washing machine to drain into a trash can to capture "gray" water for his trees. My dad wasn't the only one to make those changes. Home improvement stores made special displays of gadgets to retrofit washing machines to reroute the used water. Various styles of rain barrels are now acceptable outdoor décor.

Many homeowners in wealthy parts of town drilled their own well so they could water their grass. Signs of "Well water in use" were almost as plentiful as the "Pray for Rain" signs.

I forgot what true green looked like. Imagine playing with a photo in Photoshop, sliding the hue and saturation controls to where the photo is washed out, with little color, to deeper vi-brant colors. When I look at my neighborhood, that's what I see, a before picture with brittle, straw-colored grass for a ground covering, changing to the lush emerald carpets we have now. I have to double check my location in parts of the city because landmarks don't look the same sur-rounded by fuller, greener trees and bushes. Even the sky seems more blue.

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My husband died in March of last year. He did not get to see the water pool around his two pecan trees or hear the thunder from the storms that broke the dry spell. Living with grief in the time of drought forever linked the two for me because since last March I've prayed for com-fort from the grief and relief from the drought. As we tried to survive with our water supply dwindling, I tried to survive without the person that kept me going for almost 31 years.

Mike is buried in the Charlie Cemetery, a pretty cemetery in the tiny town of Charlie on the Red River just northeast of Wichita Falls. Crooked old headstones dating back to the late 1800s are scattered in with more modern stones with laser-carved pictures. Arborvitae dot the land, providing shade for a precious few of the lots.

My aunt Billie and uncle Pete are the caretakers of the cemetery and can tell you who's buried where and who is kin to whom. I don't doubt that Pete's boots have left prints on every inch of the cemetery. He's 94 and still does most of the mowing. He battles goatheads, fire ants and gophers, winning a victory over by the Hull family lots with the ants but losing one to go-phers up by the Garners.

On the afternoon that my dad, brother-in-law and I went to pick out my

husband's lot, Pete took a steel rod and stepped out across the uneven ground, watching his balance as he head-ed toward the grave of one Fanny Hamilton. He held his right upper arm close to his side, with the thin L-shaped rod held out in his right hand. As he walked toward Fanny's grave, the long section of the rod pointing straight out in front of him swung to the left until it was parallel with the layout of Fanny's grave. For Mr. Hamilton, the rod swung to the right. My brother-in-law thought it was a joke until he held the rod himself. My dad walked away from the Hamiltons to another group of graves, with the same results. The rod swung one way for the men and the op-posite for the women. I took the rod in my hand and without any prompting from me, the rod swung toward the west, toward Fanny's head.

Pete walked that cemetery countless times through the years with his divining rod looking for unmarked graves. I never knew he was a grave dowser.

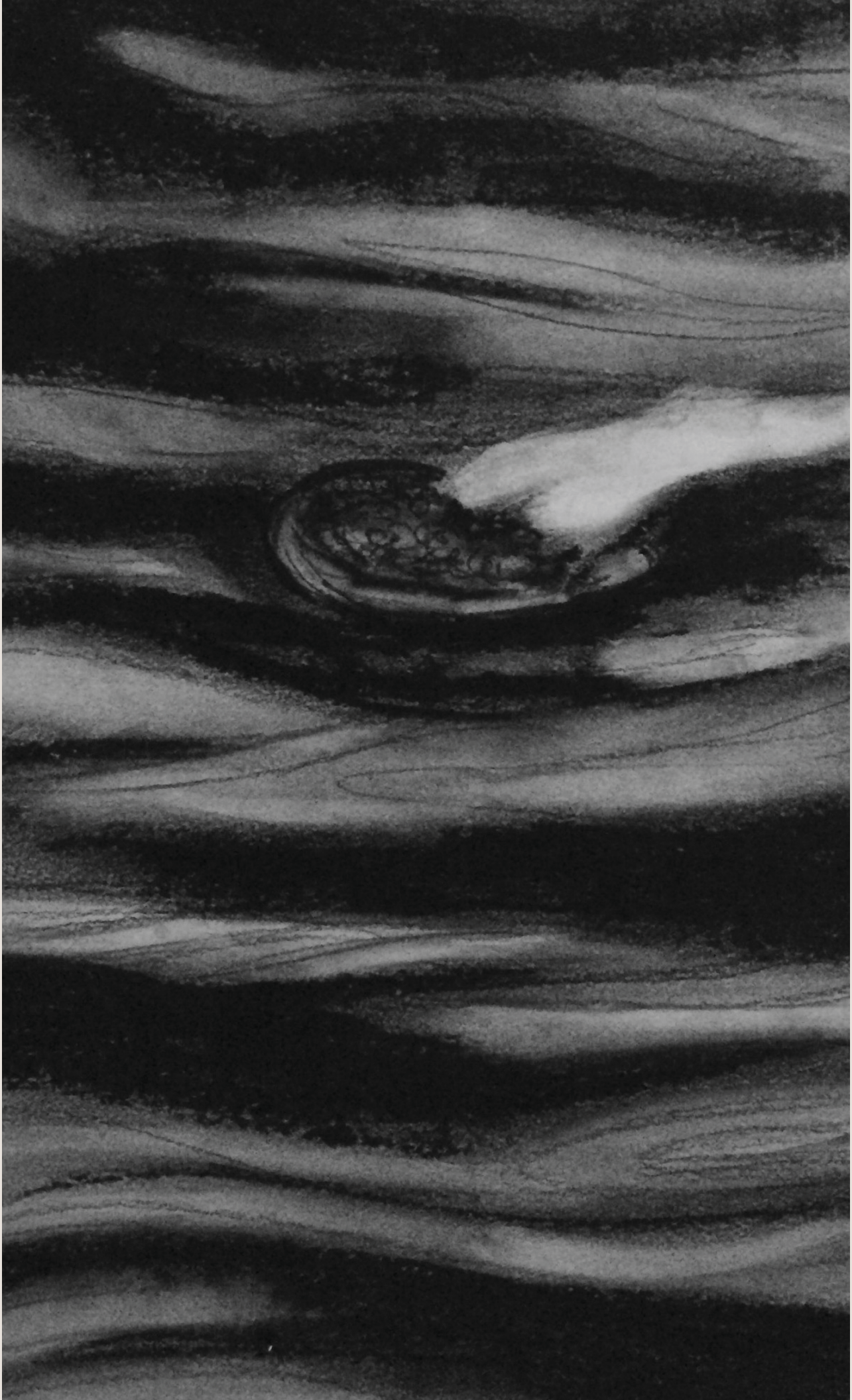
During these past few drought years, some enterprising people bought land out of town and drilled wells to pump water and haul to customers in town. Just as Pete searches for signs of what used to be life with his dowsing rod, I wondered if drillers still used dowsers to find the water underground that we needed so badly to keep our lives going.

In this in-between, maybe we need a divining rod to point us in the right direction. We need to learn how to treat water as something other than a liquid that comes from a bottomless pit into our houses.

The Wichita Falls water situation made the national news last year in July when we went to the Direct Potable Reuse project. That's the fancy name for recycling our sewer water into drinking water. Now that the drought is over for now, no decision has been made about its con-tinuance.

In the Old Testament, Pharoah dreamed of seven lean cows devouring seven fat cows. Then he dreamed of seven blighted ears of grain eating seven healthy ears. Joseph interpreted Pharoah's dreams of seven years of feast and seven years of famine, and grain was stored during the plentiful years to carry people through the bad times.

The Wichita Falls City Council already has voted to ease water restrictions that affected car washes, watering yards and swimming pools. Some restrictions are still in place such as no using a hose to rinse down your driveway, watering allowed only during certain times a day, and no car washes except at a car wash business. I've already seen an increase in shiny, clean cars.



Candles

by Philip Kelly

For a Mazatlan whorehouse, I'm guessing it was posh. An ornately carved entry door led to a room tiled in white porcelain; an airy room vaulted by a ceiling of gray-grained roble beams and walls swirled with a corn-yellow plaster.

A second floor balcony ran the perimeter, girded and grilled by a waist-high railing of cursive wrought iron, through which peeked potted birds-of-paradise and vases with jade frogs inching up their sides. Ladies in satin camisoles – rose, pink, ultramarine – lounged in the doorways, smoking, and scratching their backs on doorjambs like cats. Others leaned lugubriously over the railing, arms splayed out, careless of their wares.

It was a slow night.

Mike sat opposite me in a purple chair. His baseball cap crooked on his head, his glasses askew. He was fast asleep. It was my duty to make a bargain with the *Jefe* of the establishment.

Through blue cigar smoke we spoke.

"You should not have come. It is dangerous here, my friend."

The cab ride from the dance club overlooking the sea was scary enough for me. We rode the coastal road for a mile or so, and then wandered into a warren of industrial sites – concrete mixers in barbed-wire yards, tin sheds of auto body and painting businesses, and empty lots storing tumbleweeds. Then this place, a foursquare stucco painted the pink of a donut box.

"We have had many beers." I nodded at Mike.

"Dangerous beers, I think." The *Jefe* twirled his index finger and a girl in a crimson robe appeared. She cinched her sash as she bent to receive a kiss and a whispering. Mike woke briefly, spotted the blonde-haired woman, gave me a knowing nod. He fell back to sleep at the bottom of his nod. His face wore a look of complete peace.

The blonde returned with a silver tray and set it on the table that separated me from the headman. He drew into his cigar, blew out the blue-black haze, and with a feathery wave of his hand indicated the wares on the tray – a glass butter dish of cocaine, with a hundred- dollar bill laid on a corner; a bottle of tequila with two shot glasses; and long-necked beers sitting in a pail of ice. I pointed, he nodded. I reached for a beer.

I try always to live in the moment, but my friend Mike – we had been kicked out of a dance club at Mazatlan because he decided the best place to put on his dance moves was a long, polished bar – the bartenders pulling him down and the bouncers, menacing in tuxedos, showing us the pavement outside.

Mike was my compass for the extreme. He drank more, he climbed mountains more, swam more, traveled and worked more.

"Dos mujeres por todo noche," Mike declared on rising from the cement – "Two women for the whole night," and we hailed a cab. Now he was asleep.

The *Jefe* wore black pants and a dazzlingly white long sleeved shirt with little diamond studs at the wrists. The lights of the place played upon his straight, backcombed black hair. His face was taut, yet lined – like cracks in a smooth stone. I pleasantly thought of them as fine aging, but I knew in my heart they were scars.

There were lines at the corners of his eyes that might have come from distant laughter. He smiled now, and I thought for a moment that Mike and I might be just strange enough to live through this. Mike snorted in a dream, felt for his glasses, and wriggled back to sleep.

"What can I do for you, amigo?" It was English as sweet as Fernando Llamas's. His hands opened in a welcoming way. Each finger wore a ring, some stoned, others gold-banded. Hands set in a jewelry store. I sipped my beer slowly. It felt like a movie: a table set with drinks and drugs, a whorehouse lifting above and around us like a playhouse. Then I thought of the rough streets outside and shuddered.

"My friend was insisting on 'two women for the whole night', but I think we might get away with a cab ride home." I know my hand shook as I lifted my beer.

Then he laughed. The wrinkles at the edge of his eyes twitched. A ring hand motioned over the blonde woman leaning against a doorjamb. He whispered to her. She laughed too, covered her mouth with brilliant painted fingers, and disappeared.

The *Jefe* stood to leave. I stood and we shook hands. He spoke softly what was owed, and that I should leave it under the sugar bowl of coke. The *Jefe* brushed his fingers lightly, indicating it was time for us to go.

At the wooden entry door lounged two women, perhaps in their thirties, with dark mascara that gave them a raccoon look, and blood red lipstick. They wore postage stamp dresses of a stretchy vinyl – one a cherry red, the other a smart plum. It was if they had fallen to us from a slot machine. Each carried a vinyl pocketbook slung across her chest like a bandolier. I woke Mike from his distant dream to this one.

A man in a too-small silver suit stood smoking at the door. He nodded and pushed the door open with a forearm. Out into the Mazatlan night Mike and I went with our dates.

The girls squeaked in their dresses, clicked in their heels, to the waiting cab, then squeaked into the backseat and squeezed the now quite-awake Mike

between them. I rode up front through the dark, unknown streets with the cabbie.

The cabbie kept shifting the rear view mirror so I could see what pleased him so.

Mike sat between the girls in a bright Hawaiian shirt, an arm around each one, his baseball cap still backwards. One woman wore his glasses on the tip of her powdered nose. The other whispered in his ear. I had never seen him look so happy, and he was a happy man by nature. Then he was asleep on one of the lady's shoulders. The cabbie and I chuckled. He turned the music on his radio down.

The way to our room led by the manager's apartment.

The manager was an oval-shaped, middle-aged woman with dyed red hair that billowed above her head like crimson smoke. We had been staying in her place off and on, on our adventures to Mexico, for years. She always teased her fire-hair up when she saw us coming, warned us against the dangers of the night out there on the streets. I think she was in love with us. We thought of her as, called her, Mom.

Well, that wee hour in the morning, her "boys" and a couple pairs of high heels clicked by. Her light flicked on. I think I saw a curtain quiver. But it was dark.

The three of us, in uncertain light, lay Mike down in his bed.

The girls undressed him, while I turned away. They pulled a sheet over him as he dreamed his dreams, bent to kiss him. Blowing kisses to me, they cracked the door and eased out. I could hear the click, click of their heels falling on the tiles, then the taxi start up and cough away into the blue-black of dawn. The smell of their perfume lingered like gardenias afloat in a glass bowl. I found my bed and slept.

The heat and light of tropical Mazatlan beat into our room; finally woke us. We both lay silently. I played out, in my hurting head, the calico events of the night. "I'm still alive," I thought – coke in a sugar bowl, hookers, dancing, a cab driver with an immense moustache, a room dripping with perfume. I turned toward Mike.

He lay like a man at ease with his world in rumpled sheets, his arms akimbo behind his head, glasses set on his nose, the slimmest smile playing on his lips. Serene and tranquil.

My eyes argued against opening. Mike turned to me.

"I had your back, Bro."

"I got your back, Bro." It was our manifesto. We said it to each other at blackjack tables, on dangling rock climbs, in alleys in dark, exotic locales. We said it to each other as a joke when a wife or a girlfriend caught one of us in a little, bitty lie. We said it to each other when we each were caring for our dear failing mothers. I said it to Mike when his black Labrador died. Mike said it to me on the eve of my prostate cancer surgery. *I got your back, Bro*.

Two months ago, I got a book and a check in the mail from Mike. It was a travel book about guys running the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. The

check was for two thousand dollars. He knew I was struggling. Mike's short note on a yellow stick-um on the book read: *I got your back, Bro. Let's go!*

Now he's gone.

We met in Cairo, the spring of 1976. I was sleeping in dawn's heat and dust in the doorway of a youth hostel. Mike stepped over me, bent and nudged my shoulder.

"You okay, Bro?"

My hands were clenched around wet twenty-dollar bills I had won the night before in a longish gambling venture in a Hilton on an island in the middle of the Nile. Mike saw the rolls, figured I was in over my head. Cairo was a rough town, and the youth hostel was in the grim part.

"I'm heading south on a train to the Sudan, wanna join me? She's leaving soon."

"My pack's inside." Mike waited by the door as I hustled up my belongings.

"Mike."

"Junior."

We walked out into a wakening Cairo and thirty-eight years of friendship.

A goat was lying in the narrow aisle on the train south to the Sudan. Belongings teetered in the openings above us. A man selling tea in fluted glasses moved through ringing a tiny bell. The goat answered in kind. Next to me, a calm within the din, was Mike, reading from *The White Nile*.

I reached into my orange, nylon backpack tied to my shoe with a shoelace – my failsafe alarm system, when sleeping. I pulled out a paperback – *The White Nile*.

Mike turned to me, his ball cap tugged low, and a small, knowing smile raised the corners of his mouth. He wore monocle-round, metal-framed glasses.

"Water, Junior? Tablets added and dissolved." I drank and read till my head tumbled asleep again, bouncing freely along in time with the carriage as it carried us along in the desert and history of Alan Moorehead's book on the Nile.

I dreamed I was on the back of a ferry tossing grapefruit-sized dice into a turquoise sea. In the background of my dream, I could hear Mike. He had moved across the aisle and was playing cards with robed Egyptians on a suitcase set as a table between them. It was hot as hell, and Mike was laughing.

In Africa, at night on our adventures, Mike promoted a "daring" game for us to play. Each in turn would leave the welcoming campfire and wander into the bush with its sounds and glittering eyes.

The one who would go farthest without turning on a flashlight was the winner.

While I would venture just steps into the darkness, Mike would leave for half an hour.

In Uganda a park ranger came up to us through the tall grass. He was an older man in a ragtag uniform, part ranger, part military. He had a gold tooth and a rifle.

"Last night, when the man came between the hippo and the baby hippo." Grass swayed back to hide the path from which he had approached. He turned in that direction and nodded his head. "There." He pointed a long finger as if painting the scene. "Just over there, the hippo ate the man."

We asked the ranger to take a picture of us. He grinned, set down his gun, and moved us together with his hands and shot – Mike and I, a blue sky, the high, green grass with a man-eating hippo behind us.

We thanked him, and he nodded, moved silently around us, and disappeared into tall grass.

I appear a bit wan in this treasured photo. Early on in Africa I caught malaria, did the chills; then fever in a fiercely hot youth hostel in Nairobi.

I woke in a brightly lit hospital room. My arms to my side, a white sheet to my chin, around my bed, in the light, hovered four nuns, their dark and kindly faces caught in tight ovals of white headgear. On their shoulders starched habits rose like wings. I had died and gone to heaven. No more chills, no more fever. No more of that wretched youth hostel toilet.

Out of the corner of my eye...There was Mike. He peeped around one of the nuns. Bye-bye heaven. I tried to ignore him and bring back my celestial journey.

He got me in the Land Rover a week later, drove the bush paths and ravines. He cooked me dinner and set up my tent 'til I was well enough to walk into a dark African bush without a light. "I got your back, Junior!"

A year ago fall, Mike invited me to one of his most favorite places on the globe, a sacred place astride a sacred river.

I was walking in a rainy New York City, umbrella-less, ducking under scaffolding on the Lower East Side. I was there for a long weekend with my girlfriend, who had a series of performances. While she spoke uptown, I wandered about, broke and worried. I couldn't share either condition with her. One I was embarrassed by; the second was that a cancer worry worries another. As I ducked raindrops, my hands buried in empty pockets, my mind buried in some dark future, my cell phone rang. It was Mike.

"Bro, I got a trip planned, if you are interested. India in January for two months, all the regular sites, but most of all my very favorite place – Varanasi. You need a break; I know it ain't been easy. And it's on my dime. I got your back, Bro."

Suddenly the sky cleared. Suddenly I had money. Suddenly my cancer was gone. I skipped up Seventh Avenue. All the way uptown I thought I would go. And though, by the time I reached the Park, I knew it would be impossible, that didn't matter a bit. I had a friend in the world who said – *Climb on my back, I'll carry you!*

And I hung the map of India on my wall while I underwent the cancer treatments and painted houses. I followed Mike's journey as though I were there. For I was.

I hung the map of India on my wall as he left with Trish, his wife. I put a big, blue star in pen ink next to Varanasi.

Mike called me once from there. Varanasi, the city of Shiva, "the City of Light."

He was knee deep in the sacred Ganges in front of the Scindia Ghat. It was evening, and he wanted me to know that he was pushing a lighted candle out into the river as a blessing for me. Those thousands of miles away, his voice rang clear as a bell. "I just wanted you to know, Junior, I got your back."

Trish said he went every day to the ghats that rose in red brick, in sandstone, in glistening gold along the river's way. I had never known Mike to be spiritual. "But, Junior, he had to go each day, couldn't wait for dawn so that he could get down by the cremation ghats," said Trish. "To watch the wood pile up for the fires; to listen to the morning prayers chanted by rows of priests under bamboo parasols; and stand a respectful distance away while bodies wrapped in shrouds were lain on biers beside piles of wooden logs."

Trish told me he came back each day covered with gray ash.

Book-ended on my bureau with the picture of us in Africa, I have a picture of Mike leaning above a nighttime Ganges. His ball cap, a tannish-yellow, stands out in the flash – that ubiquitous ball cap! He's older, white hair crowding out the black, lines routing his studying face. He is being oh-so-careful, pushing a lit candle into the river.

I was in the Seattle airport when Trish called. I was on my way to visit my girlfriend. I had just bought a map of Indonesia in an airport kiosk. Mike kept saying – *I owe you one, Bro*.

The cancer that had kept me from the trip to India had been corralled. Mike wanted me to pick anywhere in the world I wanted to go – *On my dime, Junior*. Anywhere in the world! I was folding the map when my cell phone rang.

"Mike fell in a parking lot. Hit his head. He's hurt badly. Hurry, Junior!"

I tore up boarding passes, stammered to attendants. I flew to Mike and Trish.

My girlfriend calls these tales my "Spin and Marty" stories. She's a writer and listens with half an ear and rolling, beautiful eyes as I tell her of the "Mike and I" adventures: our hikes in Italian wine country, stopping for five-hour lunches at wineries, stumbling to find again the Chianti Trail; sailing the Virgin Islands, the boom of the mainsail swinging like a scythe. But my girl brightens when a story told is so ridiculous it becomes poem fodder. Which is quite often.

Spin and Marty. Trish, Mike's wife, laughs and agrees with my girlfriend. "Spin and Marty Now in Their Latter Years" is the way she would have it. Trish was there from the start. She tweets back. "Who hiked to the ranger station in the Serengeti to get the tire jack as the baboons laughed and flexed their teeth, circled you like prey?"

And on another day: "Who waited under the baobabs while you boys went off into the dark with your little flashlights to play chicken with Africa?"

What can you say about a person with the nonchalance to tolerate two men bent on pulling each other out of the sickest, brokest, most boring hours of their

lives? That on a journey of her own she stopped to stir the rice pudding and spoon it toward your gaunt, malarial frame. That focused on saving the planet, she held the door open for you two, reminded Mike, before he stormed the walls of Troy, to pack that little screwdriver to tighten his glasses?

And now the three of you at another hospital bed, the leader of the pack disappearing, having tripped in a parking lot a mile from home, a bag of groceries by his side, a six-pack of Coors Light?

At about five in the afternoon a nurse appeared, and I commented on Mike's beatific smile – "That's the morphine," she said.

I cursed the nurse under my breath.

She erased a feeding schedule from a blackboard and with practiced, quick movements, left.

We watch from a distance safe. The man rises from his knees and stands awash in the colored lights twinkling on the temple's wet steps. He tugs at a ball cap and smiles. You've left behind a room of maps, Mike.

The candle-boat flickers, struggles and twirls in the river's eddy. Then, suddenly, free.

It bobs in the Ganges's deep current, crests and surfs. The flame wavers. The candle totters and dives, then to rise again and shake itself to burst bright in the closing night.

The strong scent of frangipani surrounds us in the darkness, consoles us.

Free. Free now, the candle-cradle glides into a flotilla of lights – a sailing constellation of bright lights, golden flames sweeping steadily south to an immense sea.

My Encounter With Koresh

by Timothy Miller

Man, this guy stinks! This was my first impression of Vernon Howell. It was Sunday, April 13, 1983, and my first thought was not a judgement about him as a person but that he had out of this world body odor. He was in my space or more precise in my face. With furrowed brow I looked him up and down. 30-weight oily brown hair in need of a change. Ash gray Fruit of the Loom T-shirt semi-tucked into brown corduroy pants frayed into beige strands over cracked black converse sneakers.

He spoke to me, "That book is a good one but I have one better."

His breath was fecal so I hid my recoil from this extraterrestrial from planet halitosis.

"Pardon me?"

He repeated himself and pointed to the book I was holding. In my right hand was a small burgundy hardbound book called "Ministry of Healing." He leaned forward and took it in a slow deliberate manner. As he retrieved it I firmed my grip. He placed his left hand under my hand, like a tender act of an old friend. It felt so odd that I let the book go. Grease under fingernails but only on the right hand. Calluses on the tips, not the hands of a working man, but he just worked on something. Greasy Guitar Fingers, I thought.

He grabbed my right hand with a firm grip. I was startled by the strength. He was not a big man. Probably 160 pounds soaking wet and maybe 5-foot-11. I looked down on him. No question whatever he lacked in size he made up in testosterone. There was seductive confidence in his eyes. I stood bookless with outstretched hand. As a 6 foot 2 inch, 250 pound man who built houses for a living I was not accustomed to a male entering my personal space much less touching my hand. It was rare but for the first time in my life I felt like a deer caught in oncoming lights. He walked over to a display but kept smiling eyes synched to mine.

We were standing near the checkout counter of the Adventist Book Center or ABC as the locals called it from Keene, Texas. The bookstore was located on the campus of Southwestern Adventist College. Keene was a college town south of Fort Worth and its nickname was the Adventist Ghetto. As a former Seventh-day Adventist, Vernon Howell was quite at home in this place.

He pulled a pamphlet off the shelf called "Word to the Little Flock" and handed it to me.

"Now here is a book that contains real truth."

He tossed "Ministry of Healing" off to an adjacent display table. I looked at the discarded book and wondered why it was less significant than a 50-cent pamphlet. I pointed back to the table.

"So that book doesn't contain 'real truth?'"

This question sparked in his eyes. His nostrils flared. The stubble on his face moved with a widening smile. It felt like something changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, here was a hunter locked upon sudden prey. I was in his sights. The hairs on the back of my neck raised.

"My name is Vernon Howell, what is your name?"

As soon as he spoke his name I knew it was not my first time hearing it. Vernon's name did not immediately register in my memory but it did in someone else's. He said it loud enough to catch the attention of the man behind the counter. The manager was a man named Don. Don started in our direction. Just as I was about to answer, "My name is Tim," Don jumped in.

"Now, Vernon," he said, "we have covered this before so please take it outside. I don't want to call the campus police."

Vernon laughed out loud. He looked as if I should get whatever joke was supposed to be funny. "The Southwestern Adventist College rent-a-cops are enough to scare any man into submission," Vernon said.

Don was not smiling. "Look, Vernon, I don't want any trouble! If you feel the need to preach I need you outside!"

Vernon held up his right hand, "I'll do whatever you ask, Don."

Vernon turned to me and pointed back to the "Word to the Little Flock" pamphlet.

"Let me buy that for you," he said.

This felt weird to me and once again I was a deer in his headlights.

"That won't be necessary," I said.

"But I insist," he said.

He attempted to take the pamphlet out of my hand. I held on tight and pulled it back. I laid the pamphlet on the counter. He started for it and this time I placed my hand over the pamphlet. This must have looked extremely childish from a distance, two grown men in a tug of war over a religious pamphlet.

"I don't need your money." My face warmed.

For a split second I saw anger flash in his eyes. He knew that I saw it. He brought his hands together and moved them slowly apart. This gesture was classic black jack. The dealers do this when leaving a table. They show the eye in the sky and players that their hands are clean and they are not stealing any chips. Perhaps this was Vernon's way of showing me and the eye in the sky who really was in control. I

walked back to the display and retrieved the small burgundy "Ministry of Healing." Vernon walked out the front door. He caught himself at the entry, paused and grinned, a Casanova cat about to eat a canary.

I turned away and back into the store. I searched for my friend Tommy. He was walking up the aisle with an armload of books. I had known Tommy since high school. We played football together in the ninth grade. He could bench press 350 pounds compared to my 175.

In the ninth grade I invited him to visit the Seventh-day Adventist church. I had become an Adventist at the age of 13. This was more of an intellectual decision than spiritual conversion. After my father's death in 1972, high school football was my religion. Daddy was a gentle alcoholic and prostate cancer did what the alcohol couldn't do. Sad, but he never came to a single game.

I was home sick with the flu the week after Daddy died. A Seventh-day Adventist pastor named Dale Hoover knocked on my door. He offered me a free Bible and gave me a choice of white or black. I chose white and he invited me to study it. He received my name from the "It Is Written" television series. Even to a 13-year-old kid, there was something about that television show. George Vandeman was the host and he was not only gentle and kind, but seemed to make good sense.

Brother Hoover and I studied the Bible every Tuesday and Mama would sit in with us. Mama was raised a typical secular Southern Baptist. We went to church one time every year, Easter Sunday, rain or shine. That was about it. Our family was not anti-Jesus, we were more absent Jesus. Mama was not thrilled but did not object when I was baptized a Seventh-day Adventist. Winstons and pork chops made Mama less inclined to the Adventist health message but she liked the Sabbath and not burning in an eternal hell fire. She was determined to die a Southern Baptist and relied on Jesus to get her out of the flames, whether temporary or eternal.

I was a member of the Mesquite church but baptized at the Dallas Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since Mesquite did not have a church building I was "dunked" (as Tommy called it) at the big downtown church on Highway 75. Soon as I was baptized it seemed natural to invite my football buddy to church. I have to be honest, we went more for the girls than we did for Jesus. Before the end of my freshman year a motorcycle wreck and broken hip ended my athletic aspirations. Tommy had his own motorcycle wreck a few weeks later and this knocked him out of football. Tommy said God was jealous of our football worship and this was why we had wrecks. I did not know much but I knew that was a sack of bullshit.

After our wrecks and newfound time, Tommy would come over and Mama would make us watch Billy Graham. We didn't mind much. There was something about Billy Graham that was simple and direct. Like George Vandeman, he focused solely on Jesus so it was hard to take issue. It was probably Mama's way of trying to bring me back into the fold. One night they asked the two traditional Billy Graham questions.

The first question, "If you died right now would you go to heaven?" If you answered no they would take you through the good news of the gospel. If you answered yes then you got question two.

"When you get to the gates of heaven and St. Peter asks you, 'Why should I let you in?' How would you answer?"

If you answered anything but the cross and that Jesus Christ died for you, then you were guided through the gospel presentation. Most people would say, "Well, I guess I've been good enough." The gospel would debunk that notion and reveal all of our goodness as "filthy rags." Here was the interesting thing to me. When it came to salvation, Billy Graham taught exactly the same as Seventh-day Adventists. The only way to make it to heaven was based on what Jesus had already done. I was not religious by any means and I did not know theology at any level, but somehow I got this point. This simple understanding would prove to be very important with Vernon Howell.

At checkout Don warned Tommy and I that Vernon could be aggressive. Don told us he would preach all day if we let him. He smiled at me when he placed "Ministry of Healing" in the bag.

"Good choice," Don said. He held up the pamphlet, "Do you want this?"

I said yes and we thanked Don for the warning. He continued about Vernon, "He gets out of control sometimes and I've asked him to leave more than once. He's looking for recruits and sometimes he won't take no for an answer."

"Recruits for what?" I asked. "Is he starting an army?"

Don stared at me and I could tell this was not taken as the light hearted question it was intended to be. Either way he was not going to answer it.

"Just be careful. Vernon is looking for followers," Don said.

Tommy responded, "Don't worry I'll kick his ass if he tries anything." Tommy's Christian experience, like my own could be a bit authentic at times. We were so new in the faith they called us "baby Christians." We took our authenticity and our books and walked out the front door.

The parking lot was full but there was no sign of Vernon. I opened the door to my red Honda Accord and was about to hit the auto door lock for Tommy. That's when I heard a loud "Hey" from across the parking lot. Vernon stood in a pose, one foot resting in the doorway of a windowless white panel van. He slid the passenger side door shut with a loud "thunk" and headed straight for us.

"Can we talk a minute, brothers?"

Vernon spoke this as Tommy bent over to place his bag of books on the front floor board. I looked at my watch. By the time I looked up he reached into my car and grabbed the pamphlet out of the bag.

He held up the pamphlet like a commercial pitch man, "I'd like to share a point or two from this book if you don't mind."

Before I could answer he turned to the middle of the pamphlet and began reading. His voice was loud, way too loud. I looked around to see who was in proximity. It was awkward standing there being read to in a parking lot. By the look in his eyes this was a first for Tommy too. Vernon had a roller coaster cadence that went up and down. This was annoying at first. But the more you listened the more you fell into the rhythm of his intonations. It was like being hypnotized in a weird

sort of way. That voice was familiar. Then it hit me. Vernon had been a member of the Dallas Seventh-day Adventist Church, the same church where I was baptized. I remembered ten years earlier he was so disruptive his family was asked to leave. I heard the same thing happened at the Tyler Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I interrupted him, "We are right here so there is no need to raise your voice."

"Brother, I get excited about the word of God. I'm his messenger so I may get a little loud if you don't mind." He added, "Unless you got something against the Word of God?"

"I don't have anything against the Word of God but that is a pamphlet and this ain't church!"

He laughed out loud and slapped me on the back. "Ah, but we are in God's realm and this realm is his sanctuary. Are you familiar with the sanctuary truth?"

Before I could answer he read more excerpts from the pamphlet. He read about the little flock being the remnant of God called forth in the end time. He was now glassy eyed and began quoting long Bible passages from Isaiah and 2nd Kings. He got high with each quoted passage. I tried to ask questions but he would shift gears, give a brief answer and then go back to the rant. He went in depth into Elijah and the prophecies of his return. He got worked up then flat out shouted.

"I am the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy in Malachi; I am the fulfillment of the Cyrus prophecy in Isaiah. God has anointed me as David Koresh to prepare the way of the Lord."

"Who?" I asked. "I thought you said your name was Vernon Howell?"

He ranted on five more minutes on the meaning of David Koresh and how God "sent me to prepare the way." I looked over at Tommy and he appeared mesmerized. He stood in awe before the great prophet.

This bothered me more than anything. I tried to interrupt by saying, "Excuse me, Vernon or David. You entered into this study without prayer and haven't stopped talking since. I'm not buying."

What else was I going to do? My best friend was swallowing hook, line and sinker. I confess it was hard not to get pulled in by Koresh. Why? He knew his Bible front and back. More important he was extremely confident about what he believed. There was just no questioning him. I told myself I didn't know squat about the Bible, heck I barely knew John 3:16. I tossed up a panic-laced prayer. The next thought that crossed my mind was a question. "Vernon, or is it David, I'm confused?"

He interrupted, "My Mama made me Vernon Howell but God made me David Koresh."

"OK, David, I have two simple but direct questions for you. I don't want a sermon for answers but I want you to answer each question straight from your heart. Will you give me your word you will do that?"

"Yes, sir, I will, but before you ask me these questions I want to ask you one very important question."

I objected, "No, David, please let me ask these two questions."

"Of course," he said. "I will answer but mine is short and sweet."

"David, I don't think you do anything short and sweet."

He laughed and launched his query. "You know Elijah had a friend named Elisha, right? And when Elijah became exhausted Elisha was anointed to carry his mantle, right? Elisha even followed Elijah as the messenger of God, right?" He didn't wait for me to answer any question. Finishing each statement with a "right" at the end of each sentence was a consistent communication method. It was like he was willing me to agree with him. Don's words about wanting followers came to mind. Vernon leaned forward and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"We have a place in Waco called Mount Carmel. Do you know the significance of the name Mount Carmel?"

"Isn't that about Elijah?" I asked. At least I knew that much.

"Yes, it's the place where Elijah called down fire from heaven and destroyed the false prophets. Elijah said, 'Choose you this day who you will serve!' I am preparing the way just like Elijah. But just like Elijah needed help, I need a second in command to help me. I need help to spread the message of the shepherd's rod, to prepare the way of the Lord. I believe you could be just the man I need. It was no accident we met today. You have a presence about you. Let me teach you about the seven seals. Let me teach you about the book of Revelation. We will do some great things for God. Look at Tommy, he believes me and *both* of you can do a great work."

"Thanks, David, but will you please just answer the two questions?"

"Fire away. But before you ask them I feel the need to pray. Can we do that?"

Before I could respond he lifted his hands over his head.

He asked, "You do pray biblically don't you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The Psalms teach us to lift holy hands when we pray. Are you willing to pray with me now to allow God's will to be done in your life?"

Before I could answer, he launched into a long loud prayer that lasted several minutes. Before I closed my eyes I noticed Tommy's hands were palms up in the air just like David's. Both of them were holding up invisible beach balls. Several Bible passages were quoted and the prayer finally ended. David said, "Whew, man, I needed that! I feel the anointing, brother! Do you feel it?"

I asked, "Are you ready for the questions? And you promise to answer them honestly and from your heart?"

"Yes, of course. May God strike me down if I don't."

First question. "David, if you died right now do you believe you would go to heaven?"

The answer was delayed as he searched my eyes. Either no one had ever asked this before and it hung him up or he was scanning for some biblical reference from

which he could use as a new launching pad. When he finally answered it was with that same confident persona that he always presented.

"Well, yes, brother, I do believe it with all my heart." His fist clenched and he held it up to my face. "I believe!"

"OK, that leads us to the second question. When you get to the gates of heaven and St. Peter asks you, 'Why should I let you in?'"

This time there was less pause. He glared into my eyes. He leaned forward and whispered and it was a sneer, "Because I know the system. God has revealed it to me and this knowledge entitles me to enter."

I was stunned at his response. To profess to be God's right hand man and be so knowledgeable of scripture. How could he get this wrong?

I went for him with both barrels. "You missed it, Vernon! You weren't even close. There is no system. There is no secret knowledge that entitles you to anything. With all due respect and please don't take offense, you are full of shit." He was such a pushy bastard I thought someone should kick his theological ass. It turned out to be Mama and good old Billy Graham.

At that exact moment the side door to Vernon's windowless white van slid wide open. Out of the van stepped a blonde girl no more than 12 or 13. She leaned over as she stepped out. A thin peach shirt hung down loose revealing small underdeveloped breasts. She buttoned the top of her jeans. She was oblivious to our presence. She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. She yawned and stretched and ran her hands through her hair. Her eyes closed, she raised her head to the sun.

We all stood transfixed. She was a beautiful little girl. Behind her inside the van contained a crib sized mattress and crumpled dirty white sheets. One of the sheets spilled out of the door.

Vernon spoke to her. "Come on, Baby, get back in the van. I'll be right there."

Her physical reaction to his words was as if she had been hit in the forehead with a rock. She stepped back. Crimson cheeks above peach, her face went expressionless, mouth slightly ajar.

She started to say, "But I need..." and he cut her off.

"You heard me! Get back in the van!" This time he pointed to the side door. The tone was firm.

She did not appear upset. She was lost in a trance for several seconds. Obedience had long since evicted her from her own mind.

She hopped up into the van. She reached down and gently pulled the sheets back into the door. The van door slammed shut but with less velocity than when Vernon slammed it earlier. I thought of the Proverb, "A soft answer turns away wrath."

"Who was that, Vernon?" I asked and looked over at Tommy. Tommy stared at the van. Both of us had young daughters. This did not set well.

Vernon immediately excused himself. "Brothers, I have enjoyed this and wish we had more time to rightly divide the Word of God." He wagged his finger in my face. "If you take the time to study what I have shared, I promise you it will change your

life. May the Lord bless you!"

Tommy asked, "Who was that, Vernon?" The spell was indeed broken.

Vernon did not wait for a response and was already walking away. He was back in the van in seconds. The van yonk yonked, hesitated but finally cranked. Here was the source of the fingernail grease. We watched the van drive away with an unseen girl sitting somewhere in the back.

Tommy and I drove home and talked about what we experienced. We did not have enough evidence to call the police. Don had already called them and nothing was done. We knew the girl in the van was too old to be Vernon's daughter. We could tell by his red faced reaction and calling her Baby, she was not his sister. I told Tommy about what happened ten years earlier when Vernon was a member of the Dallas church where I was baptized. The Accord was quiet as we rode along. Both of our daughters were four years old.

Years later I discovered the girl in the van was Rachel Jones. She had been 13 at the time but the relationship was allowed by the girl's father. Rachel's father, Perry Jones, was a leader at the compound. Perry Jones would agree to allow Rachel to marry Vernon a year later at the age of 14. In the state of Texas this was permitted by law. Vernon Howell was already calling himself David Koresh at 24 when they married. Like many others, Mr. Perry fell under the spell of the new charismatic persona called David Koresh.

Fast forward 10 years and I am a Seventh-day Adventist pastor serving in Oklahoma. It was Friday, April 16, 1993, and I was driving to Dallas to visit my older brother John. I had just completed a doctoral intensive at Southwestern Adventist College. I had already finished a masters of theology in Michigan, but working on my doctorate ironically returned me to the place where I first met Koresh. On the way I listened to KRLD news radio. The DJ described the deteriorated negotiations between Koresh and the FBI. The siege in Waco had been going on since February 28. Approaching 50 days and the reporting was all over the place. They seemed to get a lot of the facts wrong.

For six weeks, Dallas-based KRLD radio commentators had characterized Koresh as having a Messiah complex. They referred to him as an impersonator of Jesus Christ. I knew this was incorrect because of my encounter with Koresh. He made grandiose statements but he really saw himself as the new Elijah. Koresh was obsessed with the prophecy in Malachi 3:2: "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire… ." The distortion of what Koresh preached became swallowed up in his reprehensible behavior.

I tried to keep up with David and knew things had not gone well for him. He was formally accused of sexually assaulting young children at the compound. The Waco Tribune Herald had published a seven-part series of articles called "The Sinful Messiah." Koresh was accused of being a polygamist and having sex with underage girls, some of whom were 12 and 13 years old. The reporting was not wrong. All in all David had 19 wives and fathered 10 children. The authenticity of the allegations and the ATF confirmation about an arsenal of illegal weapons made it necessary to intervene.

I felt at the time that I might be able to get David to leave the compound if I could get in to see him. I called the Waco police. I could tell they had a lot of helpful kooks that needed to be avoided. I left a message for the person in charge of the investigation. I finally connected with a police officer who was sympathetic but he assured me they had numerous experts who were handling the situation. He confirmed there was no shortage of people who wanted to give their two cents.

Another day went by and I had an idea. I began writing a letter to Koresh. The letter was a reminder of our meeting 10 years before. I would convey to him that I had studied his message and now saw the light. I would tell him that I recognized him as the recipient of the Elijah message to prepare the way. If only he would allow me to be his Elisha we could get his message out to the masses. I found out from the media that a form of that strategy was already in place. If David would release more children then he would receive more air time for his messages. I knew that would not work. Quid pro quo logic would never fit into his thinking. It would take a biblical scenario from one claiming to be called of God to get into his narcissistic mind.

After encountering several "right wingers" as we called them, I knew Koresh was dangerous. Confront or corner a narcissist and he will tear you apart. I had a bad feeling this would not end well.

I focused on the letter. My brother John used a new Dell laptop for his work. He allowed me to use it to write the letter. This was such a strange event I did not tell my brother what I was writing. He left the laptop with me while he went to work. After completing a good draft copy of the letter, the laptop battery ran down. I searched for a charger. The search produced nothing but I realized I had a Sony charger that seemed to have the same plug. I plugged it in. The Dell hissed at me. Smoke puffed up through the key board. A Mission Impossible moment occurred before I was even warned about choosing to accept the mission.

I scrambled to find a computer repair place nearby. They told me they could retrieve the hard drive data for my brother. His work consisted of elaborate detailed proposals. At this point the letter was forgotten. I was upset about possibly hurting my brother, especially if he lost essential work-related data. It was late afternoon. I turned on the news. Time was running out. The news reports were growing tense. I realized the letter was lost. But what else could I do?

I tried calling the Waco police and they would not connect me to the supervisor at the scene. The police were clear they already had enough on their hands with cranks and fanatics calling. My third call connected to a sympathetic officer. He confessed this was "new territory" and "complicated." They were just trying to understand a religious fanatic holding 75 persons, but all of them staying of their own free will. The police I spoke with were straight up professionals but the news media on radio and TV were calling the situation dire. Tension was rising. Who was this 33-year-old self-proclaimed prophet, ambitious evangelist, and charismatic rock musician? Who was this man with a photographic memory who could recite entire chapter and verse from the Bible?

I tried calling the KRLD radio station. I connected with a DJ who immediately wanted me to go on the air. I told him that I would need to get permission and

call him back. I called the Oklahoma Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and spoke directly with the person in charge. He was quite clear. "You do NOT say anything to anyone about this guy and by all means you will NOT go on the air." I tried to explain what happened 10 years before. I tried to explain my desire to help. The line was quiet. The conference president was not pleased. He responded with silence. After several seconds, "You heard what I said." Then he added, "If you value your employment then I suggest you take this advice."

We hung up the phone and I felt a surge of resentment. We had disagreed before. I had changed the order of worship service six months earlier and a "well-intentioned dragon" (my term for a difficult church member) had tried to have me removed. I was called down to the Oklahoma Conference to face an inquisition. I survived that but I knew I could not take his advice on this even if it cost me my job. I called the radio station back and told them I would not be on the air but was insistent that I speak to someone with authority. They said they would call back. To my surprise the phone rang. I told the KRLD program director that I had good information that may be able to help the situation. He told me to summarize.

I gave a brief summary of my encounter with Koresh and his preoccupation with the Elijah story. He tried to follow, he even took notes and asked questions to clarify. He promised to share the information. His last words were, "Somebody better do something and they better do it soon."

My brother came home a couple of hours later and I told him about the laptop. To my surprise my tears began to flow and I was overwhelmed with emotion. I told him that I would rather die than hurt him. He told me not to worry about the laptop and he would recover proposal copies from old emails. I did not tell him about the lost letter.

A short time later it was Monday morning, April 19. My brother and I had the day off and were about to leave for the golf course. I had not slept well. I kept telling myself I had done all that I could do or should do in light of my desire to remain employed. The television was playing in the background. A special news report interrupted the broadcast. The compound in Waco was under siege by the ATF and the Branch Davidians had set it on fire. Fight or flight took over within me and the amygdala in my brain hijacked the executive function. I felt clammy and needing to vomit. I ran through the "if onlys." If only I had been more forceful on the phone. If only I had told the conference president to go fuck himself and went straight to Waco. If only I had not been so aggressive with Vernon way back when, if I had been gentle, more Christ-like. Maybe just maybe, things might have turned out different. "A soft answer turns away wrath." We watched the compound burn and 76 persons die; 25 were children. I remembered Rachel and once again thought of my own daughter, now the same age as the girl who slammed the door shut on that windowless white van.

It was reported David Koresh was discovered with a fatal gunshot wound to the center of the forehead. It is believed that Koresh's right hand man Steve Schneider was the one who pulled the trigger. Schneider died that same morning of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the upper palate. Perhaps Elisha had helped Elijah after all.

I left Oklahoma shortly after the events in Waco. In spite of being awarded Oklahoma Pastor of the Year for the most baptisms in the conference and becoming ordained, I knew things would never be the same. The conference was obsessed with making money and turning people into Adventists. All I wanted to do was introduce people to Jesus. I didn't fit in with the right wing but did fit into the statistical departing of most Adventist ministers. Most left after five years and I was right on schedule. Overseeing four churches and making 22-thousand a year probably contributed to the change. In less than a year I left the ministry.

Did the demise of David Koresh have anything to do with my departure? Yes, but not how one might think. I always knew that I was different than most Christians. Religious people really annoy me. I found David Koresh to be one of the most narcissistic religious nuts I have ever met. Here was a man so totally consumed with how others perceived him that he created a symbolic persona to hide behind, a religious identity to cover his selfish acts. There are narcissistic leaders who create symbolic personas that border on sociopathic. Some of them even run for president.

Do I feel guilty or hold myself responsible for not doing more so many years ago? Sometimes. But that is ultimately dysfunctional thinking. In reality nothing I could have done would have made any difference. This begs a new consideration for those who confront evil. The heroes of Waco deserve better than being swallowed up by the distorted views and hidden agendas of those who rewrite history.

Two years later to the day on April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. His stated reason for doing this was revenge for the federal attack on "the innocent people of Waco."

Do I connect the events of Waco and the lack of intervention as a cause and effect reason for Oklahoma's bombing? Tommy thought God gave us motorcycle wrecks so we wouldn't be football worshipers. If that is the God we serve then fuck him and the horse he rode in on! Yes, I do get angry about all of this. Especially when people glamorize Koresh or try to defend someone like McVeigh. Character assassinations on the ATF, FBI, or police really piss me off. Accusing them of causing the fire was a false allegation. Remember what Koresh said? "I am preparing the way just like Elijah." That was why he started the fire. If his God wouldn't do it like he did for Elijah on Mount Carmel, David would do it for him on his own Mount Carmel. He would fulfill the prophecy in Malachi 3:2: "For he is like a refiner's fire..."

And the media perpetuates the lie of a "government conspiracy" because it sells, sells, sells. That is a shame and a dishonor to those who gave their lives doing the right thing.

There has to be more common sense than this. We live in a world of fanatics and it seems every week there is a new mass shooting somewhere. For some first responders, just going to work every day must feel like playing Russian roulette and facing more bullets than empty chambers.

Twenty years after the bombing, I ran the Oklahoma City Memorial Half Marathon. Did seeing the names and photos of the victims placed at mile markers

along the race somehow help me get closure? No, not really. Don't get me wrong, this was intense and it did provide emotional fuel to finish the race. I wish I could tell you that I felt better after running. I just felt relieved that I finished.

Can we get closure for pain that we didn't experience firsthand? Yes, but I learned it's not the same. I learned that all of us sail on an ocean of pain over giant waves between torrential rains. Our oceans are typically filled with more subtle losses and disappointments than burnings and beheadings. Hopefully, we navigate the waters well enough to remain above the waves. If we are fortunate, we have a partner who can buoy us for the journey. If we are not fortunate then we have the proverbial millstone. But either way, no matter how we deny, none of us get out of this alive.

I look back. What happened did not destroy my faith but brought me to a deeper understanding and a more authentic place. We are hard wired for social connections and God knows how much we need to belong. Flamboyant leaders with self-proclaimed visions of manifest destiny will try to pull us into their web, and make us part of something bigger than themselves. But at the end of the day the most profound and simple truth will cut through delusion. The questions may shout louder than the answers, but truth will resonate in direct proportion to our listening to the whispers of its authenticity.

And the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper, a still small voice." 1 Kings 19:12

A River Trickles Through It

by Amanda Ogle

Flakes of dry empty turtle shells sprinkle the crusted dirt of what used to be a pond brimming with life on the RiverCrest Ranch, an hour and a half west of Dallas.

Just four years ago, six ponds scattered across the 150 acres of rustic Brazos riverfront were teeming with thousands of swimming turtles. Ranch owner Bayou Bob Popplewell scans the terrain and remembers what it used to be like. The calm water would turn into a mini tropical storm at each feeding with turtles bobbing their heads at the surface and climbing over one another for food. In a good summer week, he would ship 6,000 pounds of turtles twice a week with his $2 million a year turtle shipping business. Bob began exploring different markets for turtles in the '80s and began shipping to Canada, then Hong Kong. China has a large market for pet turtles, food turtles and turtle breeding. Ranchers in Texas hate turtles because they can eat everything in a pond, so Bob created a co-op that he created in order to collect turtles from other people. Sometimes, there would be up to 1,000 people across three states catching turtles for him.

But the scorching Texas sun baked the earth below. There was no rain. Ponds began shriveling up. The ground began to crack and the turtles began crawling in every direction looking for water. He couldn't keep enough water in the ponds for the turtles to survive. Thousands of turtles need lots of water. The water started evaporating and made the water on the bottom of the ponds too hot for the turtles, causing them to die from the heat and sink to the bottom of the ponds to deteriorate.

Unable to pump replacement water for them from his dry river-fed creek, Bob

began shipping them as fast as he could to save them. They were dying fast. The shallow water made it hard for them to hide under the water's surface, exposing them to savage wild hogs, which preyed on the turtles for food.

Bayou Bob doesn't ship turtles anymore. Dozens of empty blue barrels that were used to ship turtles now line the fences next to the barren ponds.

The drought is the worst that Bayou Bob has seen in 30 years. This year is the fifth driest start to the year on record, which dates back to 1895. Many portions of the Brazos are in extreme to exceptional drought situations. Some cities have put citizens on water restrictions and make them pay dearly when they exceed their limits. Farmers and ranchers are forced to cut their crops and livestock due to lack of water. Despite all of the hardships Bob has gone through with his ranch, he still maintains a sense of humor. He wakes up before the sun every morning and walks along the riverbank with his puppies, Tinker and Tattoo, and their mother, Sasha. He is always busy, whether it's working out on the ranch cleaning up old barns with his friends who live in the next town over, or on a matinee movie date with his girlfriend. He has a way of staying positive throughout struggles and is always planning what projects he can work on next.

He spends his free time hanging out at The Maverick, a travel stop on 281 South about a mile from his ranch, reminiscing with old friends or getting laughs out of the waitresses who all know him by name.

"I'm gonna go ahead and get a veggie plate. I'm about to get scurvy I haven't eaten a vegetable in so long. And take this straw back. Real men don't suck stuff out of tiny holes," he tells the waitress.

"You got it. What veggies can I get for you?" she says while trying to contain her laughter.

"I always like to mess with people. If I can brighten one person's day then I have done my duty for the day," he says.

His phone is constantly ringing with friends wanting to catch up or start a new project with him. He's able to continue to live his life despite the losses he has been through, and he does it with a smile on his face. Bob says he always wants to have access to the river because his horses and dogs, his "family," all love it. The dogs swim in the river constantly and are free to wander around the land. After a hot day of working, Bob usually heads down to the river for a swim, and spends lots of summer nights camping on the riverbank. Even though the turtles are gone, he's determined to keep the ranch afloat.

Bayou Bob stands tall and fit wearing jeans and leather work shoes. He always sports a little mustache and perfectly combed salt and pepper hair. For a 70-year-old man, he doesn't look a day over 55, and he's still lively and cheerful in all situations. He strolls up the steps to the dock at the big pond at the front of his land. He heads towards the end and peers out from the dock's end. He remembers how crowded the ranch used to be as visitors flocked to see the turtles and other wildlife. He remembers the endless visitors he had, ready for a thrilling weekend at Bayou Bob's recreational ranch. He remembers the fun.

Cars hustled down I-20 West towards RiverCrest Ranch. Travelers piled out of their cars parked at the gate, eager to enjoy a day of adventure. Carrying lawn chairs, coolers, beach bags filled with sunscreen and afternoon snacks, swimsuits and other beach necessities, they headed down to the river, led by Bayou Bob himself. River guests were welcome to enjoy the beach and frolic freely as they please, but many were there for two reasons: kayak rentals and riverfront horseback riding. The Brazos River, flowing strong yet gentle, was a major source of income for Bob's turtle and recreational ranch businesses.

The Brazos River is the second largest river basin in Texas and flows 840 miles across the state. Many ranchers, like Bob, rely on the river's water supply to water livestock and, in Bob's case, to support his recreational ranch. He's lucky enough to have a creek that stems from the river running through his property that he pumps water from in order to water his animals. But for his cabin in the woods, he has to rely on rationed community co-op water from Lake Palo Pinto, which is sitting at 60 percent empty right now.

He's down to 14 kayaks (from 40) that sit on dirt all year long. He used to have 40 always down by the river, ready to launch into the water the moment a visitor wanted to use one. Kayakers don't visit his ranch anymore because the water in the river is too low. Guests don't want to pull their kayaks across cracked dirt even for a short distance. "People paying for this want crystal clear water that's smooth and flowing. They don't ever want to paddle or steer the boat. But it hasn't been that way in the last few years," he says. Horseback riders are gone now too. Bob went from 26 horses as of last year to five now. He couldn't afford to buy hay for 26 of them, so he sold all of them except his five best old trail horses. "I watch in helpless hopefulness," he says about the drought. He knows there is nothing that he can do right now.

The once-white, glistening sandbars on the beach are now dull and wider than the river. Cockleburs, weeds and sunflowers are now inhabitants along what was once the bottom of the river. The undergrowth and brush are so thick it makes it impossible to walk across the sand in some spots of the river. Where there is still flowing water, the streams are shallow enough to walk across, or even step across, in some areas.

Along the river banks, wild hogs dig and wrestle their snouts in the dirt. With shallow pond water, the turtles were an easy target for the hogs that came into the ponds like backhoes at a construction site, clearing out the turtles for an easy meal. Like other predators, the hogs come to the river in search of water. They're one of the top predators on the river and will kill and eat anything they come across, tearing up the ranch and rooting up brush and plants along the way.

One of Bob's friends had such a problem with a 600-pound hog that he called Bob to come out and help him with the problem. The man had a creek feeder, low enough to the ground for only calves to feed at. The problem was that hogs are low enough to the ground to reach the feeder as well, so a monster of a hog had been feasting on the feed, leaving the calves too scared to go near the feeder. Bob arrived and went to the feeder two or three days in a row, hoping to get a glimpse of the beast. One morning, Bob saw the hog leaving the feeder at daylight. "At first I thought it was a black bear, it was so big. I'd never seen a pig that big," says Bob. The pig trudged over a hill a couple hundred yards away with Bob following close behind. Bob raised the gun and shot a full metal jacket bullet through the pig's heart. Dirt kicked up on the other side of the pig, so he knew it had gone through. "You missed, you missed! Shoot him again," said the friend. But Bob didn't think that he had missed. He wasn't sure though, because the hog just kept walking. Bob took aim again and shot another bullet. Dirt kicked up on the far side of the hog again. "Dadgummit! You missed again," said the friend, eager for the kill. The hog began to stumble as he walked, until he finally fell. While cleaning the hog to sell the meat, Bob noted that the hog had consumed around $50 worth of feed from the feeder in one sitting. He discovered that both of the bullets had gone through the pig's heart, but the pig was so big it took a minute for him to bleed out.

Nowadays Bob keeps a close watch on his land and especially his animals. One of the things wild hogs are notorious for is destroying fences in order to find food. He's constantly on the watch for holes and entire sections of missing fence. Damaged fencing puts his horses, goats, donkeys and dogs at risk of attack from a group of hogs or other predators like coyotes and cougars.

Bayou Bob looks over the edge of grass that he's standing on to see how big of a step his next one will have to be. He takes a big step and lowers himself into the dirt bowl remains of the big pond at the front of the ranch. The pond used to hold 5,000 turtles at a time. He walks around, picking up pieces of turtle shells across the bowl. "This one was a snapper, you can tell," he says as he examines a shell piece. Remnants of aquatic plants lie lifeless and crisp in between the cracks of the earth. His eyes drift over the pond basin as if he's imagining. He stretches out his arm and makes a waving motion across the earth. "This all used to be filled with thousands of turtles. And now, nothing." He keeps walking until he reaches the other edge of the pond, where he climbs out, headed for a pile of old kayaks.

Kayakers used to float along the river, only having to paddle long enough to steer the kayak in the right direction. The 11-mile run was serene and scenic with live oak trees creating shade along the river's edge. Most guests that came to the river were from the Dallas/Fort Worth area and were thrilled by the fact that they had access to a river this close to home and didn't have to drive halfway to Colorado to use a kayak. Bayou Bob used to direct the brigades along the water, pointing out different types of trees and birds along the way as kayakers basked under the warm sun.

Horseback riders threw themselves over Bob's trail horses and adjusted themselves on the horses' backs. They lightly kicked the horses on their sides to make them walk across the grass. Before they could ride down by the river, they had to do a test run with Bob's ranch wrangler, Hector. "People will tell ya they're a real cowboy, but you don't wanna turn 'em loose on a semi-green horse down on the river," says Bob. Once they passed the test to make sure they could ride, it was off to the river with Hector. They would ride across the white sand along the beach and head up to a bluff overlooking the river and land. Riders enjoyed sack lunches and snacks as they took a short break from riding to enjoy the view from the top. The river looked mighty and strong from the bluff and whitetail deer could be seen in the pastures below. After covering about 20 miles in four hours, the riders would come back to the beach.

Back on the beach, guests relaxed in the sun. Children built sandcastles from the soft sand. Some guests fished along the riverbank while others began setting up tents for the night. Bob led a group of fossil hunters in a search for crinoids, tiny vertebral columns from a marine ancestor of the river that resemble a washer. The horses were let loose to graze on the thick coastal grass that grows along the shore. Bob had river guests seven days a week sometimes, especially in the summer. The river provided him with business ventures where he could stay at home and act as host to river guests.

A pile of colorful kayaks rests against a shed in the shade. Compared to the 40 kayaks that Bob used to have for the recreational ranch, this pile looks like an amateur's collection. Bob picks an aqua blue and white one from the pile and rests it on the ground. He climbs into the kayak resting on dirt and starts making a rowing motion with his hands. He tells of how he used to lead kayak groups along the river and the way the gentle current guided them along. He leaves the kayak and moves on to an area a few feet away with a group of knee-high plastic

containers resting under the trees. He says he needs to check on something.

He lifts the container off of the plastic tub to expose dark brown water. He sticks his pointer finger down into the water and jerks it out quickly. Tiny bubbles form on the surface of the water. He eases his hand back into the water until it covers his entire forearm. Rummaging through the near-black water with his arm, he looks ahead as if he's thinking as he's feeling through the tub. His arm stops moving and a grin creeps onto his face. "I got one," he says. He gently lifts his arm out of the water and pulls a turtle out of the tub by the tail. "This is a common snapper here. It's a good example of what I would ship to China," he says. The turtle looks to be around 15 pounds. Bob says he keeps some turtles in the tubs sometimes because he has people come out to the ranch wanting to put him in magazines, or to give people an example of what he used to ship. He braces the plastic lid with his left hand as he holds the turtle in the right. The turtle is furious with its mouth open wide, ready to snap. Holding the turtle by the tail, Bob lifts his foot up towards the turtle's mouth. The turtle bites the end of his shoe, jerking its head back and forth with its vicious grip. "Whoo!" says Bob. "They'll get'cha!" He places the turtle back in the tub and moves on to the next tub.

He repeats his process, sweeping his forearm through the tub, looking for another turtle. He finds one in this tub, too, and pulls it out by the tail. "Aww, this is a little gal here. She's just a sweet little line dancing girl, a little cowgirl," he says as he admires the ten-pound female snapper. Like her friend in the other tub, she's enraged, with her mouth open ready to strike. Bob takes a piece of plastic from the ground and brings it up to her mouth. She quickly snaps the plastic in half and opens her mouth again ready to repeat. "They never give up," he says as he swiftly pats her on the top of the head before she can strike. He goes on giving her quick pokes back and forth on her neck and head as she thrashes each time trying to bite. After the fun, he lowers her back into the tub and closes the lid.

In a way, Bayou Bob is similar to his turtles. As the drought hammers down on Texas, the turtles move on to bigger and better ponds. They never give up the fight to survive, and neither does Bob. He has hope for rain and for his businesses to eventually be back, but in the meantime, he waits.

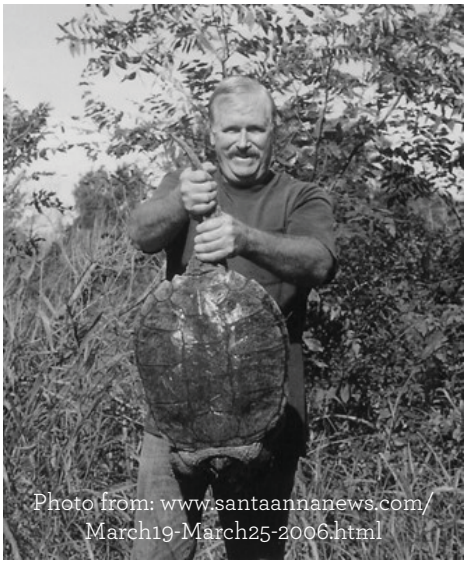


Photo from: www.santaannanews.com/March19-March25-2006.html

Married In Blue Jeans

by Shannon Randol

I stood in the blistering sun for four hours as it scorched my back and burned my flats to the bottoms of my feet. A horde of families were gridlocked on the dock craning their necks to catch the first glimpse of the 95,000-ton aircraft carrier, the Dwight D. Eisenhower. I leaned against a fence farther off from the crowd. I wasn't positive I deserved to be there, or that my ex-flame wanted me waiting for him on the dock to welcome him home for the first time in months.

It was the last week in June and the summer sun felt hotter in Norfolk, Virginia, than it had 600 miles south in Jacksonville, Florida. The aircraft carrier would finally arrive to its homeport in a few hours. A whole slew of homesick sailors anticipating the long awaited hug from their loved ones. I hadn't seen him in seven months, when I broke his heart.

Families gathered in groups while rubbing elbows with sweaty strangers. Music bled from loud speakers to help keep crowd enthusiasm high. The announcer frequently shouted updates on the ships location, and my sailor's father was busy snapping photos while checking his work email. I watched all the excitement from a distance, feeling completely paralyzed and discombobulated.

Two months prior to my sailor's first deployment, I had ended the relationship. He'd been re-stationed to Virginia Beach for six months, at the time, and I lived in Florida. The long distance was ripping road spikes through my heart and spirit. I was twenty and didn't feel like I'd known him long enough to commit to a deployment or a serious long distance relationship. *I was too young for this*.

On the day of his deployment I waited until the ship departed and called his phone to leave one last voicemail. It would be months before he could listen to the recording and that caveat gave me courage. Hopefully, when the voicemail was played it would convince him to see me after the ship docked and, on my part wishfully thinking, when he heard my voice he'd forget all the pain I had put him through. Years later, I'd like to slap the silly out of myself for digging my own hole and constantly falling back into it. From the moment I had met this person he swore he'd never shatter my guarded heart. In reality, I severed the relationship almost beyond repair and self handily fractured his benevolence.

Matthew stood roughly below the 6-foot mark with dark copper hair routinely buzzed in accordance with military standards. His eyes had small freckles below the green irises and dimples on either side of his cheeks. In his presence you all at once felt calm, cared for and protected; lean muscles apparent underneath his

loose Navy uniform.

He spent every other weekend for six months making the nine-hour drive down from Virginia to Florida. Unbeknownst to me, Matt pawned his personal belongings to afford the gas round trip, including the only object keeping him sane and able to decompress after long work days – his Xbox360.

I kept an old fish tank that once housed a fair winning goldfish that long since passed, but used the container as a makeshift coin collector.

"I know you're keeping the change for a rainy day splurge, but do you think I could borrow it?" he asked sheepishly.

"Why do you need loose coins?" I said, accusation in my voice.

"I don't have enough to make it back to base. I promise I'll pay you back."

I huffed out an annoyed, "Sure, whatever."

Blinded by pain it didn't register how much Matt was sacrificing to make the trips and keep our relationship on the ups, with no help from me.

Despite the agony I was happy to see him each weekend and would count down the days to his arrival, but the whole ordeal eventually became overwhelming. I knew the routine: over the moon late Friday, upset by Saturday because he was leaving the next day and somber Sunday because I wasted Saturday feeling dismal. All of our time spent had a deadline with a ticking timer. Exchanging goodbyes so often created a huge hole. I couldn't deal with it anymore, the swollen eyes and damp cheeks ritual grew tiring.

In the last month of our relationship I began to distance myself. Phone calls and text messages were left unanswered or kept to one worded replies. The saying "long distance relationships never work" must be true and persuaded myself into believing it profoundly. His name was left out of daily conversations and my endless thoughts of missing him ceased. Matt felt me pulling away and made a last ditch unexpected drive to repair what was broken, but I didn't want it to be fixed.

Instead, I picked a huge fight with him the night he arrived. Matt stood in my apartment's small-scale kitchen, his face weathered from lack of sleep, the long drive, and wrinkled with the misery caused by my doing. I stood in the living room adjacent from the open kitchen speaking through the bar-top; a stubborn show of my need to create distance. I knew how to process anger better than sadness, so I told him we were both better off seeing other people and deserved it, too. The decision seemed logical to have him spend his vacation before the deployment with the people who had loved him longer and it was selfish on my part to have him waste the time with me.

As I pleaded with him to "just leave" he begged to stay the night so he could make the drive back in the morning, after a night's rest. Not able to spend another moment in his presence because the pressure would make me crack, I bee-lined out of my apartment as tears streamed down my face and flopped into my car. Angry, I texted him "fine, if you won't leave I will," and sped off to my parent's house, a place that felt safer.

I laid scrunched on a love seat wrestling with my emotions and chronologically

went through the time we had spent together trying to figure out where the relationship screw came loose. How did I lose touch with the man I thought I couldn't live without? Would I truly end it? Would I ever see him again and if I did, than why am I pushing him away – or was I, and why was this confusion growing?

The next day after my shift at work was over, I sat in my apartment complex lot trying to pull myself together. His black Ford Explorer was still parked out front. I waited for my eyes to clear and the red patches around them to settle. *I know this relationship is never going to work*, still attempting to prove myself of its inevitable end. *Jump in headfirst and rip it off like a Band-Aid.*

My Christmas presents sat on the white linoleum kitchen bar top, and Matt was bent over the fridge looking for something to drink. He motioned for me to open the gifts.

"Will you please just open it, I won't be around during Christmas to see you unwrap it."

The finality of his words sent stinging welts straight through my heart as he continued.

"Now, can I ask you to give me my present?" he asked, "One last night together?"

Through tears, gasping breaths and clenched hugs, I agreed. We both wanted to ignore what the next morning brought and enjoy our final evening as a *couple*. In a few short hours our we would perish. We slept snuggled tight through the night, both of us afraid to let go.

The next morning I slid out of the house without saying goodbye. I glanced at Matt's SUV remembering the memories: our first long-awaited date, the spontaneous trips to the beach at night to walk in the darkness of the moon – and, at that, I put my car in reverse. As I made the turn around my building I caught a glimpse of him taking his belongings, a cream-colored plastic container full of clothes, personal treasures he kept safe at my house, and random items he had left to make my space our space, out of the garage. He could no longer call this place a home. My heart screamed stop, but my foot never let off the gas pedal. It was done. *We* were over.

Over the next few months each night was spent at bars and nightclubs. I drowned my thoughts in alcohol and partied away my consciousness. My roommate and her freeloader boyfriend spent nights cuddled up on my couch. I couldn't stomach to be around them and watch their relationship grow, so I drank every penny I had saved and in six months time I was living at a friend's house sleeping on her couch. I thought I knew heartbreak, but this felt like pieces of my soul had been run over, crushed and lit on fire.

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As a young child growing up I faced many difficulties other children did not face, such as constantly being the strange new kid on the block and in the classroom. I attended three elementary schools, two middle schools and eventually, thankfully, one high school. Starting my life in Buffalo, New York, and by my high school graduation wound up in Jacksonville, Florida.

Every move my family made was to better us financially. My father, the average working man with a stern drive to be the best, the sole provider. My mother, the stereotypical Irish woman with red hair, far skin and freckles, the stay-at-home mom. The pair met while working at a New York hotel in Orchard Park, where the National Football League's Buffalo Bills pound pavement. My mom was the waitress and my father the hackneyed obnoxious grill cook. They were young and looking for a better life for themselves outside of Buffalo.

After the pair began to date and they moved in with each other relatively quick. A year later my mother was pregnant with me, and, soon after I was born, my parents wed in a courthouse on June 12, 1989, both in a pair of blue jeans. By the ripe age of 28, my mother had three children all under the age of six. My father was only 26 years young.

Similar to a hurricane they fell in love rapidly, had a family and stopped what they were doing academically to provide for their children. My parents sidelined freedom in their early twenty-somethings to raise children and become a family. My pops put in long hours working restaurant gigs, and my mom learned how to keep three kids busy without the luxury of a car.

As a child you don't realize the sacrifices your parents made to give you a better life. My parents never told us kids we made their life harder, but as an adult you realize what they gave up to keep us fed, clothed and housed. Their strength is what molded me into the person I am today.

I was raised to be independent and responsible. To never expect handouts in life and to always work for what I wanted. The value of a dollar was crucial and obtaining a college education was essential to succeed later in life. One must consistently suck it up because tears were wasteful and nobody would fix your problems for you. If you want it done right, it must be done by no one other than you.

But, most importantly, the number one rule in life that was stressed by both parental figures was to make sure I wouldn't rely on anyone else to pay my bills or take care of me. My mother didn't want her oldest daughter to become dependent on a male or get *stuck* in a sticky maternal situation.

Despite what my parents taught and like most children do, they rebel. My mom fell in love and had children young. A life path I thought I wanted to tackle in similar fashion. It seemed to work out well for her, and I wanted to find a love similar to theirs. Finding a spouse, growing old together and making a family sounded like the perfect way to spend a life.

As a child I grew up watching Disney movie classics. I fought with Belle to show the beauty of the Beast and flew with Aladdin to find his Princess Jasmine. Each story had a conflict, a climax and a happy ending. I believed that someday I'd find my Prince Charming in similar fashion and be whisked away to Never-Neverland for my own happy ending. Just like my parents.

For a huge portion of my young life I thought finding love was what life was "all about." I needed to find a man to make my life complete, have the 2.3 children and buy a house with a white picket fence. I was a preteen that secretly read romance

books and was naive to the real world.

As I grew older, separated myself from Disney tales and spent more time in the "real world," the notion of having children and how they came into the world scared the bejesus out of me. I moved out and was financially independent at 18 years old. By working as a waitress I paid my way through junior college with no time for anything, let alone a link that connected me to another human being.

The drive to be independent grew as months passed and was still standing on my own two feet.

Damn, I can do this.

Ha, and everyone thought I'd come crawling back to my parents begging for a place to sleep and eat financially burden free.

Who needs a man?

I didn't want a love like my parents. I wanted to focus on my dreams and do all the things my parents wanted to do before they had children. I wouldn't fall in love young, be whisked away by a man or pop out several children and live happily ever after in Never-Neverland.

There must be more to this provincial life.

Finding the man of my dreams now meant the end of my personal ones. I didn't want a shared bank account or to depend on a counterpart to keep me fed and clothed. The notion scared me. My life wouldn't be parallel to my mother's living in a trailer with three kids and a husband working himself to the bone to provide for his family of five.

Every lesson that was taught to me as a child intensified as I aged. The stubbornness gene from both sides of my genetic pool made sure relying on anyone to live wouldn't be an option. By my own hand, I created a person who couldn't accept help and was convinced the bottom would always fall out from underneath me because people were untrustworthy. The only person I could trust was myself and I strengthened the emotional walls around my heart, with no room to let them budge.

Finding the man of my dreams? Fahget about it.

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On a Thursday afternoon, which meant payday at work, I'd eventually make the drive to personally pick up my check and cash it at the bank to immediately pay bills. My roommate, Angel, a Michigan native with a bubbly personality and blonde hair to match, recently moved to Florida to escape a nasty breakup. She was a coworker of mine at the restaurant and that morning was working her shift begging me to come in and keep her occupied.

Business was slow because a hurricane was dancing its way closer to the coast of Florida. The air was sticky and clouds loomed dangerously close to the ground threatening to unload buckets of water at any moment. After living through a few hurricanes, the threat level was low and wasn't too worried about its arrival to land.

As I pretended to search for my shoes not wanting to leave the house, my phone

buzzed again with another plea from Angel to come visit. When I checked the text said, "There are three HOT navy guys sitting in my section, COME UP HERE NOW!"

The power had incidentally gone out at my apartment, and with nothing better to do I threw on a pair of striped blue shorts and a blue hoodie. Currently living the single life it seemed harmless to partake in casual flirting. So, against by better judgment I made the 30-second drive from my old and in desperate-need-of-a-paint-job apartment complex, to the vacant Cracker Barrel parking lot. The power had gone out there, too.

As I walked past the copious amounts of rocking chairs on the restaurant's front porch, each rocking its own melody to the beat of the wind, I could see the dining room was almost completely dark and only three tables were occupied with guests. Angel was in the middle dining room and I could hear her flirtatious giggle from the front entrance. I followed it to table 241 unsure of what to expect.

As I walked into the second dining room, Angel squealed, "There she is! This is my roommate I've been telling you about." Uneasy about the introduction, I gave a tiny wave and went to the round table to pick up my check from the manager. I stalled with random conversation because second thoughts rushed into my sensibility.

What in the hell am I doing?

I don't even <u>like</u> flirting.

This damsel in distress, cute waitress angle isn't in my repertoire.

With nothing left to do I moseyed over to the guys' table where Angel had taken a seat. I chose the safer option and sat cattycorner to their table at a two-top instead. Pictures of families starred down at me from the restaurant walls while foreign farming objects hung from the ceiling. The smell of pancakes, melted butter and biscuits baking in the oven lingered in the air.

I hadn't gotten my name out before Tony, a twenty-something guy from a small town in Georgia with the same personality type as a small dog with a big canine complex, blurted out his not-so-flattering hello.

"Man, I must have a chick magnet in my pocket, because all the hot girls are at my table," he said through a grin.

Tony could hardly let out all his hot air before I finished rolling my eyes clear out of my head. I had one foot out the door when I said, "Not any more you don't." I turned to leave without giving the guys one last glance. "I'll see you at home, Angel."

She gave me a telling look that I took all her fun away, but I left feeling satisfied.

I showed them.

When Angel returned home that evening I had virtually forgotten about the fiasco earlier in the day.

"So, which one did you think was the cutest?" she asked me.

"Which one?" I mocked. "All I saw was one. The loud mouth that needed the extra three inches his standard military boots gave him."

"And you wonder why you're still single."

In reality there were two other men sitting at the table: Deel, a North Carolina native who couldn't stop staring at a woman even after she had caught him, and Matt, a surfer kid from Southern California who liked to fix up classic cars and wear skinny jeans before rapper Lil' Wayne made it hip.

After the storm passed all it left were massive mud puddles and as far as *those hot navy guys* were concerned, bruised egos. My morning class hadn't been canceled and I was on my way to school when my phone started to buzz, again with texts from Angel.

"Tony is sitting in my section!"

"He said if fate wanted us to go out then I'd be working today so he could ask!"

"We're going to a movie!"

"I call dibs on Tony."

The three young men had gone back into Cracker Barrel looking for her. Tony had made his two buddies retrace their steps to the restaurant to ask Angel out on a date. Obviously on cloud nine and swooning from the attention, she gladly soaked it up.

I didn't bother responding to her message, because if she planned on seeing the insufferable sailor then I would be seeing him again, too. I knew it was irrelevant to point out to Angel he had probably done this type of song and dance before. When her mind was made up that was the end of it, a similarity in personality we shared.

After I came home from school and Angel got off from work, she explained the use of "we" in her previous text message included me. She proudly skipped around our apartment singing "we" had a date this weekend and the movie "we'd" be seeing was "Death Race" at 8 o'clock tomorrow night.

"I already gave them our address," she said. "They're going to pick us up!"

WHAT! How did I get lumped in with her we! Wait – our ADDRESS?!

I had no time to spare rebutting her use of "we" after learning our address had been given out to a bunch of strange MEN! Hadn't anyone taught her the significance of stranger danger? Never in a million years would my address be given out to a group of guys to an apartment only housed by two women, ever! *A rule of thumb my pops would be proud of.*

I stomped out the door and down the patio stairs across a small patch of dead grass to another coworker's apartment in the next building. After explaining the situation, I begged all three ladies to come and surprisingly the trio agreed to go, evidently with nothing better to do than go to a crummy movie on a Saturday night. If I hadn't learned anything from my dad, I did learn the importance of traveling in numbers. Now, being dragged on a date with six extra people didn't feel like a new episode of a crime series premiering on I.D. TV.

Date night came and true to schoolgirl fashion all five of us hit the bathrooms

before searching for a seat inside the movie theater and used that time to sadly gossip about which guys were cute. On cue, Angel put claims on Tony for everyone to understand and nobody objected; she could have him.

I had severely underestimated the power of groupthink between three dudes. The guys had strategically placed themselves with an open seat on either side, making sure each of us ladies had to sit next to one of them. They'd known we'd all squeeze to one side. I made sure to give credit when I got up to our seats.

"Think you're all pretty smart dontcha?" I sang as I slide from the walkway to the aisle of seats. Tony, Matt and Deel sat in silence with grins across each of their punims.

Halfway through the movie I was desperate for a distraction. *This movie is so terrible I'd rather watch Angel cut her toenails on the kitchen counter.* Figuring Deel was the safer of the two men sitting beside me, I began to try to make small talk. We were literally the only group in the theater and didn't have to worry about being hushed.

Unfortunately, Deel had little to say and either my sarcastic quips about the movie were offending him, or I scared him as much as he panicked me. Matt heard my banter and saw my failed attempts at conversation and took it upon himself to interject.

"Of course, you can't die after being hacksawed and blown up, duh."

"I bet you *this* car explodes, and *this* one, Oh! and that one."

He was actually quick witted and made me snicker through the rest of the horrendous movie.

When the movie ended and we got into separate cars I leaned toward Angel while attempting to buckle my seatbelt and said, "For the love of Zeus tell me you didn't invite them back to our apartment."

"No," Angel huffed out.

Satisfied with her answer due to the large amount of annoyance her reply was dripping with, I rested my head on the passenger side window and started to close my eyes. *Lord, that movie was dreadful.* Trying not to fall asleep I popped my eyes back open and to my bewilderment, Matt's black Ford Explorer, with its turn signal flashing, was still behind Angel's grey Pontiac.

If the trio was indeed actually headed back toward base, they were in the wrong lane, which meant they were under the assumption an invitation was extended back to our apartment.

"I thought you said you didn't invite them back!" I managed to shrill out after a few choice words. "You can get rid of them," I told Angel. I wasn't going to be the girl on the news who was kidnapped by strange men she had just met. I devised a plan.

The strategy was everybody except Angel would run up the patio stairs and into our apartment. From the safety of my dining room, behind the blinds, the rest of us would watch Angel tell the boys to skedaddle and be in ample position if any rescuing needed to partake.

"Do you guys hear yourself?" Angel groaned.

"You're going to look like paranoid freaks," she continued, "and is that how you want them to see you, too?"

Nobody left in the car, minus Angel, minded.

Before Angel shifted the car to park, all four of us tripped out of the car stumbling our way up to safety. I could only imagine what it looked like from the guys' point of view. A group of young women fighting their own two feet to get up one *single* flight of stairs, comical to say the least.

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The *hot navy guys* were frequent guests at our apartment next to the Cracker Barrel where Angel and I worked in Orange Park, Florida. Tony, Matt and Deel would come over for home cooked meals, a happy change from the food on base, and to study for exams with help from Angel and I taking turns reading out questions from their flashcards.

On the weekends my next-door neighbor and his roommate would crack open beers and sit on the shared patio on Dollar Store plastic lawn furniture, my new crew of misfits joined in on the weekend ritual to reminisce on the "good ol' days" as a kid, but on most nights Angel would occupy Tony, and Deel would pass out in my room, sometimes on the bed or sometimes on the floor.

While everyone was knocked out, Matt and I would sit outside or in the living room talking for hours, getting to know each other a bit better.

"How in the world do you fit into skinny jeans?" I'd ask.

"Uh, easy, one leg after the other," he'd say sarcastically.

"I bet you I couldn't even fit into those pants!"

"Wanna bet?"

We both dropped trou to switch pants.

"I can't believe there is this much room in here," I said as I stretched out the waistband. "Look at all this room for activities!"

"Did we just become best friends?"

Matt's parents had divorced when he was young and I had the joys of growing up with both my parents under one roof. We were both the oldest kid and had our differences with our mothers. As an added bonus we both loved sports, particularly football.

Somewhere in between dinners, studying for exams, going to the beach at night and celebrating birthdays, I began to feel like I was Belle helping her Beast. Matt was kind and thoughtful, the time the group spent together steadily shifted to just Matt and I. No longer were they (or him) the creepy *hot navy guys* Angel had carelessly given our address to, we had all become each other's makeshift second family.

In the same time frame, "operation get Matt a date with Shannon" was also born. All four of them were in on the mission. I played dumb for as long as I could,

ignoring the signs and kept pretending I didn't have the slightest clue what they were doing. So they upped their game.

The gang would come into work on the nights I'd close the restaurant and persuade Matt to help me finish my side work. He would grab the broom from me and sweep my table. In other attempts to flirt, Matt would playfully wrestle with me in order to get a hug out of me.

"Oh, stop it. You know you wanna hug me," Matt said with a playful skip in his voice.

"Noooooo, not really," I'd protest with a smile that'd betray my face.

If I was laid up on the couch, he'd jump on top and scream "HUGS!" While walking down the cobblestone streets of Old St. Augustine, or anywhere else we'd go, he'd sneak up from behind and wrap his arms around me, nuzzling his face into my neck, whispering "hugs."

Matt also began to write me little notes to wake up to in the morning.

"Have a good morning :)"

"I'll miss you today :)"

"You're cute when you sleep :)"

The smiley face he added to each note became his signature and when I would see it, a smile I gave.

And after a few weeks of hinting he wanted a date, he slid a note underneath my door while I was in between work shifts taking a nap.

The note was folded up hamburger style and had two boxes drawn on them. One box was labeled "yes," the other "no." The question was always the same, "Will you go out with me? Check yes or no." I'd laugh to myself and draw my own box labeled "maybe," check it and slide it back underneath Angel's door, where they'd all hide out waiting for my answer.

After what should have been a discouraging couple of weeks, his persistence landed him a date. Not to mention he got each of his Navy buddies, my roommate and the next door neighbors to ask me each time in passing if I had agreed yet to go out with Matt.

"Stop being an old hag, Shannon! Let him take you out!" Angel would whine.

"He's a pretty good guy, and he talks about you all the time," Deel would say with an honest that's-my-friend delivery.

"Give the guy a break, just say yes," said the next door neighbors in unison.

I blamed peer pressure for caving and finally said yes.

One night after reluctantly agreeing, and chucking every article of clothing onto the bedroom floor, I realized I had another problem. *What in the flip am I going to wear!* Too nervous, anxious and slightly annoyed to be able to dress myself, Angel dug through my closet to find the best shirt I owned at the time. A magenta top that tied around my middle, flowed down around my hips and had lace trimming the edges – not my most favorite but it would work paired with my nicest jeans.

The neighbor, Angel and myself sat on the dining room floor waiting for Matt's arrival. "Operation get Matt a date with Shannon" had ended and it was now renamed "operation keep Shannon from bailing."

At the sound of footsteps, Angel rushed to the sliding glass door to take a peak.

"Oooh he's coming up!" she squeaked! "And he looks SO handsome!"

As my nerve endings split she directed me to wait in my bedroom until after he knocked on the door.

"You need a movie entrance; it's only proper for a first date," she said with a matter-of-fact sudden understanding of courtship.

Hiding behind the door in my bedroom, I could hear the door knock, Angel open the door and in unison my neighbor and Angel say, "Don't you clean up well." Figuring that was my cue, I walked out from behind the door as confident and calmly as possible. For the first time since I met him, my hair was down and styled, makeup dusted my eyelids, cheeks and lips and not a trace of basketball shorts and a tank top dressed my figure.

As I walked down the hallway all eyes were on me and I noted Matt did clean up well. He dressed in all black, down to the Jordan 6s he sported on his feet. The Johnny Cash look worked well for him, and I tried to ignore my friend's smiling faces. They looked like proud parents sending their first born off to prom with her first *boyfriend*.

"Hey," I managed to breathe out.

"Hey."

"You look gorgeous, are you ready?" Matt said as he extended his arm out to lead me back down the stairs and out to his car.

We went to a frilly restaurant on the oceanfront in St. Augustine. The conversation never lagged and although uncomfortable in my clothing, the atmosphere between us didn't falter. When dinner ended and I wistfully thought the night was over, he drove into the heart of Old St. Augustine and finished our night with the trolley ghost tour.

Matt knew my hesitations about being his girlfriend and being with a guy who'd certainly get orders to another base in a different state, or be shipped out for months on end with no understanding of his whereabouts during a deployment. I didn't want to deal with long distance or spend my time worried about what he was doing and if he was safe. *I'm too young for this kind of commitment*.

The thought of his unexpected departure at any moment paralleled with my parent's love story. I didn't want to slip into those waters and end up just like my mom, in love, pregnant and life on hold. Matt reassured me deployments would be easy and his orders could be navigated to stay in Jacksonville, and I gradually believed him.

Until the fateful day he received orders to Norfolk, Virginia. Matt kept the news from me for two weeks because he wasn't sure on how to approach the situation. The fragile matter would test our relationship and it eventually doomed us. Our relationship was created in a hurricane and it ended in similar fashion. Our

engulfing companionship fizzled with a trail of devastation.

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The sun wasn't getting any duller. If anything it got hotter when the Dwight D. Eisenhower finally pulled in between the breaker points of Chesapeake Bay. In two more sweltering hours, sailors would be released from the floating prison and welcomed home. I would also have my answer on where our relationship stood, come hell or high water. I drove up to Virginia on the notion of "no regrets;" in 15 years would I look back and wish I would've went?

For the last seven months, I had tried to forget the man I said goodbye to through a voicemail, but I couldn't. I spent nights religiously checking emails and expressing how much I had missed him, but in the same breath how angry I was he had done this to me. I'd ignore his calls from port only to frantically beg him to call me again. Why would he want to see me? I didn't even want to see myself.

In the midst of a hurricane the outer rings bark a nasty bite, and my head full of all the possible future outcomes whizzed in circles enough to make me dizzy. Mentally preoccupied, I was unaware the sailors began to make their descent from the ship when my thoughts were interrupted by Gerry, Matt's father, who shouted for me to come closer. He had spot Matt walking down the bridge onto the dock.

I froze.

The crowd noise fell silent and I had tunnel vision on his father's extended hand waiting for me to take hold. It felt similar to experiencing the eye of the hurricane. With its outer barriers still chaotic, the center of the storm was eerily quiet, waiting, giving all those in its path a moment for clarity and calmness.

There were clusters of people around me and they felt like cement, no possible way to walk through the crowd. An older gentleman broke my deadpan when he asked, "Is that your sailor coming close? Miss, is your sailor headed in your direction?"

His voice sounded like it was underwater but I managed to muster a nod.

"Hey, clear a path for this lady!" the stranger demanded. "Her sailor is on his way!"

At his request the clusters of people parted while I shuffled my way through the sea of families and grabbed Gerry's outstretched hand. I spotted Matt walking down the dock his eyes searching.

The back end of a hurricane can bring surprises. While it's true it's the strongest at immediate landfall and will weaken subsequently after, it doesn't account for the back end's tail winds. Every once in awhile the back of the storm is more vicious than its front, an unexpected gust of 100-plus mph wind can cause unaccounted for devastation.

I was nearing the end of my own storm. All that was left was to ride out the back end and hope for no hazardous wind. *Will he forgive me?*

Losing patience and a wave of anxiety rushing through my being, I began to wave my arms up trying to get his attention. Whatever fear I had moments before fled the instant I spied his face.

Matt saw his father first and attempted to move around the security barriers, and another gentleman helped him weave through the barricades. When he lifted his head our eyes locked. Instantly, I was home.

Matt's father stepped aside and I tripped into his arms. He smelled like fresh laundry, no doubt because his dress uniforms had recently been cleaned for his homecoming, and the nook between the crook of his neck and arm nuzzled my face, a perfect fit. Everything I had worried about for months, weeks, days and hours before, melted when we embraced. While the salty ocean air hung through the stagnant air, I could feel my personally created cyclone dissipate.

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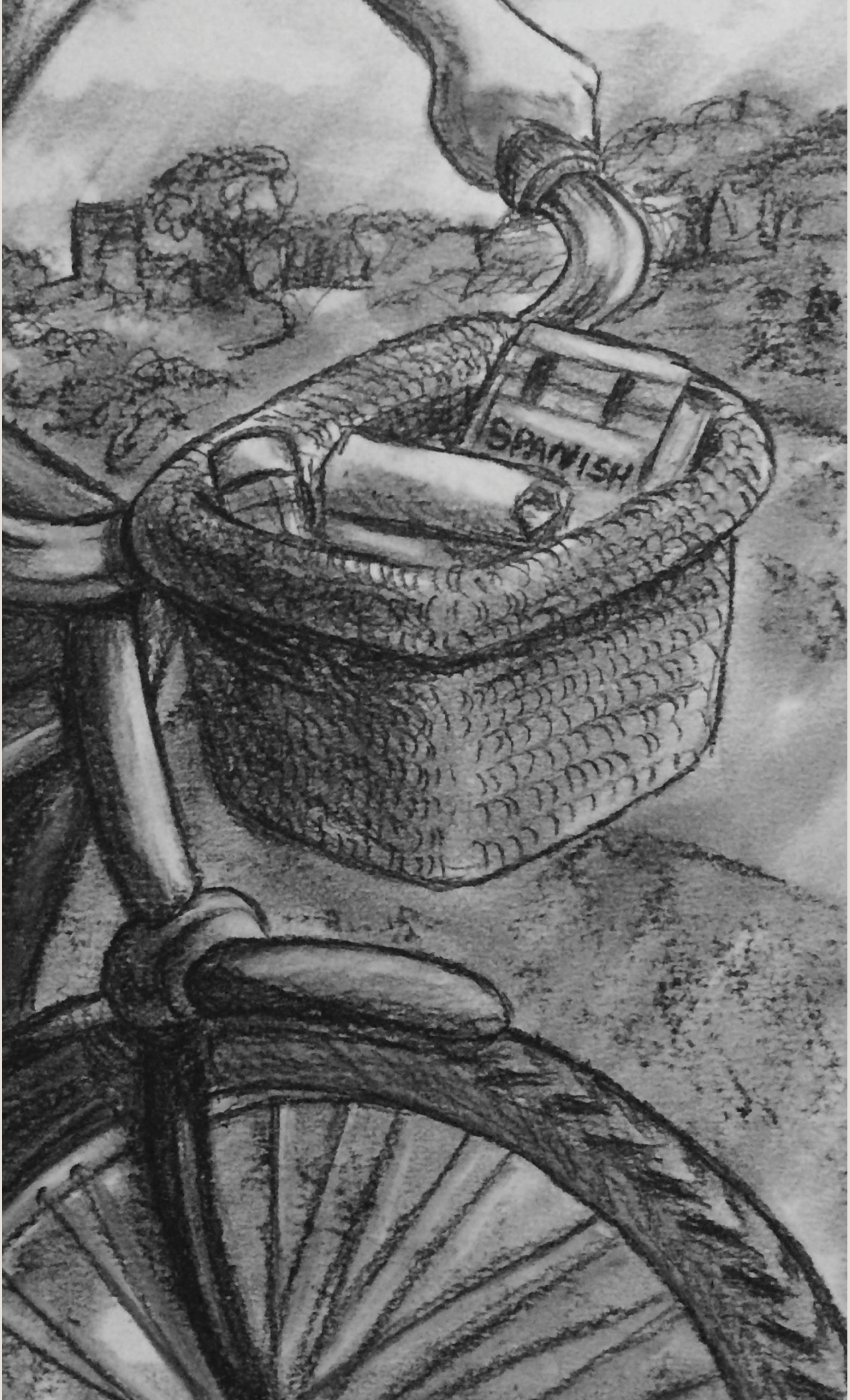
We had met during a hurricane and our relationship continued to swirl like one. A few months later, Matt proposed and a few months after that we married, in a courthouse both wearing blue jeans. Almost a year later I moved to Virginia to officially be his wife. The events on paper did read similar to my parents' path and the direction in life I swore I'd never take, but our story couldn't be anymore different.

No two people have the same steps in life. There can be similarities but it doesn't mean the outcome will be the same. I spent too many months self-destructing at the hands of no one other than myself. I had wasted energy trying to outrun a supposed destiny that was never truly mine; there is no formula for love or life, only the journey.

Belle didn't find her Beast because she was looking for him; she was in search of her beloved father lost in the woods. Aladdin wasn't trying to break into the palace to find his princess. He was busy trying to keep alive when she ran into his path.

Fairy tales aren't a step-by-step guide on how true love is found, and there isn't a timeline you can control. What is the true lesson you learn from fairy tales? You learn to live selflessly, bravely and bold. There is much more to this provincial life.


SPANISH

Crossing the Line

by Virginia Riddle

"El que nace para maceta del corridor no pasa."

"He who is born to be a flower pot will not go beyond the porch."

Sitting low to the road in my Firebird, its shiny, navy blue hood baking under the noon high, hot summer sun of South Texas, I guided its rattling wheels across the railroad tracks that divided the town of Alice, Texas. I was surprised when the pavement petered out on the other side of the track, and the landscape began to change. The sights, sounds, and smells were all foreign to me even though I had crossed no neighboring country's border. Most of the yards were dirt: no trees, grass, flowers or fences. The streets were marked only by tire tracks that cut ruts into the dirt, some deep, around which I navigated my low-slung sports car. From somewhere, music with a Latino beat added color to an otherwise dusty, dull landscape. Homes, mostly some combination of tin-cardboard-concrete brick-board and batten construction, dotted the dirt in a haphazard configuration. In a few short blocks, I arrived at my destination. The only brick building in sight, Saenz Elementary School, stood out as an oasis in the neighborhood it served. *Finally, familiar territory,* I thought as I walked up to the door and into what would become a most interesting and learning filled year of my life.

A note posted on the school's closed office door told me that the principal with whom my interview was scheduled had been called away by maintenance staff to an emergency on another part of the open multi-hall '50s era campus. I was to make myself at home in the meantime. The foyer and adjacent darkened cafeteria and kitchen looked neat, cleaned, polished and readied for another school year to begin. Concrete brick walls were painted in dull, dark primary colors reminding me of classroom photos posted from foreign countries in Africa and Central America. In contrast, a bright artistic display on the one large bulletin board greeted staff and students back to their 1970-71 school year. I had a seat and tried to gather my thoughts. There had been so many changes in my life in the past three months, and, by all appearances, those changes were only the beginning. I felt like a fish out of water. This interview was so important, because I needed this job so badly, but I suddenly doubted I was adequately prepared.

My first 21 years of life seemed so long ago and far away, but it had only been the previous May in which I had ended my coed years at Baylor University, first by saying farewell and thank you to my two supervising teachers who had guided

me through my fourth-grade student teaching experience. The following day, I had married a fellow graduating senior, Dennis Chandler, in a large, very formal wedding at my home Baptist church in Waco, Texas. We had flown to Mexico City for our week-long honeymoon, a gift from his parents. On our return, we went through Baylor's graduation ceremony; packed a few wedding presents, my clothes and Sheltie, Judge Baylor; and headed for Beeville, Texas, Dennis' hometown, for a summer as lifeguards and swimming instructors at the city's private swim club.

But summer was nearly over now. I should have had a teaching job lined up long ago. Time was scarce during the past spring in between wedding preparations, lifeguarding lessons at the YWCA, a choir trip to Canada during spring break, sorority obligations as a senior member, not to mention mastering 15 semester hours of course work in order to graduate. But I had still filled out teaching applications and mailed them to the Corpus Christi and Kingville school districts in Texas. Followup calls had netted me no interviews. As the summer weeks of sunscreen at the pool ticked off the calendar, I was becoming desperate. Dennis had been accepted as a fulltime graduate student at Texas A&I University in Kingsville. I was to be our sole financial support for the next year as he fast tracked through a master's degree program. My father-in-law, a retired U.S. Navy commander and current bank executive in Beeville, assured us that I could have a teaching job in town, but Dennis and I wanted to be independently poor and live closer to the campus. My final call to CCISD must have sounded desperate because the secretary took pity and advised me to seek employment in the smaller communities nearby. "Maybe one of them still has a last minute opening. We fill our openings with teachers graduating from A&I and with Navy wives from area bases," she offered. If only I had been aware of that information earlier. The next day, I took the morning off from the pool, called smaller districts in the area, and found that Alice ISD was the only one within an hour's drive of Kingsville that had any openings, and they had two openings! Could I come the next day, fill out an application and interview with administrators, the superintendent's secretary had asked. Could I?

The day had already been a long, anxious one for me. I had driven to Alice, nearly an hour's drive, and found the superintendent's office by 8 a.m. After filling out my application, I had met with Dewey Smith, the superintendent. He was impressed with my Baylor degree. "We don't get many Baylor graduates down this way," he told me. I was qualified, at least in his eyes, to interview with both principals who had the openings. A vocal performance minor requiring 32 college hours of symphonic and choral performances qualified me for the junior high music teacher interview, and my major in elementary education and newly framed Texas teaching certificate had gotten me the interview for a second-grade position at Saenz. Both principals were on their campuses and would be available to interview me. Mr. Smith drew directions for me and sent me forth with instructions to start with Mr. Bruce Love at the junior high, then go to Saenz where I would meet with Mr. Eugene Garcia, and finally return to his office.

The interview with Mr. Love went well, I had thought, and the campus was beautiful and surrounded by a middle class neighborhood. I would teach seven classes a day comprised of seventh- and eighth-grade students and, of course,

produce two shows a year for PTA programs and host an end-of-school concert. The job description was within my abilities as long as I could find a student piano accompanist for each class since I didn't play the piano well. I was buoyed by the idea that I probably had passed muster, but I wasn't that sure I wanted to teach choir all day, every day. Vocal performance was my joy; I wasn't certain I could keep that joy while teaching the junior high age group.

So here I was at Saenz feeling very out of place until I saw a rather diminutive man dressed in a suit opening the door and walking toward me and into the only air conditioning on the campus. I had dressed in one of my trousseau suits for the occasion, and was regretting having done so with the heat and humidity that existed everywhere except the offices which were cooled by humming window units. Mr. Love had been dressed casually as most principals do when readying a school before classes begin, but that wasn't Mr. Garcia's style apparently. His greeting was warm as he unlocked his office door.

Once past the greeting, however, we hit a language barrier. Mr. Garcia had a master's degree and was bilingual in English and Spanish, but my ears were untrained in understanding heavily accented English. Embarrassed, I had to ask him to repeat everything, sometimes multiple times, before I knew what he was telling or asking me. We took the campus tour, but I was sure I wasn't what he was wanting since he had told me that the entire staff and all the students were Hispanic, and many of the students and their families didn't speak English fluently. The staff was bilingual, but I wasn't. The 61st Texas Legislative Session had passed the bilingual education bill – following the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the enactment of the federal Bilingual Education Act of 1967. We had discussed the legislation only briefly in my education classes at Baylor. Mr. Garcia had headed the district's committee to institute the legislation into action in Alice after the Health, Education and Welfare Department had approved the ISD's program in the previous June for the 1970-71 school year. He was excited that the Saenz staff would be pioneers in bilingual education, but how could I fit into that plan?

I was surprised, when upon my return to Mr. Smith's office, he announced that both principals wanted me to become part of their staff. It was my choice. I had grown up in multiple environments fortunately, so while I knew I could handle the music job well, I had decided during the short drive back to the administration building, that if I was, by some miracle, offered the job at Saenz, I would find a way to meet the challenges it would bring to me. Without hesitation, I chose Saenz! I had a teaching job.

Upon my return to Beeville, everyone around the pool that evening celebrated my having achieved gainful employment, but wondered at my choice. I didn't know a lot about the city of Alice or its inhabitants, so I had to agree with the naysayers that I would have to prepare well and didn't have long to do so since I started in-service on August 17, and this was the last Friday of July. At least Dennis and I had Mondays off each week, so we could search for an apartment and start learning about the area.

However, Mother Nature had another plan. By Sunday, we were "battening down the hatches" for Hurricane Celia. Meteorologists were predicting landfall at

Corpus Christi on Monday, August 3. Another new experience for me, Celia's winds were clocked up to 125 mph and spawned multiple tornadoes that ripped inland habitations. We spent that week cleaning up debris and waiting for electrical and telephone connections to be restored. The following Monday, my mother-in-law volunteered to apartment hunt with me in Alice. What we found was dismal news. The nice apartments near the country club would cost my future month's salary, and the rest of Alice's rental properties were marginal choices and battered by the hurricane. Only one of those available apartments allowed dogs. It was a one-room, furnished 1930s-style stucco efficiency with little rollout windows and no air conditioning. A closet and tiny bathroom were two indents into a wall and had only curtains covering them. It was unlike anything I had ever seen! To make matters even worse, there were layers of aged grime on everything, and sand topped the grime. Refugees from the hurricane had rented the apartment on a daily basis until they could return to Corpus Christi. There wasn't a decision to be made – this was to be our new home. My mother-in-law, having been a Navy wife and experienced in preparing homes and moving, promised to come to Alice that week with her maid and a friend's maid. "We will make the place sparkle while you lifeguard and pack," she promised. What a deal!

"No hay ciego como el ciego que no quiere ver."

"There is no one as blind as the person who does not want to see."

A child of the 1950-1960s, I had an upbringing that mirrored, to an extent, the Anglo characters' lives in the book and subsequent movie, *The Help*. My mother was "old Waco" since a branch of her family had established the family farm about 13 miles down the Brazos River from Waco before the Battle of the Alamo. During my childhood, my grandmother and uncle ran the farm, and many of my weekends and summer days were spent in the Victorian farmhouse and surrounding fields and pastures. The oldest of my parents' four daughters, I was the first to do basic barnyard and household chores with Caldonia, my grandmother's maid, in charge. Valentine was in charge of all hooved animals and the third generation of his family to work for us. He was the head of the only Hispanic family I had ever known. My sisters and I were the only Anglo kids on the farm, so our playmates were Valentine's grandchildren and black kids whose parents worked on my grandmother's farm. Some of the families lived in houses along the pasture road to the Brazos River and on plots of land my family still owned or had deeded to them. As an owner's grandchildren, we learned that we were privileged but would inherit the responsibility to further the farming operation and preserve it for future generations.

My parents owned our home located in an upper middle class, newly developed neighborhood in Waco. They were members of the elite Ridgewood Country Club even before I was born. My dad – a lawyer, Army Reserve officer, politician and businessman – and my mother – an accountant, business owner and community volunteer – were often gone, so they left a series of my mother's maids and my maternal grandmother in charge of us four girls. My dad's family was comprised

of ranchers, teachers and oil field workers, and the "N word" was often used in conversations. However, my dad and mother insisted that we never use that word or any other derogatory terms toward anybody. "Switchins' and having our mouths washed out with soap were automatic consequences if we dared to try our parents on this rule.

I experienced the Jim Crow laws first in my church attendance. When my parents were gone on weekends, my sisters and I stayed at the farm. On Sunday mornings, we would occasionally walk with Caldonia to her church since my grandmother usually didn't attend church. We were always welcomed in "Miss Cal's" church, but I knew she couldn't attend my grandmother's church which was closer to the farm. I don't remember ever asking why; I just accepted the separation by race on Sundays and loved the differences in preaching and music.

By my teenage years in the 1960s, race riots and anti-Vietnam demonstrations filled Walter Cronkite's nightly news reports. My mother, who has always seen the world in absolutes, had her opinions, and her opinions were the only acceptable ones her daughters should have. Our destinies included fulfilling Mother's family legacies: taking our bow as Waco Symphony Belles, going to Baylor, pledging her college sorority, picking out the right china and silver patterns before marrying well and settling in Waco. My dad, on the other hand, was a trial attorney who saw the world in "what ifs." Dad had autoed through Mexico with his Spanish teacher mom with her students during the summers of his youth. During his WWII army days, Dad was trained in India and had served in China, so he had experienced those countries with all their cultural differences. While my mother chose to push against the vast sociological and psychological shifts that the American youth of that day were making, my dad was making his daughters think more openly about everyday news happenings. Dinners at home were often debate meets.

I was raised in Waco public schools that were very segregated. The only "minority" students I had known in my college-bound schools were Jewish kids. However, every summer of my youth, my dad was on active duty with the U.S. Army as an instructor at Officer Candidate School, Command and General Staff School and War College postings across the 48 contiguous states. We lived the army life in officers' family guest quarters. The military was desegregated, so we were exposed to a different world than in our hometown of Waco.

Now, with a signed teacher's contract in hand, I was floating on air with confidence that with my childhood upbringing, I was ready to meet this new environment and challenge head-on with success. I thought I had my eyes wide open as I entered this new phase of my life. I couldn't have been more wrong.

"Hablando se entiende la gente."

"By talking people understand each other."

On August 17, 1970, I reported to the newly built, gleaming Alice High School for teacher in-service. That night brought the first time I had ever spent by myself overnight. Dennis and I had U-hauled our few things and moved in during the

previous night, but he had to return to the pool for another week. We had not been able to get a telephone installed due to crews trying to reconnect existing customers after the hurricane, so I had no way of contacting family if I had an emergency. While it was still daylight, I checked in with Dennis from a pay phone, went to the apartment, locked Judge Baylor and myself in for the night and prayed. With windows opened in the stifling heat, I could hear my neighbors, who mostly seemed to be Navy personnel stationed at a nearby auxiliary air strip. In my darkened apartment, rats nearly as large as my puppy, Judge, scurried all night. I pulled the covers up around me and promised myself a rat trap shopping trip to the hardware store during lunch the next day.

By Wednesday, we had finished our meetings and were on campus readying our classrooms for the first day with students. Everyone was very helpful, but it was embarrassing for me when I would join teachers' conversations being held in Spanish since they would switch to English immediately. I explained that I really needed to learn Spanish and that it didn't bother me if they spoke Spanish in front of me. The teachers were horrified and explained that it would be very rude if they continued in Spanish. They wanted me to feel included and comfortable.

I was one of four teachers assigned to teach second-graders. We teamed two and two, so my partner was Ms. Esperanza Rodriguez, a veteran teacher and wonderful mentor to me. Not an artist, I spent nearly $100 of my hard-earned summer job money on art supplies so I could use an opaque projector to create poster board cutouts and trim for bulletin board decorations and letters. At night that week, after checking in with family by pay phone, I cut and painted my creations.

I also had invested in a Spanish-English dictionary. I had received my class roll with all Hispanic names and had looked through the 23 students' files. No one spoke English! On Friday that week, I worked until after dark, still trying to make the room as perfect as possible. During the weekend, I lifeguarded for the last time and spent that Saturday night in Beeville after the pool closed at 9 p.m. making cards with noun pictures cut out of magazines and printing the Spanish and English words for each object. Hopefully, I would get through the first day with the cards, Dick and Jane readers from the 1950s that I was to use for reading lessons, and some old 45 rpm records of children's songs in English. I was set for Monday.

"Nada es imposible."

"Nothing is impossible."

Dawn found me in my classroom after an almost sleepless night before my first day with students. Dennis and I had arrived in Alice late the night before, and he had dropped me off at school on his way to A&I. Steadily, the pace of activity around the school picked up as mostly moms walked their children to school. As each of my students was escorted to me by his or her mom, I used the few sentences I knew in Spanish to introduce myself and welcome them to take a seat inside. Most of the moms lowered their heads as we met, not meeting my gaze. I had learned from the other teachers that this was a common cultural marker. Yet

their children were excited and stared expectantly straight into my eyes.

By 9 a.m. I only had twelve students and two mothers in my classroom. Where were the other students on the roll? I pulled out my register, the state required ledger on which all teachers kept the official daily class attendance, and filled in the letter E for "entered" by each of the present and accounted for students' names. Later into the school year, my register would become a daily reminder of the migratory status of most of my students as they came and went without warning while "following the crops." Several students didn't ever show up while others wouldn't enter school until October.

At 9:30 a.m. the PA system crackled, and Mr. Garcia greeted everyone in English and Spanish. Then, just like in all other schools across Texas, the Pledge of Allegiance was recited and a choral rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner' was played. Everyone stood politely and appropriately, but no one was reciting or singing but me.

It was time to get down to business. Music was the international language that would save my day, or so I had thought, but my students didn't know the common children's songs I tried playing, so onward I went to my homemade flash cards. I motioned for the kids to circle around me on the floor and held up the A card with its picture of an airplane and the words *avión* and airplane written in bold print. I immediately saw confusion on everyone's faces. Maybe the problem was my pronunciation in Spanish. I pointed to the words again and tried saying them. One of the students said, "No miss, no miss," while shaking his head.

I asked him what he thought the word was, and he pointed to the plane and said, "Aeroplano." This was to be my introduction to the border lingo called TexMex. So much for my dictionary efforts! What was even worse, my students and the two moms were probably convinced that I was incompetent, and it wasn't even lunch yet.

At the appointed time, we took a bathroom break to wash hands and my students grabbed their small brown paper sacks before walking to the cafetorium for lunch. I had also brought my lunch with its sandwich, chips, a cookie and thermos of tea. Most of my students had lunches consisting of a tortilla wrapped around refried beans. Some had the nickel with which to buy a student's carton of milk; others just ate the tortilla and asked to be excused to drink from the water fountain. It was scant rations, but no student ever showed up without something to eat during these days before the free and reduced federal breakfast and lunch program was instituted into public schools. I felt guilty. Dennis and I didn't have much to spend on food – we were living on hot dogs every other day and noodles the rest of the time – but that seemed decadent compared to my students' diets.

The poverty of the neighborhood was also evident in the much faded clothing my students and their families wore. No child was dirty, nor did their clothing smell, which was a miracle in the heat of South Texas with no air conditioning. Some of the students and their moms wore second-hand shoes; others were barefoot. Back in the room, we took a siesta with heads on desks and then joined Miss Rodriguez' class on the treeless playground of dirt. The hot sun beat down as the dust flew up during the students' rousing game of kickball. As we supervised

the students, our conversation turned to my morning's experiences and my obvious dilemma as to what to do for the rest of the afternoon. "Try some of the reading books starting with the sight word cards," she advised. "That way you can tell how well they read." Hot and sweaty, my students headed to the water fountain and bathrooms, and then for the reading circle. Some words were known, most were not, but the students and moms repeated the words after me and spelled them with me. I read the first story in the Dick and Jane first of two second-grade readers and then invited the students to read with me. It was obvious to me that some of them understood my English words a little, but couldn't yet say anything in English very well. I had not expected the mothers to remain all day, but the two moms were joining in with the lesson. I would find out later that it was common for moms to stay for classes; they learned English, and, for some, it was an opportunity to get an education they had been previously denied.

But what about tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that one? We hadn't had to turn in lesson plans to the school secretary for that first week, but I would have to do so by the end of that week for the second week of school. I felt totally incompetent to do so. Teaching is communication, and as my students met their moms who were waiting in front of the school that afternoon, I knew I had not communicated well at all with my students or their parents that day. I had barely been introduced that summer to a South Texas bilingual world but was now living for eight hours a day in a Spanish speaking world. Having gone abroad for one summer to Europe and the Holy Land, I had been immersed into other languages, and had gotten adept at using body language and facial expressions to communicate. However, how could I really be a bilingual teacher without being bilingual? I went to the principal's office after my last student had waved good-bye to me. I was so frustrated and confused and in need of guidance.

Mr. Garcia listened attentively to my concerns to which I added that resigning wasn't an option. I was in this predicament and was desperate for direction. His comment: "Are you totally frustrated?" I nodded. He continued, "Well, so are your students, so now the learning begins. I don't care what you teach all day long, as long as you do so in English. I can't get Anglo teachers to teach in this school. The students you get to keep all year will not speak English like I do. They will be understood because they will have been taught by you. They hear Spanish everywhere they go – shopping, church, newspapers, radio, television and in the barrio. School is the only place they hear English." His eyes had tears in them as he continued to speak, telling me his story of being a first generation immigrant who had grown up in that neighborhood. With his words that day, my career as an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher began.

"Si tienes dinero gobiernas pero si no, te gobiernan."

"He who has money governs, and he without money is governed."

On the day I was born, my parents rejoiced at my healthy arrival but were upset by the news that Lyndon B. Johnson had been elected over Coke Stevenson for a seat in the U.S. Senate. A hotly contested race, LBJ had lost, but a few days later,

mysteriously, 202 previously uncounted ballots from "Box 13" were found in the Jim Wells Courthouse basement. Stevenson had two of those votes while LBJ had 200 and thus LBJ won the election by 87 votes. The Duke of Duval, Archer Parr, was accused of having the ballots "cast" for that specific purpose. My parents, Stevenson supporters, never forgot the incident. When I arrived in Jim Wells County, I knew that it and its neighbor, Duval County, still operated on a waning system of political patronage, misuse of funds and total Democratic Party political control based in beliefs in white supremacy, states' rights and limited government. There had been many investigations through the years, but farming and ranching families still dominated the Mexican population socially, economically, and politically.

To understand my new environment and students better, I spent several of my first Saturdays in the A&I University library researching South Texas. What I learned was illuminating. Alice had been founded in 1888 as a depot on the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway. This land had originally been settled in 1831 by Anglo-Saxons and Mexicans as part of the Charco de los Presenos land grant. I knew the area had many wealthy landowners, business leaders and professionals of Anglo and Hispanic heritage. There was a definite class structure. The ruling class of the area had Anglo or Spanish blood running in their veins; however, most of my students were of mestizo heritage and were used to being referred to as wetbacks, wets, greasers or "Mescanes." Their fathers were *braceros,* lower class day workers in the field. The word literally meant "those who work with their arms (hands).

I became a tourist and went to area museums and took the King Ranch tour. I discovered that many of the counties in the area reflected the names of Anglo pioneers – Kingsville (King Ranch fame), George West, Kenedy, Kleberg, Jim Wells, Brooks, and Willacy counties. Extreme wealth and power were inherent to these pioneers who had imported Mexicans during WWI and WWII to replace Anglo men who had gone to war. Those families had stayed in the U.S. and many had become a Hispanic middle class.

I had grown up with many examples of Jim Crow laws, but I soon came to understand that these same laws also supported *Patrón-Peón* relationships. Jim Wells, in his day, had given free representation to Mexicans in court, and folks spoke about Archer and his son George Parr's benevolent attitude toward "their greasers." The Hispanic tradition of looking toward the head of the ranch for guidance and help aided the *Don or Patrón* system of governing in these counties. However, migrant farm hands did not recognize this tradition as easily as ranch hands who had served their successive Dons for generations.

Some of my students' families had been imported by the farmers and ranchers during the late 1960s to combat the unrest created by Chicano civil rights leaders, Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, who worked mostly in California with the Farmworkers of America. In Texas, the fire of protest had yet to ignite – the unrest was just beginning. In 1966, Hispanic students at Alice High School boycotted school in protest of their treatment at school, and they were demanding that Spanish be allowed to be spoken in school. Also, many of them were barred from participation in extracurricular programs after school. They were organized by active LULAC and MALDEF units and the American GI Forum from nearby

Corpus Christi. In 1969, Hispanics had only a 20 percent high school graduation rate in Texas! My students and I had a lot of work to do so they could beat that sad statistic.

Within the class structure, everyone in town looked down on my students and their families. The parents had small dreams for themselves; just becoming a ranch hand was a step up the class structure ladder. But I could already see that the adults in each household in the neighborhood had much higher goals for their children. I resolved I would be part of the solution, not part of the structure that held my students down.

Since these families needed to move quickly, they lived in the substandard rental housing in Saenz's neighborhood. But even more depressing was the barrio that existed across the highway just a few blocks away. Unincorporated by the city, many of those abodes had no running water. The Alice Mennonite Church, area Catholic churches and the Rancho Alegre Youth Center helped Rancho Alegre Barrio residents survive on a day-by-day basis.

After spending a few weeks getting settled, I visited the First Baptist Church, the faith in which I had been raised. After church, members were warm and welcoming to me until they were reminded as to where I taught. *The Alice Echo News* had carried a listing of new teachers in its September 9, 1970, issue in which my name appeared under Saenz Elementary staff. The resulting shunning during the next few weeks pushed me toward attending Catholic churches for the remainder of that school year. The same treatment happened when Dennis was contacted by an Alice native who happened to have been a fraternity brother. His family invited us to dinner at the Alice County Club. It wasn't just the ice in the drinks that turned cold when I answered their questions about my teaching assignment. For the remainder of the school year, Dennis and I were only welcomed in Alice where my students were welcomed. I had committed the unthinkable: I had crossed the line and walked around the wall of racial prejudice by helping my students climb that wall to freedom.

"El que no arroja no gana."

"He who does not take a chance does not gain."

As the school year progressed, we settled into a routine and schedule. Ms. Rodriguez and I alternated recess and lunch duties so we could have 30 minutes prep time and 30 minutes to eat in the workroom every other day. We sang songs, read about Dick and Jane's latest adventures with Spot and worked math on the board. At night, I developed basic science and social studies lessons by working with teacher's editions from the A&I library. Since we only had the one car that Dennis needed to commute to Kingville, I rode my bicycle to school each day with my basket and a backpack full of papers, lesson plans, and my lunch. As the fall progressed and the days were shorter, it was dark when I arrived and dark when I rode home.

My mother and father came through town and stayed overnight on their road

trip to Monterrey, Mexico, where my dad was to meet with a client. My mother wasn't that happy with the apartment, but when she saw my school, she was totally dismayed. It was early, before the students would arrive, but Mr. Garcia was there. After meeting him, she asked if I was safe coming into that neighborhood. With a graciousness that should have qualified him for sainthood, he replied that if I fell off my bike and were lying in the road, I would be surrounded and cared for until an ambulance arrived because everyone knew who I was, and they were grateful that I was teaching the children. With a slight twinkle in his eye, he added, "But once she crosses the tracks on her side of town … ." Fortunately, my dad arrived with their car serviced and ready to go. However, I felt that Mr. Garcia's remarks proved that my work had value.

One of the biggest challenges of my classroom was keeping my attendance register accurately as students arrived, withdrew, had an excused or unexcused absence, or returned to class. My class grew some days to over 35 students; on other days, enrollment might be down to 15 students, and those extremes sometimes occurred on back-to-back days. Whole families packed in the middle of the night and were gone by sunrise, only to return in a few weeks. Sometimes parents would stay in the area but would need to put even their second-grade child in the field to work for several days. When the school year was over, I had only five students who had remained enrolled in Saenz the entire year. Opportunities to say good-byes were rare.

One student in my class stood out among the school's population as much as I did. Eddie Lee had arrived with the biggest grin, loudest laugh, and was a black face in the sea of brown faces. In South Texas, being black was a novelty, so the other students were fascinated with his hair and skin, and fortunately, Eddie Lee was just the kid to handle that kind of attention.

He was also just the student to play Santa Claus in our second-grade Christmas program for the PTA that December. The school had a very active PTA since most of the Hispanic moms didn't work outside the home, and the families were involved with their children. PTA membership was also a social outlet for moms, and in this school, the meetings gave the moms an opportunity to practice their English skills. Ms. Rodriguez and I were in charge of the program, so my musical training really came in handy, but we had to teach Eddie Lee his lines in both English and Spanish since it was a bilingual production – first performed entirely in Spanish, then again in English. The applause was deafening. It was a real neighborhood production since the moms had sewn many of the costumes and prepared the refreshments.

Our staff Christmas party was held at Mr. and Mrs. Garcia's home on the edge of the neighborhood. It was pot luck, so Dennis and I attended with Christmas cookies that I had baked. Mrs. Garcia had prepared menudo. When I helped myself to a second serving, Mrs. Garcia was pleased and asked if I knew what I was eating. After seeing my confusion she defined the word "tripe" and explained that it was a traditional dish that allowed a family to incorporate every part of the cow into a useful dish or tool.

"No le pido a Dios que me dé –nomás que me ponga donde hay."

"I do not ask God for anything – I only ask Him to show me the way."

Following our Christmas break, Alicia, one of my fairly regular students, came to school shoeless. With the cooler winter weather, the students had been wearing shoes, mostly very scuffed and scratched. One look at her foot, and I was in full medical mode. A thick black crust filled the space between her big toe and index toe, spilling over across the top of her foot. I called for an aide to take my class and hurried Alicia down to the school nurse. She examined the foot and had a conversation with Alicia. Out in the hallway, Nurse Martinez told me she didn't have to do anything; the foot would heal well. I was incredulous! She explained that Alicia had been running in their little home the night before and had run her foot into the leg of an old metal kitchen stool. The sharp metal edge had split the thin flesh between her toes to the bone. Her mother had reached up into the corners of their home's rooms and gathered spider webs to put into the wound to coagulate the blood. That crust was the result. I had never heard of such a practice. Nurse Martinez reassured me that Alicia would be okay and told me that as an RN she had to constantly balance modern medicine against a parent's use of Indian medicine practices and the practices of *curanderas* (faith healers) and *parteras* (midwives) since the folks in this neighborhood had little access to traditional medicine. I had definitely learned something new.

As spring storms turned the dusty streets into mud flows at times, my students and I were working hard through their second-grade curriculum. I was amazed at their speed of learning – I was blessed with little sponges. Music was the foundation of our English language study, so when I discovered my kids were singing "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog," a newly released and already a hit song, I had to have a recording of it in English. We sang "Joy to the world …" every day and really meant it.

Also, that spring, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, a Disney movie, hit the Alice movie theater nearly two years after it had been released. Several of my students had gone with the youth center group to see the show. They couldn't wait the next morning to tell me how wonderful "Shitty, Shitty Bang Bang" was. It was horrifying and hilarious at the same time, and I saw an immediate need to work harder with my students on the correct pronunciation of the "ch" sound in English.

I had never celebrated Cinco de Mayo before, but we did so at school, right along with May Day. The brightly colored ribbons wrapped around the temporary pole that some of the dads had erected on the playground looked great and piñatas for each grade level added to the festivities that were held in the evening so fathers could attend. My class was beginning to dwindle as crops started maturing. It was sad to think of this year's passing, but I would see some of my students in the bilingual summer school we were going to hold in June at the high school. I was excited to teach in such a fine building as the high school but would be sad to leave Saenz. It had been a great year of learning for all of us.

"Saber es poder."

Knowledge is power.

Many first days of school have come and gone since my year at Saenz. I have 28 years of being a public school teacher, assistant principal, and principal of Title I schools to my credit and am retired from that arena. Combined with my years of teaching on the college level, I will be entering my 46th year of teaching this fall. I still am learning as much or more than my students while teaching developmental reading and writing courses. Needing more income than teaching or serving as an administrator in public schools allowed, I have always taught adults at whatever two-year college was near. I received my ESL teaching certification in 1993 and have used it to help all ages of students learn English. I now teach international students from all corners of the world as well as former bilingual education students from public high schools.

Over the years, I have seen many changes – some good and some not so great. First, that same sense of community and family is not present as much anymore in America's Hispanic population. The barrio in Alice wasn't beautiful, but the families were wonderful, supportive and accepting of a stranger like me. Hispanic fathers worked at any available job while mom raised the family. There was no free breakfast or lunch, no welfare, and no free medical or dental plan. However, nobody went hungry, dirty or was unloved. Everyone was rising to something better in life. Education was a priority for the children, but it was a struggle to stay in school and still earn the money to eat. My students and their families didn't have many worldly treasures, but they treasured each other dearly. They and their families attended church, most often Catholic, regularly, sometimes daily. We didn't have gangs in the area, and I really did enjoy safe passage on my bicycle each day in and out of the barrio.

Many of the Hispanic families who immigrated to the U.S. before the mid-'70s have realized the American dream. They are the professionals, the business owners, and are part of middle to upper class America. I am so proud to have been a small part of their success that was bought by their parents and grandparents with so much blood, sweat and sacrifice. I look at the Polaroid photos I took of my Alice students in our classroom and wonder what place they have carved for themselves in the world of today. By now, they are about 53 years old. I hope all their dreams have come true. since those children and their families gave me what money, power and high social standing cannot give a person.

However, I have also seen the more recent destruction, in some cases, of the Hispanic family structure and neighborhoods. With the initiation of the free/reduced breakfast and lunch program in schools, Medicaid, food stamps and other welfare programs, families have broken apart in order to qualify. With many of these programs, if the father/husband is still in the home, the family doesn't qualify for the benefits. Yet, those benefits are usually funded based on the number of family members in the household. That regulation has motivated some men to not marry but to live with one or more women for a few months each year, get her pregnant again, thus increasing the family size, and then move onward. So

many of the moms don't work but don't have a husband to support the household. Often, parental interest and involvement in their child's education is at low ebb. So many fathers are not a part of their children's lives. Children are mid-management in a gang or at least are "wannabes" as early as sixth grade and so many are already addicted to drugs or liquor at a young age. Hispanic gangs are a poor substitute for family. These more recent Hispanic immigrants have a difficult time understanding religious based holidays and vocabulary because they do not attend any church, a fact that affects both their sense of family and community.

During some of the 16 years prior to my public school retirement, I directed and taught ESL at a Title I intermediate school. I lost eight students to gang knifings, shootings, or street racing over that time span, and I've lost count of how many of my students have been adjudicated as a juvenile or adult offenders. Many of these students had the latest expensive Nike shoes, iPhones and "grills," but they no longer had self-respect, parents who cared, or a willingness and drive to learn. Status quo with no status but the gangs' hierarchy worked for them.

Alice is different now, too. The barrio was finally annexed into the city and looks better with trees, gardens and paved roads. Saenz Elementary School is still educating students in its beautiful, modern facility, and the faculty's online photos show great racial diversification. The *Patron-Peón* governance system of yesteryear is almost gone, and a Hispanic middle and upper professional class has taken its place in all areas of life in South Texas. The old way of life has given way to a new, more progressive life, and occasional oil booms have helped the overall economy.

Mr. Garcia and I parted ways that long ago summer. He eventually became an assistant superintendent of schools in Alice ISD where he served until his death in 1984. I spoke to him only once again when I visited Alice ISD in 1978 while on my job as director of Texas Future Teachers of America. I was able then to tell him that it was in those moments at Saenz Elementary School in 1970-1971 that he set the pattern of my teaching and administrative career. I learned to look at people, not at their bank accounts, to see what really mattered to them. I learned that there are good people and bad people on both sides of economic and racial lines and that those racial walls and barriers can be built by the wrong ideals and torn down by the right ideals. I learned how expressive body language and facial expressions can be when people really wish to communicate. I learned to really see injustices and not to assume that everything was right for everyone just because it was for me. I learned to question some of my ideals, beliefs and practices with which I had been reared as a child. I learned that empty pockets didn't mean that a person couldn't have a full, giving heart. I learned that my students' minds were filled with dreams that didn't dwell inside their little abodes. I learned that the poorest of the poor still loved and appreciated the beauty of art and music. I learned many of the stories and sayings in Spanish were very similar to my own that I had learned in childhood. I learned to cherish similarities between myself and others, and honor our differences. I learned home was wherever these families were together that moment and that I was welcome in their homes even after "my own kind" had rejected me. And finally, I learned to be comfortable with the people around me by honoring their customs, culture and language as much as my own. My students and their families didn't have money, big houses, fast cars or dream vacations, but

they had family and a desire to work, earn and learn. Poor in monetary means, yes, but these students and their families were rich in so many other ways. Through this wonderful, first teaching year, I was molded into a much better human being and teacher and was set on my true career path. What a gift that experience has been as I've traveled my road of life!


IRON MAIDEN

The Trip to Nowhere

by Chris Vognar

It's about 7 p.m. on a balmy evening in Berkeley, the summer between junior high and high school. I skulk out of the house to meet Danny by the glowing hamburger sign outside Bongo Burger, the Persian fast food joint next to People's Park. We're due at Kojo's birthday party in about an hour. Movies and pizza are on the menu. Typical eighth-grade stuff. But first we have an assignment. In our social circle Danny and I are known as the guys who have the weed. Tonight we're supposed to bring some. Even Berkeley has its special brand of social etiquette.

We may be dead-end kids but we're reliable in our dereliction. We fire up on the benches adjacent to the junior high tennis courts every day, watching bright-eyed preppies knock balls back and forth as we puff away to the heavy metal crunch of Metallica and Iron Maiden. Now and then the preppies glance over as we suck on the aqua pipe and exhale billows of pungent smoke into their game. Some of them might even partake on occasion. The line between a preppie and a pothead can be surprisingly fine.

On this night in the park, in the summer of 1984, an eighth of an ounce will do, especially if it's that tasty green, crystalline California bud. We call it the one-hit, because after one hit you're done. I always seem to have a lot of friends when I'm holding. Sometimes I even get invited to birthday parties. Stoners may linger on the edges of most social occasions, but they can also come in handy when the good kids can't buy a thrill.

Danny is a sullen, spiky-haired kid of Malaysian descent, raised by wealthy adoptive parents in the Berkeley hills. One day soon his cardiologist father will forbid me from entering their home after we smoke out the basement. He was among my constant companions, brothers in debased self-esteem, and tonight he's in his usual state of isolated bemusement, brought on by a combination of too many drugs and a surplus of directionless anger. He's a pain in the ass to be around but so am I. And tonight he's got cash, a must tonight since I wasn't able to pinch any smoke from the bottom drawer of my dad's dresser.

It's just after dusk when Danny approaches his dealer, a skinny, scraggly, speedy white guy who seems right at home amid the benches, blankets and stink of rarely bathed bodies. People's Park once stood as a potent symbol of a city's noble struggles for genuine causes. The free speech movement was launched just a few blocks to the south. Vietnam protests hummed along steadily. But by the '80s the park had slouched into its current identity as a squalid makeshift village for the city's ample homeless population. It was a scary place, a perfect spot for persuading a bum to buy you wine

coolers or Mickey's Big Mouths, getting mugged, or, in this case, scoring drugs. Danny pulls out his cash. It's on. Just one snag: no weed tonight. What are the odds in Berkeley? The same drought that left Dad's dresser barren has apparently dried up the always-fertile turf of People's Park.

But the guy has something else, something we haven't tried yet. Acid.

I watch Danny shrug, smirk, hand over his bills and pocket a cellophane wrapper from a cigarette pack. He shows me the score within, a row of small white paper squares emblazoned with green print. "Do we smoke it?" he murmurs, a little like the girls in *Easy Rider* who don't know what to make of the LSD offered in that New Orleans graveyard. "I don't think so," I reply, remembering something my dad once told me. Father knows best. "I think we put it under our tongues." And so we do.

Ten minutes pass. Then twenty. No giggling. No comfortable numbness. No nothing. Unaware that the stuff takes at least a half hour to kick in, we figure we got ripped off.

Or maybe we didn't take enough. Yes. That must be it.

Danny takes the cellophane from his jeans pocket and hands me a second tab. He tears one off for himself. I start to suck on another hit of highly potent LSD.

***

How did I get here? My father smoked the stickiest, smelliest weed morning to night, in front of anyone who happened to be around. Marijuana was a constant in my childhood household, as omnipresent as my parents' violent mood swings. I can still smell the wretched blended aroma of pot and shit that enveloped the bathroom after my dad's epic morning bowel movements.

Eventually I felt the need to see what was behind the smell. I hit my first joint when I was 12, in line to see *The Return of the Jedi* with my parents and sister. We were at the Coronet in San Francisco, on whose majestic wide screen we saw all of our *Star Wars* movies (including the first one, when I was six, at which my dad dropped acid and really enjoyed the show). Six years later, same place, I asked to try some, and father complied with son's request. He may have been irresponsible but he was no hypocrite. I had always felt a son's impulse to bond with his father. I imagine he felt something similar, a need to be loved that would haunt him throughout his life.

I took hold of the roach clip as we milled in the movie line. I inhaled. It didn't work. (Does it ever work the very first time?) If Jabba the Hutt inspired terror that night, or the Ewoks made me realize I was getting too old for stuffed animals, the sensations weren't chemically enhanced. But I had acquired the taste, and soon enough I learned to love getting high.

More to the point, I loved the mental escape from what I faced everyday at home. My mom and dad met in an Illinois state mental hospital in 1965. Dad, the recent recipient of a mathematics degree, punched his ticket to the nuthouse by punching a cop. Mom, who had an MA in literature, heard voices that told her to kill herself. (Over the years she tried multiple times, without success). One of my childhood friends used to get a kick out of telling our buddies where my parents became a couple. He actually seemed impressed. I was not. I felt a deep stain of shame, even though I didn't know exactly what it all meant. Was there a big Indian pushing a broom in the hospital, like in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Were there black orderlies who did the bidding of an

evil head nurse? When I was a teenager I visited my mother on the psychiatric ward at a mental ward in Berkeley, where she decided to commit herself for a few days after a psychotic break that my dad pronounced a plea for attention. As I remember it she called me during final exams and told me she was going to kill herself. That was her style.

Dad got out of the Illinois hospital first, then snuck Mom out in the trunk of his car. They left their native Chicago and drove out to the land of California sunshine in 1969, a few months after Mayor Daley unleashed goon squad hell on protesters at the Democratic National Convention. They arrived in the Bay Area two years late for the Summer of Love. Timing was never their thing.

My parents established their new lives in '70s Berkeley, a city in the fog of a bad '60s hangover. I'm a native son of a town with high ideals, which don't mean much to a kid trying to dodge homeless people yelling at voices that exist only in their heads. I grew up in a part of the world that offers an endless supply of natural beauty, from the waves lapping at the Berkeley Marina to the redwood-spiked peak of Mount Tamalpais. I was surrounded by an absurd amount of beauty that I barely ever saw. You could say I lived in God's country, if Berkeley could be bothered to believe in an entity as banal and bourgeois as God. Besides, as I would soon discover, acid could help you see things that God would be hard pressed to match.

***

Danny and I arrive at Kojo's house tripping hard and trying to disguise our LSD panic. This a preppie birthday party for kids who see pot as an exotic treat. It's not a gathering of wastoids, except for the two that just walked in. I enter a room full of 13-year-olds in Izod shirts and my stomach flutters violently. I've been jerking my leg up and down so fast on the bus ride over that my shins ache, which makes me worried my leg might detach and float away at any moment. I feel like a stranger to myself, and if the goofy grin on my face is any indication I'm in love with this newfound isolation. Fortunately the lights go out soon enough to mask our dramatically dilated pupils. It's time for the movie portion of the party. First up: *Flashdance*.

Flashdance, as I have discovered since, is an odd experience even if you're not tripping on your very first hits of acid. On the one hand it's your typical Reagan-era dose of can-do Gipperness, mixed with just enough flesh to keep an adolescent boy's pulse racing. You might recall that it started an early-'80s fashion trend. Listen up, girls: you too can cut off the collar of your sweatshirt, sling one side beneath your shoulder, work as a welder by day and exotic dancer by night, and end up with the man of your dreams. It truly is morning in America.

But what about all...those...flashing...lights? See, our heroine works in your typical Pittsburgh greasy spoon/strip club that specializes in modern avant-garde dance numbers, complete with Fosse-esque outfits, checkered walls, blinding strobes and what appears to be a shower head above a stage. Pull a chain and whoosh – soaking babe.

Now take all that and put it in a dark room full of snickering adolescent boys, at least one of whom is pretty sure his skin is melting. Not melting in a bad way, mind you, just not all there where it belongs. Danny is sitting in a corner giggling; who knows what his skin is up to. And those lights...that water...Am I ever going to have sex?...Where are

Kojo's parents?...I never realized how much my hands felt like rubber...When did the movie end?

***

I didn't realize it then, but I was indulging in the two great escapes that would define me for years. Drugs and cinema. They can both take you somewhere else, away from whatever happens to be bothering you at any particular time. They're both addictive, in their own ways. They both get in your blood and leave you wanting just a little more.

If my dad got me hooked on drugs, my mom infected me with a love of movies. She would read particularly ripe Pauline Kael quotes out loud from *The New Yorker*. Our house overflowed with books and records. My mom and dad were highly cultured misfits. Such are life's ironies: The same parents whose neglect damaged me also provided me with the passions that would save me many years later.

Mom dragged my sister and me to all manner of inappropriate fare. One day when I was 11 she decided to take us to see *Blow Out*, Brian De Palma's homage to Antonioni's ennui extravaganza *Blow Up*. Siskel and Ebert liked it; we figured it must be good. John Travolta plays a sound technician who witnesses a murder and ends up in the killer's crosshairs. We took the bus up to the theater, ran to a local deli to grab contraband snacks (my mom taught me everything I know about sneaking food into the movies) and showed up a few minutes late for the main attraction.

The first scene of *Blow Out* unfolds during the dubbing of a porno movie: lots of panting, lots of flesh, lots of stuff an 11-year-old hasn't yet encountered even with overly permissive parents. My mom looked chagrined, a little confused, and wondered out loud if we were in the right theater. I sort of heard her through the sound of my eyes popping out of their sockets. Soon Travolta's reassuring mug replaced the tits and we settled in for an afternoon of suspenseful sleaze. We were home free.

Other times the movie outings didn't end so well, especially when Dad came along. My parents were dying to see *The Long Riders*, Walter Hill's ultraviolent 1980 Western. The movie didn't leave much of an impression on me at the time. I remember a lot of shooting and slow motion death, what I would later identify as wannabe Sam Peckinpah stuff. Nothing too shocking. But for some reason my dad was furious with the movie's graphic violence. As we left the theater I could see the doom in his eyes. This is always how I see my father in my memory: eyes bugging out with rage, even when glazed over from all-day pot smoking sessions and all-night cocaine binges. I would later get to know this mood well. I even found a name for it: his "That's the last time" mood, as in "That's the last time I ever go to the movies again," words I heard him mumble as we drove back home.

But I could still rely on him in a pinch if drugs were involved.

***

Drugs were clearly involved at Kojo's birthday party, but only two guests had ingested them. It seems the two acidheads were so far gone they forgot they were supposed to bring the dope.

"Hey, where is it?" grins Ben, one of those alligator shirts who dabble in pot. "Where's what?" I ask, checking for skin melt. Then I snap to. "Oh yeah. We couldn't get any."

"Can't you call your parents and get some?" My dad's pothead status is the stuff of schoolyard lore.

I nod, figuring the evening can't get any stranger.

I am wrong.

Soon I'm calling home. "Uh, hi Mom. Do you think you could ask Dad to bring us a joint?" She asks him. He says his stock is kind of low right now, which, of course, is why we're in this jam to begin with. But he agrees to twist me up a little something from his private stash. Even the most inept parents are hardwired to show love however they can.

About twenty minutes later a lime green Datsun B210 pulls up outside Kojo's house. Two middle-aged adults sit inside, each sporting a red vinyl jacket adorned with a gazillion zippers. I think they were going for a communal Michael Jackson thing. *Thriller* was hot then. I tell Kojo's folks I forgot my toothbrush and walk outside to meet the parents.

Mom smiles a nod-and-wink smile through the passenger window. She hands me a small plastic baggy. I unroll it to find a moist, skinny joint. Something about the entire transaction doesn't feel right, but I'm too high to give it much thought. I smile sheepishly, say thanks and head back inside.

The preppies are happy. We head out to shoot some hoops at a nearby park. Not every 13-year-old can toke up in the house.

Only the lucky ones.

Authors

The Authors

Jonathan Auping
The Fat Blind man

Jonny Auping is a freelance writer living in Dallas, Texas. He is a regular contributor to VICE Sports and The Classical, and some of his longform work can be found at Texas Monthly, Slate, The Cauldron, Fort Worth Weekly, Hardwood Paroxysm, and the Fort Worth Business Press. He also co-founded, edits, and writes for StoriesForSunday.com.

Story Behind the Story

A lot of the backstory for The Fat Blind Man and the Podcast was written in the actual story. I was waiting tables to make ends meet when I met Chris. I'm happy and surprised to say this is the second consecutive year I've been published by Ten Spurs. In the year prior, I found my story while managing a food truck park. I hope struggling or aspiring writers realize that day jobs, as monotonous or difficult as they may be, can still provide the material and subjects for great stories if you have the energy and open mind to look for them. The Mayborn Conference provided a lot of the inspiration and momentum that helped me to be able to pay rent as a freelancer (for now), and that's something I'm very grateful for.

Amy Burgess
Teens Rule

Amy Burgess is the admission and marketing director at Covenant Classical School in west Fort Worth. She earned a degree in communication/journalism from Biola University in California. She lives in Fort Worth with her husband, Josh, and their two teenagers, Thomas and Grace.

Story Behind the Story

I had a bit of a mid-life crisis in 2015. I didn't buy a sports car or have an affair; I entered the Mayborn Narrative Nonfiction contest. The way I see it, a midlife crisis is basically someone shouting, in desperation, "Is it too late for me to _____?" My personal version of the desperate question was, "Is it too late for me to be a writer?"

Between a full-time job, parenting kids who participate in every conceivable activity offered after school, and a husband I really like hanging out with, there seemed to be no more minutes left to pursue my writing. I started my career as a journalist after college, and I freelanced here and there over the years, but now in my 40s it seemed like maybe writing just wasn't going to happen for me. There wasn't any time, and I wasn't getting any younger.

So I panicked … and entered the contest. It was a gauntlet I threw down for myself. I needed to know if it was possible to write in this season of my life. I needed to know if I could meet the hard deadline and submit a story I was proud to have written.

When my son said he wanted to volunteer as a "teen attorney" at Teen Court, it looked like another activity to fit into the family schedule. But on his first night of training, as I sat in the waiting area with all the teen defendants, I realized I had stumbled into a fascinating world most people had no idea existed. And that is my favorite kind of story to tell. I was going to drive my son there every Monday night anyway. I might as well do some research and interviews while I'm there, right?

Christen Dennis
Addicted

I came to Denton in early spring of 2011 not really sure at all of what I would do. I had a couple ideas, a few simple plans, but nothing concrete. Born and raised in North Texas, Denton felt easy and comfortable. Always interested in reading and writing, I dove into UNT's Mayborn School of Journalism with a fierce passion and curiosity for the art of storytelling. I graduated in the spring of 2015 with a bachelor's degree in print journalism and a minor in anthropology. These past few years of swimming in writing and soaking it all up like a sponge have been the most exciting and defining of my life. I've been carving my path through freelance writing and editing, something I couldn't have done without my experiences from the Mayborn School of Journalism.

Story Behind the Story

Life is a mess and we are all just trying to stay afloat. This story, my story, is honest and true. This story was a day in my life, now a memory still pestering me. I tried the best I could.

Kathy Floyd
Living without Water

As early as the third grade, Kathy knew she wanted to write. After working for the U.S. Postal Service for 16 years, including time as a writer/editor for several Postal Service publications at headquarters in Washington, D.C., she wrote for newspapers and magazines in Cooke, Denton and Grayson counties in Texas. She has won awards from the Texas Press Association for photography. Kathy earned her Graduate Certificate in Narrative Journalism from UNT's Mayborn School of Journalism in 2015. She works at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls as a marketing and public information assistant.

Story Behind the Story

Through the first half of the 2010s in Wichita Falls, the drought soaked up all our energy, conversations and prayers. The city of Wichita Falls made national news for recycling its sewer water and our two water supply lake levels dropped to a combined total of less than 25 percent capacity. Our hope for rain was evaporating as fast as the water in the lakes.

In the middle of this drought, my husband died. My own prayers became a plea for both relief from grief and from the drought, forever linking the two. As I was writing "Living Without Water," we received more than 20 inches of rain in three-weeks' time. The drought was over.

With our prayers answered, life grew from things we thought were dead. But did we come out of the drought wiser? Did we learn that the water that comes out of our faucets does not come from a bottomless bucket? I hope so, because the cycles of drought and rain will continue, just like life and death. And just as life precedes death, death can sometimes release new life.

What started as a story about drought and grief evolved into one of water and the physical deliverance it brings to the land, and the soul's need for solace in time of sorrow.

Philip Kelly
Candles

I grew up on the lovely island of Oahu, in Hawaii. We had a mango tree and a papaya tree in our backyard.

Mynah birds would stalk our lawn in the early mornings and golden evenings – each a miniature Groucho Marx, heads bobbing, knees lifting in a gliding gait. It was, of course, heaven.

I went to college on the mainland, and with jobs at that time at a premium, I joined a friend in painting an oceanfront home in Newport Beach. Then we painted the one next door. Forty years later, I am still moving down the oceanfront painting the house next door. It has been my ticket to creating beauty and traveling the world. I am also a writer. I have been published four times in The Sun Magazine. My piece "Painting the Summer Palace of the Queen" won a 2013 Pushcart Prize.

I am , between coats of paint, writing a book on my years as a painter. There will be patrons in it. There will be my search for a muse. There will be dogs, many dogs; pooches who stretched themselves out on walkways and lawns watching me sand and caulk, waiting for that scratch and pet.

Story Behind the Story

I knew Mike for 38 years. We met traveling in Africa in 1976, and traveling was always the tie that bound us.

We grew older, bought bigger backpacks to carry our medicine. We had children, bankruptcies, and cancers, but each phone call ended with "Where next, Bro?"

Now Mike is gone. The picture of him leaning to the Ganges and releasing a candle is on my dresser. I miss him greatly. I talk to him when I walk the beach, open a travel book. Attach a map to my wall.

I wonder – Why him and not me? He was generous, energetic, and fall down laughing funny. I end my prayers each night asking: Where next, Bro?

Aloha, my dear friend.

Timothy Miller
My Encounter with Koresh

Tim Miller was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, the Cotton Capital of the world. His tractor mechanic father and nurse aide mother moved to Dallas, Texas, when he was six years old. After high school in Mesquite, Texas, Tim joined the U.S. Air Force and specialized in non-destructive inspection. NDI was highly technical work meticulously detecting defects in jet aircraft. Tim was honored with the USAF Commendation Medal, Norton Air Force Base Airman of the Year and Key to the City of San Bernardino, California.

Tim's education thereafter included a master's degree in theology and counseling from Andrew's University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Tim later obtained a nursing facility license from St. Phillips College in San Antonio, Texas. Tim's academic achievement included the publication of two articles in Ministry Magazine and The Adventist Review.

One of Tim's most inspirational challenges is encountering an extremely distressed organization or upset individual and so turning the situation around there becomes a new sense of calm. When it comes to writing, the inspiration and motivation is the same. The power for good of a story well told is more than a goal: Tim believes it is the purpose of his existence.

Story Behind the Story

When I look back I realize I was only three years older than Vernon Howell. At 26 the one thing I had going for me was I had just experienced a real conversion to Christianity. I did not know the Bible and was not at all religious. Koresh was a hard charging, Bible thumping adversary. I do look back at the entire exchange and see what an impact it had on my life. That impact culminated with the Oklahoma City bombing and my exit thereafter from full time ministry. What happened did not destroy my faith but brought me to a less symbolic and more authentic place. Although my encounter with Koresh was a brief window in time, the real truth about him, especially when one considers all of the nutcases and cop haters combined, makes this is a story that needed to be told.

Amanda Ogle
A river trickles through it

Amanda Ogle graduated from Tarleton State University in May 2013 with a bachelor's degree in communication studies with an emphasis in public relations and event management. Amanda's work has been published in D magazine, the Denton Record Chronicle, Mayborn magazine and American Way magazine. Her favorite things to write about are travel, animals and the environment, and she hopes her writing will one day take her to every continent.

Story Behind the Story

I'd known for a while that I wanted to write about the drought in Texas, specifically along the Brazos River just west of where I'm from, but I couldn't find a good character living along the river. That is, until I met Bayou Bob one day at the office of Parker County Today, the magazine of Parker County. The editor-in-chief warned me before his arrival.

"I just got off the phone with Bayou Bob, he's on his way up here."

"Who is Bayou Bob?" I asked.

She looked at me in disbelief. "You've never met Bayou Bob? Well, get ready, he's a real character."

After laughing for half an hour with him about politics and current events (you know, things you don't normally laugh about) and after finding out he owned a ranch on the Brazos, I knew I'd found my story. Over the next few months, I spent my free time with him out on the ranch, seeing just what the drought had done not only to his business, but his livelihood.

I admire Bayou Bob for his hopefulness and relentlessness, and his way of being positive in a situation that he has no control over. He really made writing this story on a hard-hitting issue fun, and I'll always be grateful for that. I hope that when people read "A River Trickles Through It," they can put a face and a story to an issue that we hear about constantly, but maybe don't see the urgency in unless it's happening in our own backyards.

Shannon Randol
All about the journey

Shannon Randol graduated from the Mayborn School of Journalism in 2015 with her bachelor's degree in strategic communication. She is living in Southern California working as the marketing coordinator for a nonprofit, the Marconi Automotive Museum and Foundation for Kids located in Orange County.

Originally from Buffalo, New York, Shannon has moved more times in her lifetime than celebrated birthdays. The characters in her books were the consistent friendships she could depend on during transition and, growing up, knew she wanted to author a book with characters who'd foster a child in the same situation.

"Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, when only one remembers to turn on the light" – Albus Dumbledore.

Story Behind the Story

When I received word about the literary conference, my immediate thought was I could finally write the story about how Matt and I had met. It had all the elements of a favored love story and had hopes it would be relatable. The only problem was I hadn't realized how hard it would be to rehash old wounds, edit my own words and relive parts of my past I thought I had gotten over.

I didn't fully understand what I had gotten myself into and began to have second thoughts. My first draft didn't hold any emotion. Then I met up with one of my professors to bounce ideas off during my troubleshooting. He gave me a single sentence that changed my entire narrative for my piece; the wheels instantly turned.

"The emotion I see in your eyes when you talk about the sequence of events needs to be in here, you're writing it guarded, with walls up."

And it clicked. I released the dam, bawled while editing and put myself into the narrative to give it heart. I want to thank Professor Donald for giving me what I needed to hear, you'll never fully understand how much that help put it in perspective for me.

Virginia Riddle
Crossing the Line

Often described as a Renaissance woman, Virginia Riddle is a freelance photojournalist, editor and grant writer. Her photos and editorial work appear monthly in NOW Magazines, Inc. and periodically in regional newspapers. Virginia's sports and nature photography can be found on her website. She is an adjunct faculty member at Navarro College-Corsicana and a performing musician. Virginia and her husband, Byron, have four children, five grandchildren and two dogs.

Story Behind the Story

When I saw the theme "the have and have nots" on the Mayborn Conference 2015 website page, I knew that I had to write about my first year of teaching. The people I met and the experiences I had that year inspired me to continue looking for the answers to sociological problems that plague many public schools today.

During the ensuing years I became an education lobbyist on the state and national level and earned a master's degree in educational administration. I achieved five Texas certifications and continued to work in Title I, high minority, low socioeconomic school districts in every grade, PK-12 through college. I learned much, yet many of the answers that I was seeking all those years existed within my first year of teaching. When, as a new principal of a school that was under threat of closure due to previously earned low test scores, I was given carte blanche permission by the school board to put my answers to work, that school received an acceptable rating by the end of the monitoring year and went on to become exemplary by the end of my third year as principal.

I am thankful for the workshop experience as a contest finalist at the Mayborn Conference. I was encouraged by my fellow finalists and facilitator to write a book about those three years as principal of that school. Since I came to writing by chance with no degree or background in the subject, their encouragement and the receipt of the Ten Spurs award has validated my writing efforts and pushed me onward.

Chris Vognar
The Trip to Nowhere

Chris Vognar was the 2009 Nieman Arts and Culture Fellow at Harvard University. He is culture critic for The Dallas Morning News, where he has worked since 1996. He is also a contributor to Transition, the quarterly journal of African and African-American studies at Harvard. Chris co-hosts The Big Screen show on KERA, Dallas' NPR affiliate. He has taught journalism at Harvard Summer School, film history at the University of Texas at Arlington and arts journalism at Southern Methodist University. He earned his B.A in English from UC Berkeley. He watches far too much basketball.

Story Behind the Story

For years I thought writing about my sordid youth would help me exorcise some demons. I had planned a memoir of my teenage drug daze and family dysfunction. This story was conceived as an excerpt from said memoir. I have since put the memoir on hiatus, choosing instead to live in the here and now. My first book probably won't be about me. But I think there's still some good stuff in this piece, even if it belongs to a now-abandoned project.

The Staff

Staff

Michael J. Mooney | *Editor*

George Getschow, director and writer-in-residence of the nationally acclaimed Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, spent 16 years at *The Wall Street Journal* as a reporter, editor, bureau chief, and on the Page One Rewrite Desk. At the *Journal*, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and won the Robert F. Kennedy Award for "distinguished writing" about the underprivileged. He covered Mexico for several years and directed the newspaper's coverage of the Southwest. Many of his protégés have won Pulitzer Prizes and other literary achievements. Today, he is a principal lecturer and writing coach for the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism, and a writing coach for a number of storytellers in the Southwest. He was recently inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters for his "distinctive literary achievement." He's editor of *Ten Spurs*, a collection of the best essays and narratives submitted to the Mayborn's national writing contests. *Ten Spurs, Vol. 4*, was selected a "Notable Special Issue" by Robert Atwan for his renowned anthology, *2011 Best American Essays*. He's completing a book, *Walled Kingdom*, for John Macrae Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Co., which grew out of two narratives he wrote for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Neil Foote | *Associate Editor*

Bill Marvel, who authored an essay in last year's edition of *Ten Spurs* about the controversy surrounding Caleb Hannan's "Dr. V's Magical Putter" in Grantland (which is the subject of a panel discussion at this year's conference), has been associated with the Mayborn Conference as a judge, speaker and workshop leader since 2005. Marvel began his career as a journalist at Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* in 1961, moved on to Dow-Jones' weekly *National Observer* as an art and theater critic in 1969, and came to Dallas in 1977 to cover art and write general features for the *Dallas Times-Herald* and then *The Dallas Morning News*. He left the *News* in 2006 to write books, a career move he wishes he had made about four decades earlier. He's the author of numerous magazine pieces and is co-author with R.V. Burgin, of *Islands of the Damned*, an account of Marine combat in World War II. *The Rock Island Line,* his history of the famous railroad, was published last summer by University of Indiana Press. *The Miner and the Millionaire*, a narrative of the bloodiest labor war in U.S. history, is slated for publication by UNT Press once he finishes the footnotes.

JoAnn Livingston | *Research Assistant*

Jo Ann Livingston is a writer/journalist whose career with Texas-based newspapers included 10 years with the *Waxahachie Daily Light*, where she was honored as the 2010 Star Reporter for Class A newspapers by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors. A many times award winner at the local, regional and state level, she received her Master of Journalism degree in 2014 from the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas. She is currently enrolled as a doctoral student in UNT's Interdisciplinary Information Science program and works as a research assistant for the dean of the Mayborn School of Journalism.

Kate Green | *Illustrator*

Kate Green is an illustrator near Austin, Texas, and member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She studied drawing and painting at the University of North Texas and got into book illustration about seven years ago. Kate has illustrated two children's books, and is currently working on a third — a Mother Goose nursery rhyme cook book.

Jim Dale | *Conference Manager*

Jim Dale is the Marketing Director for the Mayborn School of Journalism and also Manager of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. Prior to joining the Mayborn, where he is completing a Master of Journalism degree, Jim worked in the advertising, public relations and communications consulting fields for a wide range of Fortune 500 clients. Jim is also a freelance writer with articles published in numerous magazines, newspapers and online publications. He is a published author.

Jake Straka | *Design & Production*

Jake Straka is an alumn of the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism and now works full-time for the University of North Texas as a communications specialist. He splits his duties between the Mayborn School of Journalism and the Division of Institutional Equity and Diversity handling the design and production of marketing materials as well as updating/managing the content on both of their websites.

"It was after I moved to Texas that I truly discovered myself as a writer."

— W.K. "Kip" Stratton, author, *Chasing the Rodeo*

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