

Ten Spurs



Introduction by Ben Montgomery

The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference

Vol. 13, 2019

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FRANK W. MAYBORN
GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF JOURNALISM

Ten Spurs

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The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference
Vol. 13, 2019



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Contents

Foreword

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Best of the Best

23 **Portrait of a “True Crime” Character**

by Jonathan Auping

39 **Going Remote** *by Matt Crossman*

47 **Endlessly** *by Daniel Garcia*

55 **No Condor Falls Unnoticed** *by Christine Heinrichs*

69 **Richard** *by Kim Horner*

77 **Jukebox DNA** *by Timothy Miller*

85 **Night and Day** *by George Newtown*

103 **ACE: Anita’s Childhood Exposed**

by Anita Roastingear

117 **Marriage of a Different Kind** *by Jaya Wagle*

127 **Dark Blots** *by Debbie Williams*

139 **Authors and the Stories Behind the Stories**

151 **Staff**

Foreword

by Jim Dale,
Manager, Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference

I returned to grad school at the Mayborn in the spring of 2015 in mid-career, after decades of writing – mostly advertising. Immediately it was a strange new world, filled with courses in statistics, relearning the intricacies of algebra and working to figure out the routines of classes and studying and report writing again. Within just a few weeks, I was wondering what the hell I'd gotten myself into. I'd also taken a job as a graduate assistant, helping with marketing, since that's what I had done for years.

A month in, I found myself in a planning meeting for the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, something I'd heard of but had no clue about. The whole team – all new to me – was there. The planners, the logistics people, the staff who arranged everything from A/V and signage to who stayed in which rooms at the Hilton DFW Lakes, to someone who needed ideas on how many meatballs to have on hand for the VIP reception. It was all a bit different and intriguing to me.

But George Getschow was there, too, and when it came time for him to run through the working lineup for that year's conference – Anne Fadiman, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Alex Tizon were the keynotes, followed by a who's who list of authors, journalists, and writers whose names I knew – suddenly everything became clear to me. I understood why I'd made my way back to the Mayborn School after all those years. I knew that I'd found my people.

I instantly recognized that, with this thing called the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference – on top of having professors like Getschow on faculty – I'd landed at Ground Zero for the storytelling world. I've never looked back.

2019 is my fifth year to manage the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. I'm the guy who works behind the scenes to make everything run smoothly. I'm the guy who will pull off 999 awesome things that you'll never notice, and probably goof the one thing that you will. It's an intricate job, pulling off a successful Mayborn Conference. But it's a job I now relish.

That's because it truly does put me at Ground Zero. Over these five years, the conference co-directors, Neil and Mike, have managed to scrounge up more literary illuminati than I could've ever envisioned. Names I follow in the news, faces I see on television, authors whose books have impacted me hugely. As a grad student writing for the Mayborn magazine, I traveled to Florida to cruise around Lake County with Gilbert King, learning about how that gifted Pulitzer Prize winner sniffed up the reporting for "Devil in the Grove." We're friends to this day.

Equally important, the Mayborn Conference lets me – lets us all – rub elbows with people, like us, who somehow intrinsically know that storytelling is life and life is storytelling. Narrative drives everything. The "Ten Spurs", Volume 13 that you're now holding in your hands represents the "Best of the Best" of the personal essays and reported narratives that were submitted to our writing contests in 2018.

This year we'll also recognize the winners of the 2019 contests, and I'll happily coordinate the publication of their powerful words in next year's Volume 14 of "Ten Spurs". And the narrative thread that holds the Mayborn Conference together year after year – great writing by inspired writers – will carry forth unbroken.

I attended my first Archer City Writers Workshop last year, in the days immediately following the 2018 Mayborn Conference. It was a continuance of the pleasant exhaustedness and comfortable numbness that always comes for all of us on staff who pour so much into bringing together a successful event. It takes days to work through the blitheredness, recalling all the people and conversations and meaning-making and raw power that blasts forth from a full weekend of sessions and panels and workshops and keynote dinners and fun and camaraderie and late nights at Bonnie & Clyde's.

But Archer City was a warm, gentle afterglow for all of that. A mellow descent into quietness and stillness, all built around a laser focus on the actual craft of spitting out great writing. If a typical Mayborn Conference is a Super Bowl of narrative celebration, then Archer City is its follow-up, low-key Pro Bowl. This year, we'll be cross-pollinating between the Mayborn Conference and Archer City, with the likes of last year's Biography Fellowship winner Julia Flynn Siler and panelist Ben Montgomery sharing their wisdom in both places.

The Archer City workshop happens at – surprise! – the Spur Hotel, right at the corner of Center and Main, adjacent to the town's one and only blinking traffic light. It sits at the center of Archer City just the way "Ten Spurs" lives at the center of the Mayborn Conference.

So enjoy and celebrate this latest iteration of "Ten Spurs". Meet the writers and shake their hands. Beyond great stories, these missives represent the very best of what makes the Mayborn Conference the inspiring event that it is.

Now I'm off to go make sure we have enough meatballs for the VIP reception.

Acknowledgments

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

“Ten Spurs” is one of the most treasured aspects of The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. Each year, we publish these articles and essays that represent “*The Best of the Best Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference.*” Let me just say, this is no easy task for our judges who face this daunting and awesome task of reading these carefully crafted pieces. We know, as writers, that there are plenty of stories around us – every day, all day. It’s the best reporters and writers who somehow are able to transform people, places, and things into compelling, riveting narratives that lure us in, reading each word with anticipation and curiosity. It’s great writers who organize words, sentences, and paragraphs to paint a picture in our mind’s eye so crisp and clear that all of our senses are stimulated.

I’m one of the luckiest persons in the world to get a chance to work with these brilliant judges, and then get the opportunity read these great works.

Let me first congratulate the writers: **Daniel Garcia** for “Endlessly,” **Anita Roastingear** for “ACE,” **Jaya Wagle** for “Marriage of a Different Kind,” **Jonathan Auping** for “Portrait of a ‘True Crime’ Character,” **Christine Heinrichs** for “No Condor Falls Unnoticed,” **Matt Crossman** for “Going Remote,” **Debbie Williams** for “Dark Blots,” **Timothy Miller** for “Jukebox DNA,” **George Newtown** for “Night and Day,” and **Kim Horner** for “Richard.”

Thanks for our unpaid judges who do this work because they are passionate writers, journalists, and storytellers who know, love, and respect great writing. Thanks to Susannah Charleson, Ron Chrisman, Zac Crain, Cristina Daglas, Stella Chavez, Jim Donovan, George Getschow, Abby Johnston, Brantley Hargrove, Jim Hornfischer, Baxter Holmes, Patrick Hurby, Paul Knight, Michael Lindenberger, David Patterson, Bradford Pearson, BJ Robbins, Tim Rogers, Sonia Smith, and W.K. (Kip) Stratton.

One of the very special components of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference is that we host workshops for these writers prior to the kickoff of the conference. For more than eight hours, the writers and workshop leaders discuss each of these pieces in excessive and excruciating detail. There are intense periods where writers defend their words, their organization, their descriptions. There are heart-wrenching moments of emotion where tears flow. There is laughter and joy as both writers and workshop leaders revel in their ability to reach a common ground on how to transform their good pieces into great, memorable essays.

Thank you workshop leaders: Susannah Charleson, Joan Donaldson, Sam Eifling, Michael Graff, Michael Lindenberger, and W.K. (Kip) Stratton.

There are many other pieces of “Ten Spurs” that are required – beyond the writers, the judges, and the workshop leaders. It’s the work of many others who have to design, lay out, and ensure that the publication continues to live up to its outstanding national reputation. Caitlen Meza answers calls and questions from Mayborn students by day, but also is a gifted artist. She reads our stories, then pulls out her pencils and charcoal to create memorable cover art and the illustrations that are sprinkled throughout the publication. James Dale, the Mayborn School’s marketing director, works with Jake Straka, the talented graphic

artist and designer, to do all the production work for the book, including the layout and design for “Ten Spurs,” Vol. 13, 2019. My co-director, Mike Mooney, juggles 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 Ben Montgomery, the Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of “The Man Who Walked Backward: An American Dreamer’s Search for Meaning in the Great Depression,” (Little, Brown 2018) to write the introduction, and veteran editor Kathy Floyd to copy edit.

The reality is that so much of these essays may have never seen the light of day if Jo Ann Livingston, a Mayborn alumna, didn’t spend hours on the phone and responding to dozens of emails, urging writers to submit their entries, answering their questions and cracking the proverbial whip to make sure they met the contest deadlines. She also corrals the judges, then packages the stories so that it’s convenient for judges to access them online. She then sets up the in-person and conference calls with the judges to sift through the essays to choose the winners.

Join me in thanking all those who have helped produce this edition of “Ten Spurs.” Please enjoy reading these impressive narratives that represent the best in journalism.

Thank you all!

Introduction

by Ben Montgomery

May 6, 2019

I returned last week to the St. Petersburg, Florida, headquarters of my former employer, the Tampa Bay Times, where I'd spent almost 12 years working as a newspaper reporter and, essentially, collecting things like a packrat. Florida has no true mountains but for my stack of old files on the fourth floor of 490 First Avenue South.

I left the newspaper in October 2017. *Left* is a fuzzy, bullshit word, in this context. It's true that I left the building, left a job I loved. But *left* – as a verb – suggests I had some say in things, some ownership. It leaves the listener pondering possible motivations – on principle? to do other, perhaps nobler work? Like Magnus Nillson leaving Fäviken to be a gardener, maybe. Like Cat Stevens leaving music to find God.

If you cut through the shit, I was cordially let go. Fired by a kind, regretful editor who never used that awful word, but fired nonetheless. Reduced. Position eliminated. Shown out. Two years after the best pay raise of my career, I was downsized. They offered to throw me a party, with cake and warm words, but that didn't feel right at all. The Times was my dream for as long as I could remember. Every step early in my career – moving from a paper in Arkansas to West Texas to New York to the Tampa Tribune – was to get hired by the St. Petersburg Times, which enjoyed a reputation for a few decades as the very best place for serious writers. It was a haven: a for-profit newspaper owned by the nonprofit Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the leading school for professional journalists. All my heroes had stormed through. Roy Peter Clark, Anne Hull, David Barstow, David Finkel. Tom French. Lane DeGregory. Kelley Benham. Kelley had a hand in hiring me, Kelley and Mike Wilson, who was editor of the Times' feature section, Floridian. So when I got on as a reporter in a bureau east of Tampa in March 2006, I thought I'd never leave. The editor, David Karp, gave me a few days to define my beat and I audaciously told him I'd cover loneliness, choices and consequences, and human collision. He leaned back in his chair and said, "Okay. And the city of Ruskin." And that was it. I was 28 years old and my beat was awesome amorphous ideas and the city of Ruskin. That's the kind of place the Times was. The leaders there just said yes okay go do it.

This is when I started never throwing anything away.

They were heady times. I sat at a desk that once belonged to Rick Bragg and I'm pretty sure the burnt-orange stains along the edges of the office chair were where wiped his Cheetos fingers. An old copy editor told me the path that snaked from my desk through the cubicles to the men's room was unofficially known as the Rick Bragg Memorial Parkway, because Rick would sometimes write something he thought was so pretty that he needed to walk it off, and that's the route his stroll commonly took. (If I'm being honest, I sometimes walked it for inspiration.) I shared a cubicle wall with Lane DeGregory, who won a Pulitzer, and another with Leonora LaPeter, who would win one.

I kept files of my own research, but also dozens of files filled with work from others, work that I loved and celebrated on my website, Gangrey.com. I kept files through five different editors. I kept files through the reduction of the publication

of our Floridian section from daily to weekly to monthly, and through the terrible and sad draining of the feature staff. I kept some of the files that belonged to my dearest friends as they left the newspaper: Thomas Lake for Atlanta magazine then Sports Illustrated; Mike Wilson to FiveThirtyEight then The Dallas Morning News; Kelley Benham to Indiana University; Michael Kruse and Bill Duryea to POLITICO.

In 12 years, I wound up with many hundreds of files, a small mountain of ephemera, the bare bones and blood of a thousand stories. Somehow, in the 18 months since I'd been shown the door, no one had the time nor energy to throw it all out. And in that time, the building had sold and the newspaper staff had been reduced to the point of reconfiguration. Our wing was being vacated, the Rick Bragg Memorial Parkway abandoned. Someone emailed to say my files were still there, and did I need to borrow a dolly?

I sorted through the leftovers of some ridiculously daring projects. I found the outline of one of the first stories I did for Floridian, a profile of Tom Laughlin, the man who wrote, directed and starred in the 1971 hit "Billy Jack." My pitch to Floridian editor Mike Wilson was to let me fly to California to try to convince Billy Jack that we needed him more than ever, and that he should run for president of the United States. He did. And he did.

I found the remnants of a story I wrote about spending a week in the summer of 2012 traversing Tampa Bay on foot, no car. The Thoreau Experiment, we called it, honoring the great philosopher's 1862 Atlantic Monthly essay "On Walking."

Seven or eight folders contained elements of an adventure we called The Politirod, what amounted to a rental-car road trip from St. Pete to Washington, D.C., by way of Oklahoma in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election. A photojournalist and I covered nearly 4,000 miles telling stories from what I had pitched as "the intersection of politics and culture." We wrote about the mayor of Inglis, Florida, who had banned Satan from town in the 1990s; about a Mexican food truck operator in post-Katrina suburban New Orleans who earned a high school diploma as town leaders tried to evict him; and about the remnants of the KKK in Zinc, Arkansas, trying to capitalize on a satirical Onion-style spoof that suggested the Klan had endorsed Barack Obama; about a small-town mayor in Tennessee who thought the Russians were coming to take jobs from locals at Dollywood; on and on. I thought about how much trust it must've required for the paper to cut us loose for three weeks and reserve space on 1A every other day for whatever craziness we filed from the Great Out There. And that was pretty small potatoes.

Leftovers included stacks of reports we used to track six years of police shootings in Florida, my last big project. I'd gone on a rant at a staff meeting one day, pissed that state law enforcement could say how many purse snatchings there were in any given year but not how many citizens had been shot by police. Per custom, my editor said, Well, why don't you find out? Two and a half years later, we reported that police in Florida shot 628 people in the past six years, and that 40 percent were black, in a state where black made up 15 percent of the population.

There was a small box devoted to a deep plunge into the ignored issue of indentured servitude in and around Palatka, Florida. Photojournalist John

Pendygraft and I spent weeks with a woman who owned a local pie shop and had become something of a saint, working anonymously to help elderly African American farmhands escape potato-field peonage and leave town on a sort of modern day underground railroad. Who tells that story now?

Another few files documented the epic adventure of Doug Hughes, a mailman from rural Florida who gained a flash of fame for landing a gyrocopter on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol to demand campaign finance reform. I remember waiting at the base of the Washington Monument the day he came flying low over the government buildings, one of only two or three people in the world who knew what he was up to.

Eight or so Bankers Boxes contained reportage from the years I spent working on a project about the Dozier School for Boys, a brutal reformatory in the Florida Panhandle, 300 miles from St. Petersburg. The entire project was fueled by outrage, and we exposed a place that had mistreated children for more than a century. I'm sure it made little sense to spend the time and money we did on a story so dark and hard to read. I know it was hard to read because I'd get the occasional email along the lines of: thank you for doing this work, but I cannot bring myself to look at it. The state closed the school in 2011, after 111 years of operation, because we would not shut up. Since then, a team of anthropologists and archaeologists have unearthed the bodies of dozens of kids - most of them black - buried in unmarked graves on the school property.

Also costly was the story of the lynching of Claude Neal, comprising another dozen files, a retelling of an unsolved killing witnessed by some 5,000 people from nine southern states. I spent two years trying to learn the names of the six men responsible for abducting Neal, an illiterate farm hand, and torturing him for eight hours before killing him and turning his corpse over to the crowd. The story about the 1934 lynching and subsequent effort by whites to run all blacks out of Jackson County was in keeping with the Times tradition of resurfacing forgotten episodes in Florida history, no matter how ugly. Many Americans outside the state know about the Rosewood Massacre because a Times reporter got curious one day about a highway sign that said ROSEWOOD and no corresponding settlement. He started digging, tracked down survivors, and wrote a piece that would eventually be expanded into a book and major motion picture. Years later, the descendants of the victims won reparations from the state government, the first and last time anything of the kind has happened.

As I decided what to keep and what to trash, I came across a yard sign that said SAVE THE TIMES PICAYUNE. The staff had them made to protest the cuts in home delivery at the once-venerable New Orleans paper a few years ago, and I'd mailed in some money to buy a few. Within hours of holding that sign, we'd all learn that the 182-year-old paper was shuttered that very day, its entire staff laid off. Poof.

My former coworkers trickled by, pausing to make small talk. Things were good, they promised. The empty seats, though. So many empty seats. I wondered what had been lost, or unrealized, in the effort to survive. How many thousands of untold stories were smoldering on the altar of fiscal survival and financial prudence?

I've cheered newspapers with my whole soul for 20 years. I've spent my free time trying to conjure a fix. I've advocated online and in lecture halls for better writing, better reporting, thinking the stories would save us all. I was so certain of this that I wrote a piece for *Mayborn* magazine (and posed for the cover in my underpants, clutching my morning paper) telling everyone to calm down, that things would be all right so long as we kept telling good stories.

But at papers across the country, when financial pressure is applied, narrative is among the first things to go, like art and music in elementary education. Good stories require time and money, two things in short supply in American newsrooms in 2019. The payoff of well-told stories is often intangible, not easily measured, making the practice difficult to defend. I thought for a long while that if anyplace could stand through the storm it would be the Tampa Bay Times, which always felt experimental and innovative in both company structure and communicating stories to readers.

I'm not foretelling the death of local newspapers, for heaven's sake. Others have been singing that tune for decades, and I hold hope that there will be a new day. And I'm not bitter. I've got book and television writing to keep me busy, and the work feels natural and challenging in the right ways. (Speaking of television writing, Hollywood is hungry right now. It's a good time for writers with good ideas.) I'm teaching now in the universities, too, which is frustrating and rewarding. I'm still pulling hard for the paper that gave me a chance to roam.

I do wish to make a case, however, for cloistering. All writers should find a sect, a fortress, a coven of like-minded artists and craftsmen with whom to dwell during these dark times. Find your people and take care of them. Stick with them. Genuinely love them. Learn from them. Write them letters. Swap stories on barstools. Whether that's at a conference like *The Mayborn*, or in Archer City, or Ludowici, Georgia, or at a writers' group at the Starbucks, nurture and sharpen one another. Do not be exclusive. Others will come in search of what you have found. Invite them in. Cheer them on.

A few years ago, while covering Hurricane Isaac in New Orleans, I was walking along a levy as wind pounded my face and rain poured and emergency personnel launched rescue boats. Against a concrete barrier I noticed what at first appeared to be a large rock. As I drew closer, it appeared the rock was moving ever so slightly. Closer still, I saw it wasn't a rock at all. It was a clump of wetlands creatures – snakes, horseshoe crabs, worms, spiders, snails, lizards, frogs – and they had all taken shelter on the lee side of the concrete outcropping. They collectively, instinctively found a way to survive together, above the floodline, predators and prey. Their disagreements could wait. The ball of swamp critters was one of the weirdest and most beautiful things I've ever seen.

How's that for a lesson?

I hauled eight boxes of files to my car that day. Future books, maybe. Who knows. I threw the rest away, several hundred pounds of work headed for the recycling plant. Ashes to ashes, pulp to pulp.

Only two boxes remained, two I couldn't bring myself to throw away. I inherited them years back from the legendary Lucy Morgan as she left the Times. She

encouraged me to pursue the story, but I could never find the time. It was my white whale. The boxes were filled with court documents that told the story of how a giant Orlando theme park swindled a few hundred acres from an elderly black couple. The shenanigans were pretty simple. All it required was someone with the time to connect the dots, the talent to make readers care, and the guts to take on a huge corporation in the pursuit of justice.

A young feature writer strolled by – Christopher Spata. I barely know him, but I love reading his work. He has a distinct voice that stands out. I stopped him and ceremoniously bequeathed to him the two boxes. He seemed excited. He promised he'd make something of it. What shape that might take, I can only guess.

There was art before the paintbrush. There was music before the flute. The methods of creation and delivery have changed, and will keep changing, but we've been telling stories since we occupied caves. Someone has to carry the fire so the rest of us can find our way.

Best of the Best

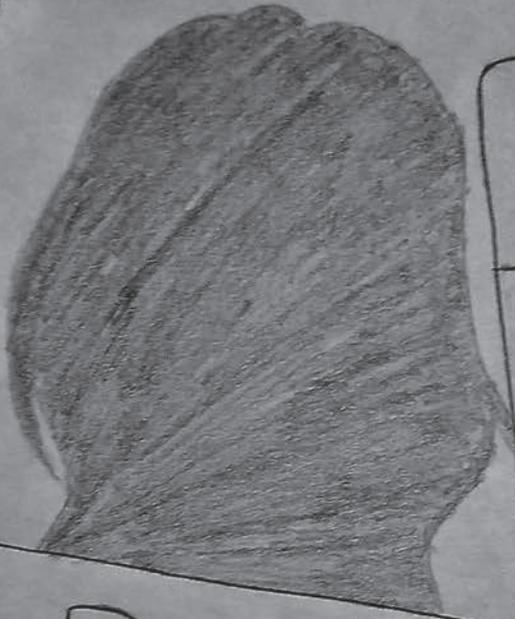
Ten
Spurs

- 23 **Portrait of a “True Crime” Character**
by Jonathan Auping
- 39 **Going Remote** *by Matt Crossman*
- 47 **Endlessly** *by Daniel Garcia*
- 55 **No Condor Falls Unnoticed** *by Christine Heinrichs*
- 69 **Richard** *by Kim Horner*
- 77 **Jukebox DNA** *by Timothy Miller*
- 85 **Night and Day** *by George Newtown*
- 103 **ACE: Anita’s Childhood Exposed**
by Anita Roastingear
- 117 **Marriage of a Different Kind** *by Jaya Wagle*
- 127 **Dark Blots** *by Debbie Williams*
- 139 **Authors and the Stories Behind the Stories**
- 151 **Staff**



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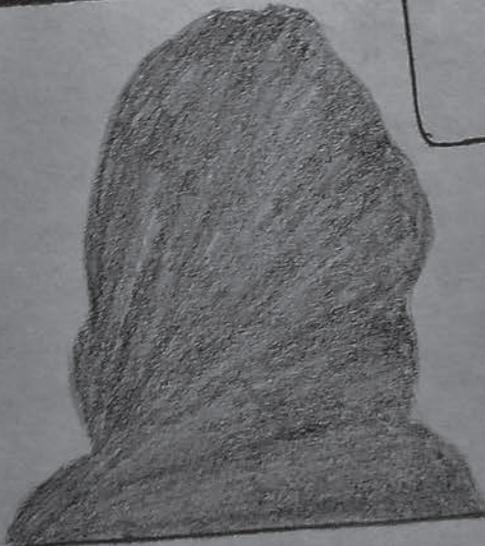
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Portrait of a “True Crime” Character

by Jonathan Auping



Rachel Trlica, Renee Wilson, and Julie Ann Mosley disappeared almost 44 years ago. Rachel’s brother, Rusty, hasn’t stopped looking for them and he’s become the central character in a tragic mystery.

The Swiss Pastry Shop is a longtime Fort Worth, Texas, establishment; the kind of place with wood floors, bingo hall chairs, and black forest cake staring at you from behind a glass. It had recently celebrated its 40th anniversary when Rusty Arnold suggested I meet him and Richard Wilson there in December of 2016 to talk about Rusty’s sister, Rachel, and Richard’s daughter, Renee. The last time anyone has seen either girl was two years before the diner served its first meal.

Two days before Christmas, 1974, Rachel Trlica, Renee Wilson, and Julie Ann Mosley piled into Rachel’s beige Oldsmobile and headed for the Seminary South Shopping Center in Fort Worth to go shopping. When the mall closed later that night the Oldsmobile was in the Sears parking lot, with Christmas gifts locked inside of it. The girls were nowhere to be found. Rachel was 17. Renee was 14. Julie was 9.

The four decades of aftermath that their disappearances produced would include devastated parents, a much-debated letter from Rachel, suspicious family members, strange coincidences, torn relationships, mysterious phone calls, an ominous psychic, numerous suspects, a potential love triangle, supposed Rachel sightings around Christmas every so often, horrific rumors, and dozens of relatively convincing theories.

It also left an 11-year-old boy named Rusty, who would never see his older sister, Rachel, again. Rusty is 54 years old now with balding blonde hair and a patchy goatee, and he couldn’t believe what he’d heard when the Swiss Pastry Shop hostess blurted it out.

“Rachel! Party of three!”

We were barely 10 minutes into our meal, three days before the anniversary of the disappearances of Rachel, Renee, and Julie. I had to admit it was an eerie

coincidence, but Rusty reacted like he'd seen a ghost. Then it was like a switch had flipped. He was talking faster than I could take notes. He was jumping from theory to theory leaving little time for follow-up questions or even the foundation of facts that I needed to make sense of them. Renee's father, Richard Wilson, sat more quietly and answered any questions directed toward him.

Rusty's many stories involve trespassing and digging. He's searched land and water (his boat is called the "Mary Rachel" – his sister's given name) for what happened to those girls. His findings include a bag of human teeth, and a trash bag of bones and hair. ("It was a dog," he said, still dismayed. "We thought we had it. But it was a dog.")

If there's a suspicious connection to one of the girls then Rusty, who roofs houses for a living, has probably looked into it. Sometimes he doesn't have to try. He recalled getting a call at work from a woman claiming to be Julie Ann Mosley. She was skeptical of aspects of her past and believed she was abducted as a child. When she saw a picture of Julie she tracked down Rusty and sent a picture of herself. "Dude. *Dude*," Rusty said, with his glass of water paused in the air, halfway between his lips and the table. "It was so convincing. It was so overwhelmingly, powerfully convincing that that was actually her." Julie's own mother thought the woman was her daughter, but a DNA test came back negative.

When he discovered that convicted serial kidnapper Mike DeBardleben, known notoriously as the "Mall Passer" had lived only minutes away from Rachel's house around the time of the disappearances Rusty looked into it. "I've been to his house," Rusty told Blog Talk Radio in 2013. "I've been through his house. I've been in his attic."

To the police, the case of Rachel Trlica, Renee Wilson, and Julie Ann Mosley's disappearances is an open investigation. To you or me it might prove to be a compelling story. To Rusty, it's his universe.

So what makes something a true crime story? Clues would seem like a necessary ingredient, but what about a case rich with juicy clues that don't seem interested in collaborating with each other? By his own estimation, Rusty has personally looked into hundreds of theories on this case. "We work leads every day," he told me flatly. He's made his fair share of accusations and burned almost as many bridges. Rusty's life isn't a podcast or a Netflix documentary. Rusty's life is a mess.

"I *wish* I had time to work," he told me recently. "I don't have a life anymore."

Rusty doesn't remember much about the first half of that day in 1974.

The Arnolds and Wilsons lived only a few blocks away from each other in a middle class neighborhood in South Fort Worth known as Greenbriar. The two families went camping together and took trips to Benbrook Lake every month when the weather was nice. Rachel was particularly close to Renee Wilson, who was two grades below her at Southwest High School. The Wilsons owned some pigs in nearby Crowley, and sometimes Rachel would tag along to go feed them.

That December day the girls were expected back from the mall by mid-afternoon. Rusty remembers Renee's younger brother, Ricky, saying that she was going to be

late for a Christmas party. The next memory Rusty has of that day is scouring the mall with his mother from about 6 p.m. until 11 p.m., going through every store and paging the girls until the entire mall was empty and closed.

“Christmas was unusual without Rachel there,” Rusty remembered. But the Arnolds’ three-bedroom house was hardly quiet in those next few days. Various grownups and police officers were in and out, speaking in not-so-hushed tones about this possibility or that. Rusty was too young to have a theory of his own and barely old enough to understand what was going on. His other sister, Debra, then 19, had been a rebellious teenager who ran off for days at a time before coming home. “I was kind of used to a sister disappearing on me,” Rusty said. So maybe Rachel and Renee were just doing the same thing. But even to Rusty, it seemed odd they would take 9-year-old Julie Ann Mosley with them.

While Rusty’s recollection of the day his sister disappeared doesn’t start until it was halfway over, the only part of that day that anyone can trace for Rachel, Renee, and Julie is the first half. Seventeen-year-old Rachel Trlica wanted to go Christmas shopping for her 2-year-old stepson, the child of her husband of six months, 22-year-old Tommy Trlica. “They were going to have him on Christmas Eve, so they went shopping to find a bunch of toys to put under the tree,” Rusty and Rachel’s mother, Fran Langston, told me.

Debra told police that her younger sister invited her to the mall that morning, but she declined because she was tired from their game of canasta, which had stretched until 4 that morning. So Rachel invited 14-year-old Renee, who had recently started dating the older brother of Julie Ann Mosley. Nine-year-old Julie was bored and begged them and her mother for permission to tag along before they eventually relented.

When evening came and none of the families had heard from them panic started to creep in. “I feared they were gone,” Langston, who is now 79, recalls. “When we didn’t find them by the time the mall closed, and her car was still there – you know something happened to those girls.”

Today, Rusty and his wife Terri live in the same neighborhood, not far from the house he was living in 43 years ago, where his mother still lives. Richard Wilson is still in the neighborhood as well.

At the time of her disappearance, Rachel had been living with her husband, Tommy, only a few minutes from the house she grew up in, close enough to still be a part of Rusty’s life. (Her older sister Debra lived with Tommy and Rachel as well). He looked up to her. When McDonald’s ran a promotion giving away collector’s edition drinking glasses to any child able to recite the Big Mac ingredients in four seconds or less, Rachel would take her little brother to collect them. Now, in his early 50s, he delivers the phrase in one breath: “Two all beef patties, pickles, lettuce, cheese, onions on a sesame bun.” Although four-plus decades later, the ‘special sauce’ escaped his memory of the original jingle.

The lasting image of Rachel is one of youthful allure. At 5 feet, 6 inches tall and 110 pounds with light brown hair and green eyes, she was pretty, on her way to

beautiful. “She was a wonderful girl,” Rusty said with a smile from his living room, having invited me back to his house after lunch. “Charming personality. All the guys loved her. She taught me how to play guitar.” Rusty would later start a band called Rock-N-Rusty – think Ted Nugent crossed with the James Gang. They released an album a few years ago.

He insisted that I sit in his truck in the driveway so that I could hear on its sound system the song he’d written dedicated to Rachel titled, “In Memory of You.”

It begins with a spoken voiceover:

*You weren’t just my sister; you were my best friend.
You taught me my first guitar chords with your guiding hands.*

Other lyrics include:

*On that cold December night,
So many questions left unanswered
Did you try to fight?
You were with your two good friends,
Why did they have to go, too?
Rachel, Renee, and Julie Ann,
Where on Earth are you?*

On Christmas Eve, 1974, the day after Rachel, Renee, and Julie went to the mall, Tommy and Debra showed up to the Arnold household with a letter in hand. The police were already at the Arnolds’ house when they arrived. The letter, they explained, was from Rachel.

I know I’m going to catch it, but we just had to get away. We’re going to Houston. See you in about a week. The car is in Sear’s (sic) upper lot. Love Rachel.”

The piece of paper was passed around the room. Even 11-year-old Rusty held it in his hands. All these years later, it remains perhaps the most confusing element of the case. Langston’s immediate reaction was that her daughter did not write it.

When examined closely, the handwriting in the actual letter *seems* different than the handwriting on the envelope. The letter is signed “Rachel,” but it appears that the final “L” has been traced back over, as if she had begun to spell her own name incorrectly. The envelope was formally addressed to “Thomas A. Trlica.” Rachel exclusively referred to her husband as “Tommy” as did most people who knew him closely. The envelope was smaller than the letter that purportedly arrived inside of it.

The following morning Detective Billy Wilbanks of the Fort Worth Police Department’s Youth Police Division told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that the

police believed Rachel had written the letter, before adding, “but I don’t know if she was forced to write it.” Four years later, a police investigator named George Hudson, who was later assigned the case, told the Star-Telegram, “We sent that letter to the FBI three times. Each time they asked for more samples of her writing. We sent stacks of things she had written.” All attempts came back inconclusive.

Richard Wilson, the father of 14-year-old Renee, was skeptical of the letter’s quick arrival. “Back then the post office wasn’t near as fast as it is today,” he said. The postmark on the envelope also contained an inconvenient error. The first four postal service numbers are 7608, but the final number is indecipherable. It is perhaps a faded “8,” but, strangely, also looks like an inverted “3.”

If the final number were an “8,” making the zip code 76088, then the letter would have come from Weatherford, Texas, which is about 40 minutes west of Fort Worth. The final number being an inverted “3” would seem unlikely as “76083” is not currently an active zip code. But in 1974, the zip code for Throckmorton, Texas, was 76083 before it was changed years later. Neither Weatherford nor Throckmorton is on the way to Houston.

“We can go over there right now,” Rusty said to me from his living room.

The phone was already pressed against Rusty’s ear and ringing before I had time to protest that I didn’t have any questions prepared for a mother about her missing daughter or that it felt rude to show up at the front door without having reached out in advance. I just sat on Rusty’s couch and grimaced through a conversation I could only hear one side of.

“I have a magazine writer here who’s going to write about Rachel’s case. He needs to talk to you.”

The exchange was already taking an urgent tone that I wasn’t particularly comfortable with. The awkward silence signified what I could only imagine was an attempt to decline on the other end.

“Mother, we *need* this.”

If Langton’s house has changed much in the 45 years since Rachel lived in it you probably wouldn’t guess it. Langston was sitting in her recliner watching a black and white Western when I arrived. She turned down the volume to speak with me and pulled out a thick binder she kept next to the couch full of short newspaper clippings “from way the heck back” all concerning her daughter’s disappearance. “I’ve got that one over there,” she said, pointing to a big feature in the Star-Telegram. “‘Crimes of the Last Century.’ It starts with Jack Ruby.” She spoke of the girls’ inclusion in the feature with a sort of melancholy pride, like a fractured version of a typical parent showing a stranger that her child had been written up in the newspaper for a less tragic reason. The living room was full of pictures of Rachel, frozen in childhood.

The letter was the first and only major lead in the girls’ whereabouts, even after a week had passed and the girls had not returned as the letter had promised. Langston confirmed that, until Hudson eventually took over the case, all three families were upset with the police handling of the case. “[The police] treated it

like a runaway [case] 100 percent,” Rusty interjected.

“They were lying to us,” Richard Wilson, father of Renee, had told me bluntly at lunch. He recounted a story about being fed up with the lack of progress made by the police until, one day, officers told him and his wife that they had a tip that the girls’ bodies were at the bottom of a well in the nearby city of Aledo and they were heading over there to check it out. Richard decided that he would follow the officers, unbeknownst to them. But instead of going to Aledo, the officers made a beeline to the Paris Coffee Shop, a popular Fort Worth diner. Richard parked across the street at Shorty Brown’s Barbershop and waited. From Paris Coffee Shop, the officers went back to the station and called the Wilsons to tell them that nothing had come of the tip about the well.

Some weeks after the disappearance, Langston said the families hired a supposedly well-known psychic named “J. Joseph” to come to the Arnold home. Joseph, who apparently did not charge for his services but instead donated to a reward fund, sat with all three families in the Arnold’s living room and shared an ominous message before beginning the session. He told them that when he finished, if they never saw him again, “then they’ll know that the girls are dead.”

“And we’ve never seen or heard from him again,” Langston told me from that same living room 42 years later, with gentle finality in her voice.

The psychic also left the families with vague hints, including a “sense” that something was wrong with the letter from Rachel, and a “feeling” that the girls went north toward “Oklahoma or Illinois,” or that they were being held against their will and “dope is possibly involved along with three to five people.”

Langston would plan a funeral six months after the disappearances, not for Rachel, but for Rachel and Rusty’s father, who died while the case of his missing daughter was going nowhere. Cotton Arnold was terminally ill with stage-four melanoma at the time of the disappearances. The Arnolds didn’t have life insurance. Langston, who would remarry a few years later, had to take a part-time job at McDonald’s while trying to raise Rusty and cope with the mystery of what happened to Rachel. “It wasn’t easy,” she told me. “I guarantee you. Lots of tears. I cried myself to sleep a lot.”

She remembers her late husband that night at Seminary South, waiting for answers in the Sears parking lot with a shotgun in hand. “[He] was so sick, and he was running a fever that he was just freezing to death, but he still sat there on that lot.”

“Some people say that’s why he died: a broken heart,” Rusty said, in commiseration with Fran.

But he was only humoring his mother. Rusty’s memories of his father are less rosy than Fran’s. Raymond “Cotton” Arnold raced cars for a living when he was young and eventually opened up Arnold’s Transmission Shop in Fort Worth. “If your car’s rotten bring it to Cotton,” was the slogan. He had a dark side, though, and his daughters were often on the receiving end of his demons. Rusty later told me that he could talk his way out of physical punishment because he was the son that Cotton always wanted. Debra and Rachel were less fortunate. “He was very

abusive to the girls,” Rusty said. “I’d seen him whip Debra so hard that she had blood running down her legs.” At one point, Rusty claims Cotton put a gun to Fran’s head in front of all three children and threatened to kill her.

Rusty’s adolescence was a front-row seat for traumatic chaos. He grew up with an abusive father who spared him the beatings that his sisters had to endure. In the span of six months he grappled with a sister dropping off the face of the Earth and the death of his father that sent him and his mother into financial crisis. There’s no course of action for events like those. Just keep being an 11-year-old boy.

I went ahead with my childhood,” Rusty said. “Of course I missed my sister. She was one of my best friends. But what am I to do at that age? Just wonder what happened and go on with my life.

“Until I got old enough to take charge myself, and I’ve been in charge ever since.”

It was an unusually humid March day in 2017, and I was sweating and thinking to myself that I would rather have been a number of other places other than the South Fort Worth property I was trespassing on, when we found something under the dirt.

It was a small, light blue button-down woman’s shirt; the cloth so thin and tattered it looked as though it had been there for years, maybe decades. Part of it was buried so deeply under layers of soil that pulling at it felt like yanking at the roots of a shrub. Scattered a few paces away from the shirt were some dirty old soda cans. Beyond them were the collapsed remnants of a house, now taken over by squirrels and rabbits. Some 150 yards from there was a divvy in the ground, likely just a dry creek bed. Or, as Rusty put it, “a perfect place to hide a body.”

We found ourselves on this ramshackle 17-acre stretch because Rusty was following a tip from a retired Fort Worth police officer named Alex Faltner. Faltner spent part of his childhood in the same neighborhood as the Arnolds, and remembers when the girls went missing. Though he was only 9 at the time, he told his mother he would someday solve the case. The case has had that type of resonance with local law enforcement. Months later, talking to another retired officer with the Fort Worth Police Department, I asked whether the disappearances sounded familiar. You’d have thought I’d asked whether the JFK assassination rang a bell. “*Everyone* knows that case,” was the response.

Falter’s tip was an attenuated one: Another cop had reminded him that, back in the ’70s, the former property owner’s nephew had been a suspect in “the murder or disappearance of some girls.” But in all those years, the property had never been searched.

Rusty wasn’t worried about getting caught. He already crafted a cover story: the land was for sale and, if approached, we could just claim to be interested buyers. “Believe me, I’ve done this a hundred times,” he assured me over the phone before the search.

And so we – a ragtag group of sleuths including a great-grandfather, a former cop who walked with a cane, and Rusty’s wife, Terri – followed Rusty across a busy road to the land. We came upon a spot Rusty had scouted out where the barbed wire fence was down and walked right in. It wouldn’t be until almost an hour later,

when Rusty bent down to pick something up off the ground, that I noticed the handgun tucked into the back of his pants.

But apparently none of the girls were wearing a light blue shirt when they disappeared. So Rusty moved on, leaving me there thumbing the fabric. He had moved on to the next rabbit hole: a couple hundred yards away was a dry creek bed that, he thought, deserved a closer look. After all, at breakfast, Falter had mentioned that, "Nine out of 10 times when someone puts a body underground, trying to hide it, it's near water."

So as fire ants climbed up the shirt and onto my hand, I dropped the garment and hustled to catch up with the group, giving in to the wandering attention span this case seemed to bring out of interested parties. The shirt was the wrong color.

Waiting to be seated at the Westside Café earlier that morning I asked Terri how many expeditions like this she had been apart of. She looked up from her phone and smiled. "Well, we've been marred for 26 years. So, a lot."

All of this searching began when Rusty got out of the military - four years served in the 49th Armored Division of the Texas Army National Guard - in his late 20s and he started to reflect back seriously on the events surrounding Rachel's disappearance. Around that time he divorced his first wife, and the case became a bigger and bigger part of his life. The more he discovered, the less he could justify "moving on." His current wife, Terri, supports his mission for truth. Their wedding anniversary is the anniversary of the girls' disappearances. Rusty and Terri have two children, now 27 and 25 years old, and Rusty has another son who he's been estranged from for over 20 years.

These days Richard, 79, is the first one to get a call when Rusty has a new lead. When his daughter, Renee, disappeared the Wilsons still had a 12-year-old son. Richard had a career in the steel industry. Moving on might have been impossible, but moving forward was mandatory. He still remembers his wife, Judy, going to the courthouse every week begging whoever would listen to upgrade the status of the case, put more men on it, anything. Around the same time, Julie's mother, RayAnn Mosley, was getting calls that were either silent or sounded like the distant voice of a young girl. Police eventually reprimanded prank callers. Richard's wife, Judy, passed away of pulmonary hypertension in 2015, but his infant great-grandkids manage to keep him busy. "They get all the money the grandkids used to get," he told me with a chuckle.

Richard rarely instigates new leads, but he tends to serve as Rusty's right-hand man, or at least a source of knowledge of the case from his perspective. Of course Richard has had theories over the years. It goes without saying that the disappearance of his daughter doesn't sit right with him. If Rusty *were* to find some answers, Richard wants to be there every step of the way.

But when Rusty first became to dedicated to the case, before Richard retired, Rusty and Debra would work together, looking for clues to what happened to their lost sibling. That went on until Rusty came to a realization of his own.

"Hold on now," he thought to himself. "*She* could be involved."

Debra was not only living with Tommy and Rachel in 1974; she had also been previously engaged to Tommy, though she later maintained that it was not a serious engagement. Rachel met Tommy through Debra. All of Rusty's childhood memories of Debra tend to emphasize her reputation as a problem child. "[Rachel] was more of the responsible one," he said. "Debra was the rebellious one. She always wanted to cause trouble."

A closer look at Tommy's marriage records show an eventful timeline. On August 23, 1971, he married Shauna Ford with whom he had a son, Shawn. On April 26, 1974, he and Ford filed for divorce. He married 17-year-old Rachel only 43 days later and was engaged to Debra before that.

The disappearances occurred a little over six months into the marriage. Less than two years later Tommy requested a divorce from Rachel on the grounds of abandonment. On December 15, 1976, he married Josephine Beck, who was also 17 years old. He and Beck were divorced by June of 1978. Less than three months later he would marry 23-year-old Ruby Fox.

Tommy now lives in Galveston and has been married to his current wife, Linda, for over 30 years.

Tommy's marriage applications to Beck and Fox were both conducted in the same city: Weatherford, Texas, 76088. Both applications requested that the marriage licenses be sent to the same address in Throckmorton, Texas, 76083. A recovered deed has Tommy buying a house in Throckmorton, which currently has a population of 828, and included Rachel's name in the deed. The document was dated in May of 1976, nearly 17 months after Rachel disappeared.

Rusty tends to draw intense conclusions from his theories. He says that police have threatened to arrest him numerous times for his meddling. He claims that after searching a property he says the owner gave him permission to search, an officer named Cheryl Johnson told him, "If you ever do that [again], I'll throw you under the jail. I will arrest you so fast your head will spin." Johnson, who has since retired from the Fort Worth Police Department, declined to comment on the case, but told me that she never said anything along those lines. She did, however, confirm that Rusty was admonished for interfering with a police investigation.

One day he called me, despondent, to tell me that an email virus had caused all his records on the case to be erased from his computer. "I feel like I've been raped or something," he told me. Another morning, I stopped by his house to borrow a few binders of old notes on the case, which he had happily volunteered to lend me. As I carried them he followed me to my car and took a picture of my license plate, "just for my peace of mind," he assured me.

When the song he'd played for me back in his truck - the one dedicated to Rachel - ended he played another song; a more ominous one; dedicated to whoever was behind her disappearance.

*But in the end
You didn't really get away with it
You can hide
Your secrets from us all
You live with your conscious
I stand tall*

He advised me against meeting with Tommy, calling him “a psychopath” and claiming he would “fear for [my] life.” He gave me Debra’s phone number, but warned that his now 61-year-old sister is “pure evil, but she’ll come across like June Cleaver.”

Still, he isn’t the only one who holds suspicions of the two. Richard never liked Tommy. “I got it in my head that him and Debbie were involved and until they find someone who stands up and tells me face-to-face, ‘I did it’ then I’m going to have that on my mind. Quite a few parents died with that thought.”

Those parents that Richard spoke of are likely his late wife, Judy, and the mother of Julie, RayAnn Mosley, who passed away in 2014. In a 2000 story by Mary Rodgers in the Star-Telegram Debra is quoted as saying, “she has nothing to hide.” Afterwards, Mosley, Rusty, and the Wilsons wrote an open letter addressed to Debra “begging and pleading” with her to take a polygraph test administered by the Fort Worth Police or the FBI.

Left off of this plea is the name of Fran Langston, who has never entertained the notion that her surviving daughter was involved in the disappearance of her missing daughter. Langston’s theory boils down to what she refers to as “white slavery.” She believes the girls were abducted by someone from another country and sold into the world of human trafficking. The fact that Rusty and Debra are not on speaking terms pains Fran deeply.

Meanwhile, it’s common when discussing a person even remotely related to the case who had passed away in the last 43 years for Rusty to use air quotes when describing their cause of death, as if to suggest an unknown conspiracy. But no death sticks out to Rusty more than Jon Swaim’s. In the months following the disappearances, frustrated with the police and wanting to take matters into their own hands, the families hired Swaim as a private investigator. He worked the case for nearly three years and supposedly did good work. Richard credits Swaim with getting the police to more actively investigate it.

Whatever Swaim uncovered, when the case was still relatively fresh, will never be known. In 1979 Swaim died of an overdose of pills and alcohol in what was deemed a suicide. He had supposedly requested that all the records of his cases be destroyed in the event of his death.

“Why would he destroy all the evidence he worked all his life to gather?” Rusty asked me. “That makes no sense.”

The explanation the families were given is that a private investigator might

have dirt on a number of different people and wouldn't necessarily want all that information to be revealed. Perhaps it was to protect his wife from those who might be incriminated by those records.

"He had something on everybody downtown," Richard said. "Judges, lawyers. That's the story [Swaim's wife] told us."

Rusty, who can only revisit the circumstances through other people's recollections, chooses to take a different perspective on the same idea.

"Plenty of people had motives to kill him," he told me.

About 20 years after Swaim's death, Rusty would cross paths with another P.I. named Dan James whose investigations into the case actually predated Swaim's. If the divide between Rusty and Debra was once merely the difference in how two people mourn the loss of a sibling - one looking for ways to move on, the other obsessed with finding the truth - then that gap became unbridgeable around the time that James came into the picture.

He's a man who Debra has called "a scumbag." Langston has referred to him as "the devil."

Rusty does not share those opinions. "Dan James is the most decent man I've ever met," he told me.

When I visited with James, a calm, deliberate man in his early 60s, in early 2017, he had been hired to work on the high profile John Wiley Price case in which the veteran Dallas politician stood trial for bribery and fraud.

But James' career as an investigator was in its infancy when the girls vanished. At the time, he was living near Seminary South Shopping Center and began looking into the disappearances in his spare time out of curiosity. Over the next 30 years he claims to have spent over \$30,000 of his own money investigating the case. When he took a job as a Chief Investigator for the office of the Federal Public Defender in Dallas in 2001, a position he held until 2013, he had to leave the Seminary South case behind, but some of his findings put Rusty on a path he never turned back from.

"My mother says Dan James poisoned my mind," Rusty told me. "Well, that's not true. He opened my eyes."

Through various interviews with neighbors and friends, including two people who were living in an RV in Tommy and Rachel's backyard, James was told around the time leading up to the disappearances there were numerous arguments between Tommy, Rachel, and Debra, including a physical altercation in a bowling alley the night before the 23rd, an account left off of Debra's recollection of the two playing canasta.

James believes that Tommy and Debra were having an affair. He also points toward certain individuals with loose connections to Debra and criminal associations who were in town only for the specific window of the disappearances, though this is all just anecdotal, and he doesn't consider his findings to be proof of anything.

James admitted to me that he believed Rusty is overzealous in his approach to the case. “This is something that’s a criticism of Rusty: Rusty has no concern of what people invest in time or money,” James said. “He’s wasted a fortune of people’s money on this case. He’s got people doing freebie stuff all over everywhere, and so much of it is a waste.”

He is also aware that he is despised by Rusty’s sister and mother, but claims that he handled the case with the same professionalism as any other gig. It was his information in the hands of Rusty that led to inevitable drama. “Rusty would go and torment his mother, and boy, he would just needle Debra terribly,” James told me. James still comes across the occasional tip in the case. He’ll look into it if it seems particularly credible, but these days he rarely passes information on to Rusty, aware of the lengths he might go to investigate it.

Debra did not respond to requests to speak for this story, but in 1999 she typed a three-page letter to Rusty chastising him and begging that he end the accusations toward her.

The letter criticizes Rusty’s inability to move on, points to the pain his obsession has caused their mother, and speaks to the trauma she and Rachel endured at the hands of their father, reminding him of their bond and the age difference between he and them. She cites an incident when she nearly died of a drug overdose. “What did you do? You sent detectives to the hospital because you were afraid that I was going to die and believed that I had some information about Rachel that I might want to confess in my dying breath.”

Perhaps most notable, though, are Debra’s direct challenges to aspects of Rusty’s own memory, which clearly became part of his narrative long before I met him. “Rachel didn’t teach you to play guitar,” Debra wrote in 1999. “I did. She didn’t even know how. You have an uncontrollable need for things to be the way you need them to be. Not the way they were,” she continued.

Even James’ investigations seem to contradict the angelic image that Rusty has of Rachel. “He has an oddball assessment of Rachel and her character,” James said. Rusty is keen to highlight Debra’s troubling past, but according to James, Renee and especially Rachel were caught up in the same bad crowd. He also said friends of Rachel told him Rachel was having multiple affairs while married to Tommy. “She just made bad, bad decisions.”

Closure and acceptance are two different things.

There can be nobility in the search for truth. But theories don’t always exist in a vacuum. Exploring one can mean putting a greater importance on the value of *What if I’m right?* than on the potential consequences of *What if I’m wrong?*

One afternoon, when I was sitting with Rusty in his living room, he warned me, “This is going to get dark.” He paused, as if unsure whether to go on. What followed was a conversation about Rusty’s father that really only became clear to me over the following months, as more information and context came to light.

Back in her own living room, Langston said of Cotton Arnold, “When he died he didn’t have any brain left. It was full of nothing but tumors.” Rusty nodded

along, but tumors or not, Cotton was a deranged man according to his own son. Rusty can't shake the idea that Cotton had something to do with the girls' disappearances, that he might have been the one behind whatever happened that day, and that he had been putting both of Rusty's sister through hell before December 23, 1974.

Rusty's ability to think that his father was capable of such evil again comes back to alleged claims found by James. "I'm trying to find a way to parse this so it's unbiased," James told me. "Mr. [Cotton] Arnold was really an awful person."

Interviews around the transmission shop led James to determine that Cotton was having numerous relationships with minors. In a 1997 fax to Detective Fortinberry of the Fort Worth Police Department, James cites alleged medical records that said that Rachel was six to eight weeks pregnant not long before she disappeared. James told me that he found no evidence pointing to Cotton's involvement in whatever happened at Seminary South, but didn't sugarcoat what he thought Rachel's father was capable of.

"I don't know that Mr. Arnold necessarily had active involvement in the girls missing," James said. "He had motivation for Rachel to be missing. I think Rachel was pregnant with Mr. Arnold's child when she went missing."

This is a reckless theory to posit without definitive proof. To someone like James, who is no longer working the case, it is only that: a theory. He was responding to my line of questioning with his honest opinion. Still, he may have walked away from the case, but not before that seed was planted in Rusty's mind. As you'd probably guess, Rusty took this idea and started digging. Literally.

This is going to get dark.

On September 24, 2016, three months before I met Rusty and Richard for the first time at the Swiss Pastry Shop, Rusty arrived at Colonial Gardens Cemetery and Mausoleum in Marshall, Texas. He had paid the cemetery approximately \$3,000, and when he showed up to the grave of Raymond "Cotton" Arnold they had already broken ground. Fran Langston had relented to Rusty and given written consent for exhumation of her late husband.

The wooden casket was dilapidated. What was inside barely represented Rusty's father. The body had gone through over 40 years of decomposition. Rusty only needed one bone.

Dana Austin, a forensic anthropologist with the Tarrant County Medical Examiner, accompanied Rusty. She was not working on behalf of her employer and was not compensated for her assistance. She allowed Rusty to pay for gas.

Austin climbed into the casket and removed Cotton's femur. They took it to a building on the cemetery property where Austin sawed off a sample of the bone as Rusty stood watching.

"I had bone dust all over me," Rusty said. "In my hair. In my lungs."

When they returned to the casket Rusty climbed down and personally returned the femur. "I just wanted to do that, because that was my dad," he said.

Rusty needed DNA. He was trying to connect dots that didn't even directly lead

to the disappearances of Rachel, Renee, and Julie. He had heard horrible things about the sexual actions of his father, and he thought he could prove them.

A DNA profile was unable to be obtained because the particular sample of bone taken was degraded, which had been a clear possibility considering the time passed since death. Rusty says he is prepared to go through the entire process of exhuming his father's body again. Austin told me that before assisting Rusty she had a discussion with him about the realistic "value" of such action. She has since had a similar discussion about a second attempt.

When I reminded Rusty that these drastic paths could lead to neither a conviction nor even any sort of proof of what happened to Rachel, Renee, or Julie, he expressed that he just wanted clarity and asked me if I could blame him for that. Clarity, though, is not what tends to come out of Rusty's searches. And any results from a DNA test are likely to only push Rusty further from closure.

Detective Jeremy Rhoden represents the entirety of the Fort Worth Police Department's Cold Case unit. He inherited the position back in March of 2017, including "five Bankers Boxes of information on the case." When he spoke with me in late 2017, he told me that with plenty of cases to investigate he felt he had barely scratched the surface on catching up and piecing together the previous work done on this one.

"So many detectives have actively worked on it," he said. "I don't have one roadmap. I have about seven."

Austin, the medical examiner, told me that over the past 20 years she has worked in tandem with the Fort Worth Police on multiple investigations into the case.

In some sense, Rusty is part of the case himself now. "Every person who worked this case in modern history has dealt with him," said Rhoden, who expressed to me that Rusty was a man who had lost a loved one and, above all else, he sympathized with him for that. "We've talked and we are at a point where we see eye to eye," Rhoden said. "For now."

In late 2018 Rusty orchestrated a team to dive down and pull a car out of Benbrook Lake based on a thin rationale that the girls' bodies might be in the trunk. If it seems like Rusty has been playing detective for most of his adult life it's because he keeps finding intriguing clues that bring him no closer to the truth. Given all the strange circumstances surrounding the case, whatever happened to those girls could very well be as bizarre as one of Rusty's theories. One of his theories might actually be what happened to them.

"The reason that I help Rusty and take his calls is because he is driving this case," Austin told me from the Anthropology Lab of the Tarrant County Medical Examiner's office. "If Rusty wasn't doing this, nothing would be happening on the case."

One of the last things Rusty said to me before the publishing of this story was that he was pursuing another big lead that he wasn't yet at liberty to talk about. He referred to it as the "smoking gun" and assured me I would be writing a follow-up piece. This is not how any reporter would prefer to leave a story. It's not out of cynicism or impatience that I didn't wait out this lead. I think it's more about

accuracy; whenever you're reading this, Rusty Arnold is likely just on the verge of a huge breakthrough in the case that has consumed his life.

Or maybe - hopefully - he's found some closure. If alive, Rachel would be 60 years old today. Renee would be 57. Julie would be 52.

Maybe "True Crime" is a genre to everyone except those who feel they have no choice but to live inside of it. Does that make their stories true crime stories?

My older sister and I grew up in Fort Worth. In 2000, when I was 11-years-old, she was 17.

I don't know how many of Rusty's theories, deep down, he truly believes. I don't believe he's ever intentionally misled me. He almost always provided me with names and phone numbers to follow-up on his claims. His motivation for speaking with me was to publicize his website, MissingTrio.com, in hopes of generating tips or information.

The only thing I'm sure that Rusty believes is that, even 44 years later, someone out there knows something about what happened to Rachel. At some point in my interactions with him I stopped asking myself whether or not I agree with him. Instead, I started wondering, if I did, and she was my sister, would I ever stop looking?



Going Remote

by Matt Crossman



A howling wolf woke Ryan Means. He rolled over inside his tent, miles deep in the Idaho wilderness, and checked on his wife, Rebecca, and daughter, Skyla. They remained asleep. The three of them had spent the previous few days hiking to the single most remote spot in the state – some 17.6 miles from the nearest road, which makes it one of the most remote locations in the United States. The hike that day had covered a long distance, up and down steep terrain littered with loose rocks, and they had collapsed into their sleeping bags, exhausted.

The longer the wolf howled, the more adrenaline pumped into Ryan’s body, the more alert he was. Soon Rebecca stirred awake, too. They listened as one wolf singing solo turned into a choir of who knows how many. They debated waking Skyla and ultimately decided not to. In their journeys to the most remote locations of 35 (and counting) states, Ryan and Rebecca had encountered numerous dangerous animals – the most notable being rattlesnakes and grizzly bears – but those animals flee at the first sign of humans. This was something else. This was a pack of aggressive predators declaring their presence. The howling got louder as the wolves tightened their circle around the Meanses’ tent.

Ryan reached for his gun, a .357 magnum revolver, which he had never needed in weeks spent in the wilderness during Project Remote – a study of the way development has crept into remote areas that he and Rebecca have been conducting for almost a decade. “I didn’t know which would be better – stay huddled in the tent like sitting ducks or step outside and risk getting separated from the girls,” Ryan said. “Not ever having been surrounded by howling wolves, I wasn’t sure what to do.”

Just as suddenly as the howling started, it stopped.

The silence was almost as frightening as the howling, and at first, Ryan didn’t trust it. It would be a brilliant hunting strategy for predators to let their prey think they had left. But eventually it was clear the wolves had fled. As the adrenaline wore off and Ryan drifted back to sleep, he knew he had achieved what Project Remote was all about: A memorable and thrilling sense of being far, far away from it all.

'I had to stand on those coordinates'

It all started with a walk on the beach.

Ryan strolled along the water near his home in Florida about 10 years ago and was distressed at how crowded it was. He started daydreaming about getting away from people and structures and roads.

The daydream quickly became specific and literal. He wanted to find the singular spot in Florida that is quantifiably the farthest from civilization. Rebecca is as much of an outdoors enthusiast as he is, and also happens to be an expert at using mapping software. He knew she'd be able to find the location, and also that she'd go with him to find it. Rebecca quickly identified coordinates within the Everglades – 17 miles from the nearest road – as the most remote location in Florida. "I started salivating on it," Ryan says. "I had to stand on those coordinates. It must have been like that feeling mountaineers get when there's a new summit to climb."

Soon enough, Rebecca, Ryan, and their Skyla, then 6-months old, hiked to that spot and spent the night there. And thus an extraordinary adventure was born. Skyla is 9 now, and the Meanses have traveled to the most remote location in 35 states, with more planned this year, and next, and so on until they notch all 50.

At each location they document what it's like to be there – a qualitative analysis to go along with the quantitative facts of the location. At the start of Project Remote, they hoped the quantitative remoteness would yield qualitative remoteness, too. They wanted the literal remoteness to feel remote. But that hasn't happened.

They have discovered evidence of human existence at every remote location. From South Dakota's location, they could see a road. In Arkansas, noise from a highway kept them awake all night. At New Jersey's most remote spot, they could see the Atlantic City skyline.

Ryan and Rebecca are both scientists and aren't usually emotionally attached to their findings. But in Project Remote, they are. Fire towers, cell phone towers, and litter blot what they hoped would be pristine landscapes. "When we see a beer can, I go, shit, goddamn it, look at that friggin' thing," Ryan says. "I get pissed man, really pissed."

Far away but still so close

When Ryan and Rebecca began the seven-day hike to get to and from Wyoming's most remote spot, they carried 62- and 75-pound backpacks, respectively. (They train extensively to keep themselves in "expedition shape.") Lodge pole and white bark pine forests covered the mountains in front of them. On the first day, they trekked through a controlled burn area; the earth and trees glowed with a scorched beauty. The smell of a camp fire followed them step by step.

Thunderstorms rose and fell, as volatile as they were unpredictable. Their feet pounded through a trail covered with mud and muck. For three and a half days they slogged through Yellowstone National Park, one of five National Parks to

contain a remote spot. Finally, they approached their destination – at 21.6 miles from the nearest road, the farthest on the mainland in the lower 48 (some island locations are farther from a road than that). They got to within a mile of the location and were shocked to see two National Park Service ranger cabins. They had hiked 35.5 miles one way to get there – an enormous expenditure of time and energy to “go remote,” as they call it – and the presence of two structures so close by left them deflated.

Had they erred in picking that spot? No, but the cabins showed the difficulty of defining “remote.” The Meanses debated the best definition to use in the six months between Ryan’s beach epiphany and their visit to Florida’s most remote site. There were numerous factors to consider – roads, population, cell phone coverage, and structures, to name four that are interconnected and often overlap. They eventually settled on “farthest from a road” as their definition.

In Tennessee, the most remote location wound up being just a few steps off of the Appalachian Trail, and thousands of hikers walk that route every year. Even though that spot met the quantifiable definition of remote, to stand there was to be a long way from feeling remote.

That has happened so often it makes both of them mad. They see the lack of qualitative remoteness as proof that society cares more about development than conservation. Which is not to say they don’t still find great joy even when they don’t find great remoteness. When they arrived at the Wyoming coordinates, the two cabins had faded from view. Cabins or no cabins, the vistas inside Yellowstone National Park were inspiring. Ryan, Rebecca, and Skyla posed for a picture – a tradition they have repeated at many remote spots. All three are smiling broadly in it, certain that they were, at that second, the most remote family in the lower 48 states. “This place is one of many national treasures,” Ryan says. “Let’s make sure it stays that way.”

‘A Death Star-like continent covered in asphalt’

One reason the Meanses have struggled to get away from it all is that there’s so much to get away from. The first paved roads were made of rock and built in Mesopotamia more than 6,000 years ago. The Champs-Elysees in Paris was covered with asphalt in 1824. The first concrete road in the United States was a one-mile stretch of Woodward Avenue in Detroit in 1909. The highway system in the United States exploded after that.

Even since the Meanses started Project Remote, the total of miles of roads in the United States has grown at a surprising rate. According to the federal office of highway policy information, there were 8,746,124 miles of roads in the United States in 2016, the last year for which statistics were available. That’s an increase of 168,945 from 2009 – enough to drive round trip from New York to Los Angeles 30 times.

“We need to stop laying down asphalt and concrete – now, yesterday, years ago, actually,” Ryan says. “We’ve got plenty of human structures everywhere. We’re calling for a stop of road building, and even a reduction of roads on the landscape.

We can have our cake and eat it, too. We can utilize roads to get to remaining remote road-less areas. But for god's sakes, if we continue to chop up the landscape at the same rate in this century as we did in the prior century, we're going to be left with a Death Star-like continent covered in asphalt. That's not acceptable."

And roads aren't the only thing Ryan and Rebecca are trying to get away from. There's Twitter and the people on it who hate Donald Trump, and Facebook and the people on it who love him. Calls, texts, emails, voicemails, whatever. Just as development has crept into our wilderness areas, technology has invaded every aspect of our lives. We use our phones in the bathroom, check notifications immediately after waking up and feel our phones buzzing in our pockets even when they're not in there.

They lament the fact that at 60 percent of the remote spots, they had cell coverage. They turn FOMO – fear of missing out – on its head. The acronym comes from the belief that being disconnected means a person will miss something big and important. The Meanses see it the other way around – being connected means they might miss the numinous and sublime, whether that's wolves howling in Idaho, Skyla's joyful singing on a trail in Colorado, or a pod of gray seals in Massachusetts.

Ryan and Rebecca are not anti-technology. They see the irony in using sophisticated machines to enable themselves to get far away from those sophisticated machines. But they push back against the cultural expectations of 24/7 connectivity. That's an increasingly unusual position, as the writer Sherry Turkle points out in "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other." "People say that the loss of a cell phone can 'feel like a death,'" Turkle writes. "Whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift."

But Ryan and Rebecca feel most alive when their phones stop working. The Meanses' views are so counter-cultural in rejecting the allure of permanent connectivity that their friends sometimes don't understand that they are serious about it. "We've had so many people telling us, oh, you need to tweet while you're on an expedition, or you need to post on Facebook while you're doing this," Rebecca says. "We're like, no, we don't want to do that. We don't want to make a podcast while we're out there. We're out there for a reason. And while we may get more followers or supporters or whatever if we did that, it defeats the whole purpose of what we're doing."

Education trumps danger

The quiet of the wolves in Idaho turned out to be just that – quiet. They left to do whatever wolves do after they've howled the night away. Ryan recounted the experience in an online journal, as he has for most of their journeys. They plan to write a book, and the videos they have posted on their website and on YouTube feel like the first draft of a documentary. "We've had quite a few media companies talk to us about doing a TV show," Rebecca says. "Every single one of them wants to talk about the danger of what we're doing. We told them, we will not do something that talks about how dangerous going outside is."

Which is not to say there is zero danger. They know they could get mauled by a bear or bitten by a rattlesnake or fall off a ridge ... “Or we could get in a car accident on the way there, which is more likely,” Rebecca says.

They see the danger as minimal, a small part of a broader whole, and that education, not avoiding the outdoors, is the solution.

In New Mexico, Ryan spotted a rattlesnake under a bush. He’s a herpetologist, so he knew that it wasn’t dangerous if treated properly. He knew it was perfectly safe to pick it up with his hiking poles. Using them like giant chopsticks, he held the snake aloft and showed it to Rebecca, who filmed the encounter on her phone. When Ryan stepped toward her to allow her to get a better shot, she laughed and backed away.

“If you have no experience in the outdoors, then you’re probably going to fear it,” Ryan says. “Part of what we’re doing is trying to inspire people to get their children outdoors. Start them young and grow them up as people who are connected to and proficient in the outdoors. That, and only that, will breed another generation of people who care and who aren’t overly fearful about the outdoors.”

Paving Noah’s Ark

A study by the National Academy of Sciences analyzed housing development in and near protected areas from 1940 through 2000. In that time, 28 million housing units were built within 50 kilometers of protected areas, and another 940,000 were built within national forests. New housing near protected areas grew faster than the national average, and if those numbers continue, another 17 million units will be built within 50 kilometers of protected areas by 2030. “Our findings show that housing development in the United States may severely limit the ability of protected areas to function as a modern ‘Noah’s Ark,’” the study said.

True as that may be, the Meanses still have catalogued numerous encounters with animals they wouldn’t otherwise see. In a 10-day hike to and from Montana’s most remote location, they saw a western species of garter snake, a mountain goat (a first), a bear far off and another up close. They also photographed a larval-tailed frog (*Ascaphus truei*) – the only frog with a tail (another first). They encountered many travelers on horseback, which would have been OK except for what the horses left behind.

Rebecca turned 40 the day they arrived at their base camp a few miles from Rampart Mountain (site of the remote spot), and they celebrated with a dinner of caribou stew. They woke up the next morning eager to ascend to the 7,789-foot peak and then climb another 500 feet down the other side to reach their spot. But Skyla got sick, vomiting inside the tent and out. She recovered after a late morning nap in the sun, and the family decided to try to reach the remote spot, even with the late start.

The average remote spot is just over a mile away from the nearest trail. That doesn’t sound like much but covering the same distance off of a trail takes twice as long as it does on a trail. The route they plotted to get to Montana’s remote spot required a 2,300-foot ascension without a trail – as arduous a stretch of hiking as

they completed in all of Project Remote.

Wary of getting lost in dark, Ryan and Rebecca set a turnaround time of 4 p.m., and when that arrived, they were still nearly a mile from the spot. They reluctantly gave up and headed back to base camp. As they trudged down Rampart Mountain, their quads and knees burned from the stress of going downhill. But they remained hopeful that they'd have better luck the next day.

They woke up refreshed. They re-assessed the route from base camp to the remote spot and opted for a new one – it was easier but longer. When the cutoff time approached, they were short of their goal, again. But they didn't have another day to give up, so they kept going. Finally, they reached the top of the mountain, where they made an unusual decision: Ryan would descend the 500 feet to the spot alone. It took him 20 minutes to get down, 20 minutes to do the remote spot assessment and 20 minutes to get back up.

That put them more than an hour past their deadline, and darkness was coming.

Still, they paused to revel in the surroundings. Green mountains rolled in front of them like deep ocean waves. Splotches of dark brown and black revealed where long dead fires had feasted. A new wildfire, stoked by the arid air, erupted below them. Fires often are a good thing for forests, and in this case served as evidence that nature takes good care of itself. "These are the places that we must preserve forever if we, as a nation, are going to save something natural, wild and free for future generations," Ryan wrote in his journal.

Finally, they began the long hike back to base camp. It was almost, but not quite, dark when they made it there. They slept straight through until morning.



Endlessly

by Daniel Garcia



He isn't going to answer, but I knock and swallow the sob in my throat anyway. His apartment building, like all the others in the complex, has a staircase at the front and back of the second floor. I take the back steps one at a time, until I see the grassy wetness just past the concrete. I want to see his face.

At the back of the building, I look up to his balcony. The night air presses tight to my face. Tiny beads of sweat form on my arms. I walk to the wall, smoothing my fingers against the jagged beige. I don't know anything about climbing a building, but I curl my fingers and lift my legs.

It was still summer when I met him my first fall semester of college. I hadn't yet declared a concentration for my English degree, as I'd just turned 18 and didn't know what I wanted to study. I was with friends when my brother introduced us, and I don't remember who said hello first, me or him, but his eyes were shifty and brown and flat. He was majoring in math, he said.

Later, when everyone split, and I started to leave for my dorm, he called my name. "Daniel." I spun to look at him, the two of us in the hallway, and he came over to me, taking me in his arms. *Oh*, I thought, a shiver passing through my ribs. I'd never been held like that before. I didn't know how it would be, feeling safe in another man's arms.

Some astronomical theories suggest the possibility of a multiverse, rather than a single one. One idea attributes this to universal pockets that are, at different points in space, expanding into forever. While farfetched, some even believe the same events in this universe repeat in others.

After the semester ended, I texted him during winter break, asking if he wanted to come pick my brother and I up from our house to hang out; we had plans to meet with other friends after. I still didn't know him all that well, but I wanted to see him.

His apartment, barely larger than an efficiency space, had papers and empty wine bags strewn across the living room. There was a guitar in one corner. The kitchen was covered in dishes and dried coffee stains. Some of the long white slats

shading the balcony/patio door were torn and gray; a half-crushed Chinese paper lantern slept by the couch, one of its circular wires mangled. The lantern seemed sad, so I looked away.

Later, I sat on the edge of his bed and gently shook his shoulder; he'd taken a nap and asked me to wake him. I kept the lights off, and I looked down at his sleeping face, his tousled brown spikes. I wanted to fit myself to his side and rest my head on his shoulder. I wanted to wrap one leg around his, press my hand to the center of his chest to feel his heartbeat, as if to say *there you are*. I did none of those things. As soon as he woke up, my brother, who'd stepped outside to make a phone call, came back in. The outside light spread into the apartment, spilling across the floor. We looked at each other through the half-darkness, and my brother called for me, saying we had to go.

Outside, he and my brother shared a one-armed hug, and I pushed my face into his chest when he slid his arms around me. As we walked away from his apartment building, my brother warned me not to get too close. "Be careful," he said.

I've always been fascinated by the story of Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the sun and died after his wax and feather wings melted away. I think of his father's warning, and how Icarus forgot, not because he was careless, but that he was so in love with flying over the ocean he couldn't see how close, how bright the sun was; he couldn't feel the sting of wax melting on his arms.

Winter broke a few weeks into the spring semester, and the sun slid into every corner of campus, swelling the leaves in all the trees into emeralds. It felt like summer when I ran into him. I called his name, and I told myself the passing shiver when he smiled was from the breeze, nothing more. I didn't have a class for a few hours, and I went with him to one of the smaller libraries on campus.

Inside, we wandered through yellow-painted metal until we sat down between two shelves. He opened a book he'd found on African art, flipping to a picture of a tribal mask. I thought it was spooky-looking and told him so. He asked, "Do you think it's ugly? I think it's art."

I replied, "Well, it's not that I don't think it's art. Like, I can respect that someone put a lot of time into making this thing and that someone else will think it's beautiful, but I just don't like how it looks aesthetically." I told him my brother suspected us of having a thing, and he said, turning the page, "We don't." I said, "I know, but my brother is weird like that." He said, "I'm not gay."

I wanted to hide my face in the red and white plaid of his shirt, so I leaned my head against his shoulder, looking down at his gray sweatpants. He was so warm. Then he twisted his torso, planted his hands against my shoulders, and shoved me away.

There wasn't anything traditional about him and me. He never picked me up and took me out for dinner and a movie. We texted each other every so often, but we

never lived together or had arguments the way couples do. We touched each other, but we never made love. I told myself this was enough for me.

Some weeks after he pushed me, we made plans to hang out in the art building after classes were done for the day. He'd already been drinking by the time I got there, but when he saw me, he rushed down the brick hall on steady legs, and scooped me up. Laughter spilled from me as he spun us around and around, until his pale skin bled into the soft brown, until he stumbled, and we were a pile of limbs. I don't remember if he fell between my legs or if I landed on his chest, but he looked so handsome. He leaned in, and I could taste the wine on his lips.

Later, when campus was still blue with sunset, he ditched me to see if a nearby student event had any alcohol, the outside sky oozing to black.

Aside from our own solar system, there isn't much proof of other life in the universe, though a few planets brim with the possibility of sustained life some light years away. Because of this, I like to think, in some pocket of the cosmos, a bud springs from dusty soil, and blooms into a flower.

Before, he visited me at work once. I walked around the counter, and there he was: He took me into his arms and kissed the hair on the side of my head, just below the edges of my work hat. I didn't grab his hand, but I held onto hope.

A few weeks later, we ended up inside one of the on-campus music annexes with all the student practice rooms. Since it was getting later in the evening, we trekked to the third floor, not wanting to be bothered by any of the nighttime custodial staff. We went into a practice room, letting the light from the hallway filter through the window on the door. I thought he would make love to me.

I knew something wasn't right when he tried getting me to try the wine he'd brought with him. I told him I didn't drink; I told him about my father's long addiction to alcohol. He told me his mother molested him as a child. I reached for him, and he slapped me. He sexually assaulted me after that. He didn't rape me, but his hands were all over. I think I tried to push him off. I mostly remember his hot breath, crooning: "Mommy loves you, Mommy loves you, Mommy loves you."

Be grateful, I remember telling myself. Be grateful for whatever you can get.

After, when he came to see me at work, a heaving thing rose when I saw him: *Run, sweet boy. Get away from him.* I didn't understand the impulse, because I didn't yet understand the enormity of what he'd done to me, but I listened. I disappeared from the front counter, rushing past the Chick-fil-A fryers to the employee bathroom, where I couldn't hear the sizzle of the peanut oil cauterizing the floured mounds of flesh into something consumable.

The practice room, only slightly bigger than a bathroom stall, smelled stale.

He cried when I tried to leave. I wanted to hold him. He looked so sad. He took a swallow from his Dasani bottle. "Please stay with me." He sounded so earnest. I wanted to run screaming from him. It wasn't until I threatened to call the police that he let me go.

Sometimes, I wish it'd been worse; if I'd been raped, maybe I wouldn't have stayed in that room so long. Maybe I would have given up on him sooner.

When I called him out for hitting me, he said, "That's not my fault. That's just human collision."¹

My three most recent Google searches:

1. do roses grow in the ocean
2. lists of things that give people hope
3. what is an abusive relationship

A few months after the new year, I started seeing an on-campus therapist. At the time, the university only offered eight free sessions per year, so when that ended, I saw a new therapist at a different clinic, one that saw both students and the general community. We talked about my issues with my father, my depression, my history of eating and throwing up. I'd blocked his number after the assault, so I didn't hear from him at all. I told myself I was done. I told myself it was for the best.

That same summer, I got myself an apartment. I'd taken over someone's lease in the same complex he'd lived in when I was a freshman. It'd been so long since, I figured he probably moved. A few days after we ran into each other on the bus that went by our division, I unblocked his number. When I called, he gave me his building and apartment number, and I walked over. I knocked, and he answered, naked, eyes glazed over. He didn't smell bad; I just couldn't stand the stale wine on his breath. Inside, I got him to brush his teeth, though not before he tried to stick his toothbrush in his ass.

The following summer, my therapist's practicum ended, so she transferred me to a peer of hers. A tall woman, she led me to a room with soft blue walls, and for our first session, we discussed what I'd like to work on in therapy. I said, "I'm a sexual assault survivor. I'd like to work on that." It wasn't the first time I'd used *survivor*, but she seemed sad, so I looked away.

Months later, I told her, "I miss him." She asked, "What is it about him that you miss?" I said, "His arms. His hands, his smile. Everything."

In his bedroom, the lightbulb, likely burnt out, didn't have a small glass dome covering it. Instead, the only light came from the adjoining bathroom. Soft music played from a shattered cell phone on his bed. He took my hands, and our feet

swayed across the hardwood. He kissed my neck. He spun me in his arms, and when my back was to his chest, he raped me with his fingers. It wasn't violent. I looked at the wall on the other side of the room. The light swelled into a small sun.

If this theory of the multiverse holds true, I hope there's another version of myself somewhere. I hope whatever version of me out there was smarter. I hope that boy's love wasn't as abiding as mine. I hope that boy found someone else. I hope I am somewhere on another planet, holding a love that doesn't hurt. I hope, in a different time and place, he and I find each other again.

In his bed, I fitted myself to his side, curling a leg over one of his. I lifted my head up from his shoulder. I missed the spikes he used to have.² We didn't make love. When I smoothed his hair back, he said, "I'm like, 30-percent gay." I kissed him anyway, tasting mint and wine.

When I think of Icarus / I think of the parts left out / of the story / Icarus must've thought / *How could I ever be without you this close* / with all that orange / and yellow / shining / endlessly / he must've reached for that cruel / celestial body / realized too late / as he pitched through the clouds / wings ripping off / in sheets / the wind shredding his cheeks / did he fall in / legs first / or / face down / or / ribs and legs / fractured against the thirsty ocean's mouth / what swallowed him first / the drowning / or / the cold / feeling / of *not this / not this* / never to be warm / again.

After I kissed him, we sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. I watched him rummage under his nightstand, until he found a glass bowl, sleeping behind a few empty wine boxes. Grabbing a stray bag, he pulled the plastic nozzle. It wasn't until he pitched the bowl to his lips that I realized it wasn't a glass bowl at all - it was the glass covering for his ceiling lightbulb. He turned back to look at me, and when I saw the red dripping from the sides of his mouth, I knew I had to leave. *I'm done*, I told myself. *Never again. I'm done.*

The wine looked far too much like blood.³

I wasn't done. I went back after the rape, night after night, pounding on his door, waiting for him to answer. I wanted to go back to his arms, strong and spinning, before his legs collapsed. I did this for weeks.

"But what is it about his hands, or his smile?" The therapist asked, flippant. "Other people smile or have hands. What is it about him specifically?" The hurt must've shone on my face, because she said, softer, "It's important to remember that sometimes we should just call things what they are. I think with the magnitude to which you use language, it can be a prison in itself."

For months, it will feel like I am wrong for missing him. The prison, of course, was this: I didn't know what I would do without him, and I didn't want to start over. I looked away.

Sometimes, I wake up and imagine he is under the sheets with me, and sometimes I imagine ripping off his hands and carving my name into his back, just so he remembers every awful thing he did to me. Even if he begged me to stay with him, even if he promised to change, to stop drinking, I don't think I could forget his vampire mouth, the red falling off at the corners.

If anything, life after an abusive relationship, however one-sided, is a slow and sad meander toward something different: It is small steps after the fall, when your legs are still shaky, and you have no idea who you are without them, and tearful phone calls to the domestic violence hotline when the grief is too much to bear alone. It is long walks during summer, and emergency appointments with good therapists that want to see you get better, and dinner with even better friends. It is sunrises and sex without flashbacks. Roses blooming in winter. Memories of hands that do not have power over you anymore.

It doesn't get better. Until it gets better.

In another universe, he answers the door. *There you are*, he says. Mornings, he stands behind me, his hands warm on my waist. He leans down to the crook of my shoulder for a moment, then he lifts his head. His eyes are soft with sleep when he tells me I am beautiful, and I believe him. A shiver passes through me. Toothbrush between my teeth, I grin at him in the mirror, my mouth dripping in minty foam. *There you are*, I say, and he knows I love him.

When he comes home for the day, he leaves his shoes by the door, and I take his hands. He's no good at it, but he knows I love to dance. It is still summer. We spin for a lifetime. Sunset passes through the window, and the room is lit with blue and yellow and orange and pink and flourish and tomorrow and yesterday's sheets. Each day, he continues to choose me. He kisses my hair, still. The edge of his balcony is so close.

I sob when the wall in front of my eyes turns to gray. My arms start to burn. In another universe, there is another him, there is another me, and we grow old together.

In this universe, I let go.

I always let go.

¹gaslight

/gaslīt/

verb: to psychologically manipulate and confuse another person into questioning their own sanity.

²In season 2 of *BoJack Horseman*, Wanda Pierce asks, “What happened [to us], BoJack?” And he says, “Same thing that always happens: You didn’t know me. Then you fell in love with me. And now you know me.” And she says, “You know, it’s funny: When you look at someone through rose-colored glasses, all the red flags just look like flags.”

³To swallow the thorns.



No Condor Falls Unnoticed

by *Christine Heinrichs*



Condor 703 landed heavily on the California grasslands. He took a step, then shook his feathers. The ruff around his neck fluffed into place, below his naked black head. The turkey vultures tearing at the dead deer flapped their wings, startled at his arrival. They backed away. As 703 hopped over to the carrion, the vultures turned and flew off. Condors are used to fighting other animals for food. They aren't easily spooked.

Big game remains, such as deer and feral pig gut piles, and dead varmints, such as coyotes and ground squirrels, are good food for a young condor. What 703 couldn't know, the turkey vultures and coyotes didn't know, none of them could tell, was that they were also eating poison that would kill them.

The poison wasn't set out for them. The deer or pig was shot by a hunter, getting meat to fill his freezer. The coyotes and ground squirrels are often shot by ranchers, killing the varmints that compete with their cattle on the range. Maybe they didn't know they were spreading poison, killing the wildlife on the land. But it was there, in the gut pile, in the squirrel, waiting for the next level of the food network to consume it and die.

After years of effort to claw condors back from the brink of extinction, dedicated biologists' and wildlife experts' uncountable hours fretting over eggs and chicks, even using hand puppets to nurture each precious chick to maturity, all to rescue America's largest bird – introducing birds back to their wild habitat might yet fail. The land itself, their habitat for thousands of years, is poisoning them.

Expanding condor range

703 was one of the first group of seven young condors released on a ranch in San Simeon, 30 miles south of Ventana Wildlife Society's flight pen in Big Sur, in 2015.

He was moved from Idaho to the flight cage in September 2015 to prepare him for his new life in the wild. He, two other males and one female, were released to fly free for the first time in November. Five more were released in November 2016 and four more in November 2017.

Condor 703 came to California from the World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, where he was hatched in November 2013. His parents, 97 and 48, raised him there. He grew into his 9-and-a-half-foot wings. He was transferred to Ventana Wildlife Society's release pen in San Simeon, where he would spend a few weeks acclimating to his new home.

Like all condors, he got a wing tag identifying him, green for his 700 series cohort, showing only the two digits, 03, that identify him as an individual. Anyone who saw him could have reported the sighting to VWS, one of the nonprofit organizations working for condor recovery.

Although it's customary to give wildlife numbers rather than names, captive-raised condors get names, too. 703 was named Hades, after the Greek god of the underworld, The Unseen One, for his preference for perching in places beyond the view of the biologists. He had an especially luxurious ruff around his neck, "reminiscent of his namesake's cloak of darkness," according to his profile in MyCondor.org.

At 3 years old, 703 was still a juvenile, black all over, his feathers, his featherless head and the ruff of feathers around his neck. As an adult, the skin on his head would become pink and orange. Condors grow into full adult plumage and sexual maturity when they are between 5 and 7 years old. He was about as big as he would have grown, weighing between 17 and 22 pounds, standing 24 to 28 inches tall.

As a chick, 703 had to learn the lessons of the School of Hard Knocks in captivity, rather than in the wild, where he'd either succeed or die. Like all captive-raised condors, he had to be physically strong enough to survive in the wild. Condors are intelligent, but have to learn from other condors to get by. They have to master enough food and social skills to make their way. They have to avoid manmade hazards evolution didn't prepare them for, like power lines. To avoid landing on them and being electrocuted, their keepers give them aversion training. They get nonlethal shocks when they land on mock power poles in their flight cage.

Their human keepers have to be discreet, keeping themselves concealed or simply far away from the birds in captivity, so that the condors don't get used to being around people. A tame condor spending time around people won't survive.

Back in the 1990s, some landed on rooftops and decks. In one case, eight young condors got into a house through a hole they ripped in a screen door. They were tearing up a mattress when the owner walked in on them. One condor had a pair of underwear hanging from its beak. Condors need to stay wild.

They can learn to find food, stay away from people and power lines, get along with other condors. But there is no way to learn not to eat lead.

The poison that keeps on killing

Lead ammunition is the silent killer that stalks condors – and eagles, and vultures, and ravens, and crows, and coyotes, all wildlife that scavenges on the remains left behind. Under normal circumstances, these animals are all part of the circle of life, consuming the dead, endlessly recycling the nutrients in their bodies.

Lead, a heavy metal, is the marauder on the landscape. It has no role in biological systems. It maims and kills. The condors are up against it.

Back in the day

On a different day, under California's sunbright blue-white sky, a condor glides, light on the updraft. The grass-green hills of winter dry out to golden as summer days go by. The craggy rocks of the mountains are beyond human reach. The urban megalopolises of Los Angeles and San Francisco are so distant, they might be on another planet. Forests of pine and redwood rise over the coastline. It's a world of blue ocean, rocky coastline meeting cliffs rising straight up from the beach into the dark forest. Condors range free.

"I was always drawn to the West, where the mountains are big and grand, all the open space," said Joseph Brandt, supervisory wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) California Condor Recovery Program at Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura County, who got involved with condors five years ago. He grew up in New York State, where he still returns to hunt white-tail deer. Condor conservation people are as much at home in that rugged landscape as the condors.

As the bird swoops lower, I imagine stitching its wingspread in needlepoint. At the Monterey County turnout on Highway 1 in Big Sur, a mosaic depicts a life-size condor. Condors have caught our imagination and inspired art for centuries. Native Americans carved that outline into totem poles in the Pacific Northwest, etched it on rocks from the edge of the East Coast, across the Midwest, and over the Rockies.

Hundreds, thousands of years ago, condors ranged across North America. Their iconic silhouette was the inspiration for Native American Thunderbird myths. Thunder rolled out as they flapped their wings.

By the middle of the 20th century, condors had declined to a small population living in California's coastal mountains. They nested there, foraging for food out in the vast San Joaquin Valley. Their historic range, from the Sierra Nevada to the Santa Lucia and other coastal mountains and the broad valley between, by then was mostly empty of condors.

The landscape that was wide open habitat in the past disappeared under housing developments and industrial farms. Poachers shot them in the forests that remained. Early homesteaders, seeing them feasting on dead cattle, concluded that the birds had killed their cows, and campaigned against them as vermin. Collectors scaled cliffs to steal their eggs. Poisoned bait set out for grizzlies and other large predators killed many condors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The poison that killed the grizzlies went on to kill the condors that ate the grizzly remains. Electric power lines electrocuted birds that flew into them. By the 1980s, they were all but extinct.

Saved from the brink

Wildlife observers watched the gathering doom with horror. In 1985, when only nine wild condors remained still living in California, they advanced a plan. The USFWS and several nonprofit organizations determined to save the species, *Gymnogyps californianus*, by catching them all. They took the unusual, and controversial, step of capturing all wild condors and bringing them into a captive breeding program, before it was too late and they were gone for good. Extinction is forever.

The last wild condor was captured in 1987. The total population then was 27 condors.

Against all odds and much criticism, the program succeeded. The Los Angeles Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park had the space and expertise to manage the program. Teams of wildlife biologists and research technicians were assembled to care for the birds and their chicks. They learned by doing, even puppet-rearing some, using hand puppets to feed chicks, to avoid letting them imprint on humans.

The birds mated, laid eggs, and hatched chicks. Just getting wild birds that far was an accomplishment. By 1992, the project had enough captive condors to begin releasing them to their wild habitat. They seemed to be doing fine. Except, they died. The cause of death was apparent for those that flew into electric lines, but the rest just sickened and died. That was when the secret killer was discovered: lead.

How to feed a condor

Condors don't ever kill anything. Their Andean cousins may, but California condors are called obligate scavengers: they have to wait until something is dead. With sharp vision, they gaze down from hundreds of feet in the air, watching for eagles, turkey vultures, gulls, coyotes, bears, and other carnivores gathering around a carcass. They swoop down to chase away lesser critters and feast.

In the distant past, that meant animals like mastodons that were killed by other predators or died on the landscape. Today, it means deer and feral pig gut piles left by hunters in the field. It's the ground squirrels, coyotes and other vermin shot by ranchers. It's all great food for condors – except when the critters are shot with lead. Inevitably, condors eat the lead along with the carrion.

Toxic lead

Lead has been recognized as a poison to all living things for centuries. Romans 2,000 years ago cautioned against drinking water that flowed through lead pipes. Lead can reduce children's IQ and damage their learning and memory abilities. In adults, lead can cause brain, kidney, and cardiovascular damage. Nevertheless, during the 20th century it was a common ingredient in paint and gasoline, becoming pervasive in American life.

As evidence of its toxicity mounted, federal laws were passed to reduce human exposure to lead. In the 1970s, it was banned from paint. In the 1990s, it was banned from gasoline. Recent lawsuits are still cleaning up lead paint from housing. Flint, Michigan's, water supply is coping with lead.

Lead bullets shatter when they hit the target, scattering bits of lead throughout the meat. There is no safe level of lead, for humans or animals. Other birds and animals are poisoned by the lead, too: bald eagles, golden eagles, ravens, magpies, any animal consuming the lead.

The condor population is hit harder than other species because their reproduction rate is so low. Condors lay only one egg every two years. Parents work together to rear a single chick for over a year, to launch the next generation. Condors are smart, and have a lot to learn. Their natural lifespan is long, as much as 60 years.

Lead toxicity was recognized as a problem for wildlife years ago. Lead shot was banned from waterfowl hunting in 1991. Although some hunters were initially reluctant, the switch from lead to steel shot has helped: fewer ducks are dying from lead poisoning.

Condor social life

Condors have complicated social hierarchies. It's the order that dictates who eats first and who eats next. That helps them sort out the crowds around carcasses they feed on. When the condor arrives, he chases the other animals off, and gets feeding rights for himself and the rest of the flock. But each has to take its turn.

Releasing birds that have spent their entire lives protected in cages into the wild to manage on their own requires planning and support. To acclimate them, they are transferred into a flight cage for six weeks before they are set free. That gives them time to adjust to their surroundings, and to meet the other condors in the flock.

Support teams set out food near the flight cage under cover of darkness. In Big Sur, that's stillborn calves, free of any chemicals or medication. Local dairies donate the carcasses, and biologists carry them up to the remote flight cage. It keeps the wild birds coming around, without associating the food with people. The carrion placed at the release sites attracts other condors, so the newly released birds can become part of the larger flock. Watch it on Condorcam, ventanaws.org/condor_cam/.

Social life, the condor hierarchy, is important to condors. Each one knows where he or she stands in relation to the others. The young condors are released in groups, already knowing where they stand in relation to each other.

Fall is the best time to release them, when it's cooler, with fewer thermal updrafts. Less favorable flying conditions encourage the newly released young condors to stay close to the release site, where they can find food and water.

Tracking where they fly

Technology helps field teams follow them. All condors are fitted with radio transmitters. Some condors also have tracking devices attached to the flexible fold of skin between the body and the wing or affixed to a tail feather. The radio transmitters are small, weighing less than two ounces, and can transmit signals as

much as 20 miles. Some condors are also fitted with wing-mounted GPS satellite transmitters. They operate on solar power and report GPS locations, including coordinates, speed, heading, and elevation. They are capable of collecting a bird's location as often as every minute, collecting literally millions of data points. The data are transmitted via satellite or over a cellular network. The accumulated data points, mapped out, allow the condor team to study individual flight paths.

Condor conservation team members follow up on GPS and radio signals for "ground truthing," verifying what's going on where the condors are. They may be feeding on carrion that hasn't been provided by the team, a potential source of lead. Dead condors need to be collected and necropsied, examined to determine the cause of death. No condor falls unnoticed.

Condors pair up to nest and raise their chicks. Although it's said that they mate for life, that's not exactly true. The detailed observations made possible by having every condor tagged tell a different story of relationships. Males can be competitive, and females may be lured away by a more dominant male.

"With the help of transmitters, we now know more about their hierarchies," said Joe Burnett, Senior Wildlife Biologist and Condor Program Manager for the Ventana Wildlife Society. "It's not as romantic as it has been depicted. They are only as loyal as your rank. It's more like the Mafia."

Attracting the newly released condors to return to the flight cage helps the team confirm they are adjusting well to life in the wild.

"We're like worried parents," said Burnett. "It's a relief every time they make it back."

Occasionally, a young bird doesn't find its way back. It may be intimidated by senior condors, and be reluctant to return to find a place in the hierarchy. Condor social relations can be brutal. When that happens, the team will track it down using the GPS tracking, recapture it, and return it to the release site. "It's part of the release of any animal," he said.

Contaminated food

Condors can't escape lead contamination in their food, though. California is at the forefront of non-lead ammunition legislation. Conservation workers are looking for the balance between making laws against it and encouraging voluntary compliance. Hunters have a historic legacy of conservation, a strength that could influence the next generation of hunters.

Changes in California law are working toward cleaning lead up. The Ridley-Tree Condor Conservation Act (2008) regulates lead ammunition, and California Assembly Bill 711 set the limit on lead ammo. The California Fish and Game Commission set the phase-in of non-lead ammo to eliminate lead ammo (except at the shooting range) by July 1, 2019. Proposition 63, the Safety for All Act, took effect January 1. Intended to make ammunition sales face-to-face, like gun sales, it prohibits ammunition from being sold directly to customers over the internet. Ammunition has to be delivered to a licensed gun dealer, where the purchaser can then pick it up after a background check. The Department of Justice is preparing

standards to guide ammunition purchasers and dealers. The new law created some unintended hurdles for non-lead outreach programs.

“The people who wrote up this law were not thinking of me,” said Russel Kuhlman, Non-Lead Ammunition Outreach Coordinator for the Institute for Wildlife Studies. “It was designed for people who are stockpiling ammunition, but it’s also affecting conservation work. I have feet on both sides of the line.”

Ventana Wildlife Society has adjusted to the new law by offering free non-lead ammunition to hunters and ranchers, who then have to pick it up themselves, in that face-to-face encounter that allows for a background check.

Staying with lead

Anthony Prieto is a Santa Barbara hunter on a mission to get his fellow hunters to change to non-lead ammo. For rifles, that means copper. Shotgun ammo can be other metals, such as steel or titanium.

He makes the point that hunters who wouldn’t allow their children to play with a lead-based painted toy bring lead-laced meat home to their families, if they are hunting with lead ammunition.

His experience with copper ammo is that, in the field, it’s more accurate and deadly than lead. The game drops dead in its tracks. The carcass is cleaner, and trophies undamaged.

“It’s a no-brainer,” Prieto said. “But I’ve heard every reason on the planet not to change: Lead is better, they are too old to change. It’s such a simple step, but we are dealing with complicated people.”

Using non-lead ammunition requires hunters to adapt their shooting technique. Copper is lighter, and has different characteristics from lead.

“Copper ammunition shoots a littler lighter, a little higher,” Prieto said. “The first mule deer I shot was jumping over a log. I saw a puff of smoke, and he was dead right there. When I shot my first elk, it was dead before it hit the ground. I’m really sold on it, how efficient and humane and accurate the kill was.”

Kuhlman explains the difficulty with an analogy: “It’s as if I told someone they have to use a spoon instead of a knife to eat peanut butter because it’s affecting mice,” he said. “It’s hard when you aren’t seeing it first-hand.”

The pathway lead takes through wildlife isn’t as direct as it is in waterfowl, where the birds are shot with it. Hunters and ranchers aren’t shooting condors and bald eagles.

“They ask me, ‘How are my bullets getting into eagles when I’m shooting ground squirrels?’” he said.

Making the change

Wildlife biologists like Brandt and Kuhlman are hunters as well as conservationists. They work both sides of the issue. Kuhlman got a new .280 Akley

Improved rifle for hunting bear and mule deer last year. He came back empty, but that's hunting. He did better with his 7 mm Remington Magnum, getting a mule deer and a feral hog. He got another hog with his .270 Winchester, and a deer with his .50-caliber muzzleloader.

"It's easy to justify buying a new rifle when your job is testing bullets," he said.

Hunters accuse non-lead ammunition of being less accurate. Prieto, Kuhlmann, and Brandt haven't found that, after they adjusted to using it.

Brandt, who still hunts with the Remington Bushmaster 30-06 his father gave him back East and a Mossberg 12-gauge pump action he's had since he was 12, learned about the ballistics of ammunition as an adult.

"As a hunter growing up, you don't learn the specifics of ballistics," he said. "It's been neat to learn the whole science behind that. It helped me as a hunter to understand the tool."

Ammunition ranchers use to shoot varmints is more subject to the criticism of being less accurate. The .22-caliber copper is so small and light, wind can blow it off target. If .22-caliber copper ammunition isn't readily available, Burnett recommends using .17-caliber Hornady Magnum Rimfire. It performs as well as its lead counterpart and gun shops often carry it.

"I've personally used non-lead .22 ammunition to hunt ground squirrels," said Kuhlman. "At 50 yards, the accuracy is better. At 100 yards, there's no comparison. The lighter non-lead ammunition flies all over the place."

Copper ammunition isn't readily available. The CCI Copper-22 that is certified for use in the condor range was found on the shelf in only half the gun shops VWS recently surveyed. As demand increases, more gun shops will probably carry it.

Ranchers who shoot ground squirrels and coyotes don't eat what they shoot, but using copper ammo still makes sense for stewardship of their land. Costs of copper and lead ammunition are now comparable.

A slow, painful death

The people who work with condors know lead toxicity when they see it. The first sign may be a senior bird being picked on by younger birds. That wouldn't happen if the older bird were strong.

"We notice, when a dominant 10-year-old bird is getting picked on by 2-year-olds," said Burnett.

The lead causes paralysis, gradually affecting their legs. Their involuntary muscles can't work, so their digestion stops working. They can't digest food or absorb water. They are starving, even if their crops are full. They are desperate for water. Their crops are paralyzed, and can't process food. They eat and drink, but nothing will pass through the crop down to the stomach.

They soldier on, though, evading the biologists who can offer treatment.

"We can't magically catch them," Burnett said. "They are wild animals. It takes a bit of luck to catch them. Ultimately, many times we don't get to them until it's too late."

By then, they smell putrid from the food they have eaten that remains, undigested but rotting, in their crop. Their crops are bloated with water they drink, but still they die of thirst. Burnett often finds them sitting next to a creek or cattle trough.

“It’s a slow, debilitating death that can happen in a week or take a month,” he said.

Treatment

Field teams attempt to catch every condor at least once a year, to take blood samples and test for lead. They test one sample in the field, using a portable lead analyzer. Two other samples are sent for further testing, to the University of California at Davis for concentration and to the Microbiology and Environmental Toxicology Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for lead isotope analysis. Any birds with high lead levels are taken to the Oakland Zoo or the LA Zoo for treatment. There, they are injected with a chelating agent once a day until the lead has been removed from their blood circulation, and they can be returned to their wild home.

Treatment isn’t always successful. “Their efforts are heroic,” Burnett said, “but lead is lead.”

Expanding the range

California condors are making progress. The three small flocks that had been separate are now considered a single Central California flock. Individuals travel freely across the entire area, from San Jose to Los Angeles, from the coast across the Tehachapis to the Sierra Nevada.

More than 170 birds now fly over Big Sur, Pinnacles National Park, and Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Individuals find mates as they explore territory far from their release sites. One, Condor 192, released in the Santa Lucia Mountains near Big Sur in 1999, made her way south and paired with a male in Southern California in 2004. She returned to the Santa Lucias, near where she was released, in 2015. She fed and interacted with condors there for nine days, then returned to her nest in SoCal.

“Distances are nothing to them,” said Burnett. “It’s trivial to them to cruise 50 or 60 miles in the blink of an eye.”

Releasing condors to San Simeon is the test case to extend their range. Condors range over a wide area, but they aren’t inclined to explore new areas on their own, staying close to the complicated social ties they have with each other. Establishing young birds at the fringe of the established range gives them a more distant start point. Their presence will attract older birds looking for nesting sites.

“It creates a new stronghold for that area,” Burnett said.

A young pair has already established a nest in the area. VWS scientists are monitoring it, to see whether they succeed. Young pairs aren’t always successful the first or even the second time they attempt to raise chicks.

“If they succeed, it will be the first condor nest in San Luis Obispo County in decades,” he said.

Future of hunting

Although some hunters resist changing to non-lead ammunition, it could be a way to bridge to a younger generation. Hunting is declining, down 16 percent, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife National Survey. Making the case for ending lead contamination could help reach the next generation of hunters.

“It’s a great cause for them to jump on board,” said Burnett. “It keeps hunting traditions alive.”

Hunters have long been associated with conservation. Teddy Roosevelt, big game hunter, gave federal government protection to millions of acres and established the first Federal Bird Reserve. John James Audubon hunted birds in order to paint their portraits. Aldo Leopold, outdoorsman and author of “A Sand County Almanac,” was a hunter and conservationist. It’s not about the Second Amendment. It’s about making the ecosystem clean and safe for all wildlife.

Hunters don’t use much ammunition. A box of ammunition for each of Brandt’s rifles lasts him four or five years. Ranchers targeting varmints use more, constantly shooting the ground squirrels that burrow into grazing land. Survivalists have stockpiled ammunition in their bunkers.

This is an issue that hunters can use to their advantage. Voter initiatives threaten hunting, and the hunter image suffers from ugly examples like the Trump sons posing with dead African game, and the killing of Cecil the lion, a popular attraction at a Zimbabwe national park. Public perceptions can equate hunters with poachers. Hunters have licenses and permits to hunt legally. Poachers illegally kill wildlife. Embracing non-lead ammunition gives hunters a platform from which to advocate for long-standing principles of wildlife conservation.

“If hunters get out and spread the message that they are switching voluntarily to non-lead ammunition, for any reason, that we are providing animals with a free food source, increasing the population, it’s a great way to support hunting for future generations,” said Kuhlman.

He finds that being a hunter helps other hunters relate to him and be more receptive to his non-lead message. Ranchers and hunters congratulate him at many events.

“They are glad we’re out there helping them change over,” he said.

Ranchers take pride in being good stewards of their land. Most are champions of wildlife. In 2018, one found a condor drowned in a water tank at the highest point on his ranch. The top had blown off during the previous year’s storms. By the time the road was clear enough for him to get up to repair the tank, Condor 760 had died trying to get a drink.

It’s not an uncommon accident. Condors gather around water sources. Watering troughs, 2 or 3 feet deep, serve them well. Deeper tanks, with smooth sides, are deadly. Two birds drowned in a 6-foot-deep water tank set up in Southern California for fighting fires.

The rancher was devastated. He often brought hunters out to hunt elk on his property. The incident brought the condor situation home to him.

“It was a teachable moment,” said Burnett. “He definitely took it to heart. He’s now one of our biggest non-lead advocates down there.”

Condor 760 was 3 years old when she died. She was one of the 16 young birds that were introduced to the San Simeon area south of Big Sur.

“It’s funny how things happen in this business,” Burnett said. “It was really a bummer to lose that bird. But for the long term, it’s going to help.”

Voluntary or compulsion

“This is not a ploy to restrict hunting,” said Brandt, a lifelong hunter. “Condors are relying on hunters to provide a food source. It’s a matter of being contaminated.”

Second Amendment organizations such as the National Rifle Association and Safari Club International oppose laws against lead ammunition. They characterize proponents of lead ammunition bans as “radical environmentalists and animal-rights activists.”

“The NRA-ILA has been working quietly behind the scenes to block these efforts and protect the millions of Americans who use traditional ammunition. A ban on traditional ammunition would affect hunters, sportsmen, law enforcement, military and target shooters – regardless whether they hunt,” according to a statement on their website.

“Condors are just the lightning rods,” said Prieto. “Everyone on the planet is affected by lead toxicity.”

Fire and rain

Wildfire, made worse by years of drought, followed by torrential rain, wreaked havoc on California’s wildlands in 2017. Highway 1, the scenic north-south route, was closed, buried under mud in Big Sur and Montecito. People died. Condors soared above the landslides and flew away from the smoke and flames.

Condor chick 871, the precious offspring of parents who had failed to raise a chick in two previous nests in Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge, was on her high cliff nest. She had been flapping her wings for weeks, getting strong enough to take her first flight. Observers watched, eager to see her launch into the air, begin her life in flight.

Then the Thomas Fire began to burn. Santa Ana winds blew the flames closer. Eventually, the Thomas Fire would burn over 440 square miles and destroy over 1,000 structures. It burned for nearly a month and became the biggest fire in California history.

Flames blew closer to 871’s nest. Waves of heat fanned her. She flapped her young wings and raised into the air, flames chasing her. So close, flames burned her wing feathers, but she and her parents, father 206 and mother 513, made it across Sespe Creek. Firefighters stopped the fire at the creek.

“We can only imagine the circumstances of that first flight,” said Brandt, supervisory wildlife biologist at Hopper Mountain. “The fire burned that area around the nest pretty intensely. The tips of her wings are more jagged than they should be, but the damage was not extensive. She may have fledged in the process of escaping the fire.”

Condor future

Condors face other dangers along the way to recovering a wild population. Condors pick up shiny bits and pieces of micro-trash, such as nuts, bolts, washers, copper wire, plastic, bottle caps, glass, and spent ammunition cartridges. When parents return to the nest to regurgitate food for their chicks, the chicks consume the micro-trash along with it. It can cause cuts in the digestive tract or block it entirely, killing the chick.

Coastal condors eat dead marine mammals such as sea lions. Many of the sea lions are born in southern California, near the Montrose Chemical Superfund site, where over 1,700 tons of DDT was dumped from the 1940s through the 1970s. Their flesh is contaminated, and the birds that feed on them lay eggs with shells only a third as thick as condors who don't eat sea lions. Those eggs break easily, another cause of nest failure.

Condors need experience to raise chicks successfully. The California Condor Nest Guarding Program helps wild chicks survive. The program combines monitoring nests with direct intervention to detect threats. Field teams watch the nests from as close as they can without disturbing the birds, and some nests are fitted with cameras. Live-streamed video is archived and reviewed, giving condor protectors a closer eye on what's going on in the nest. The field team members are trained to use ropes to climb up and down the steep cliffs where the condors find ledges for their nests. They make their way to the nest after an egg is laid, to check on whether the egg is fertile. They may take the egg for incubator hatching, replacing it with a dummy egg for the parents to set on, or leave the egg for them to hatch.

The team members go in again when the chick is 60 days old, to give the chick a general health check, take a blood sample, vaccinate it against West Nile virus, measure its tail feathers and clean up any dangerous trash. At 120 days, the chick gets its first tag and VHF transmitter.

As condors expand their range to the Tehachapi Mountains, they'll confront the large wind farms in the area. Whether this will take yet another toll on condors or the birds will navigate around the windmills remains to be seen.

California's condor recovery teams work with teams in other states to restore the condor to its Western range. Condors have also been introduced in Baja California and at the Vermillion Cliffs in Arizona. In 2016, the official count was 446 total, 276 living in the wild.

Burnett and his team at VWS continue carrying calf carcasses up the mountain to give condors lead-free food. They trap and check every bird every year. “We treat any bird we come across, but we are shifting resources to non-lead efforts,” he said.

“As an organization, we are focusing on the source.”

“Condors are only going to survive in the wild if hunters and ranchers switch to non-lead ammunition,” said Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the VWS.

Kuhlman and Brandt continue their work at Hopper Mountain.

“It’s wonderful that so many folks are concerned about condors and the fire,” said Brandt, “but condors are adapted to fire. Since 1992, fires have killed seven condors. Lead poisoning has killed more than 70. They can’t adapt to lead poisoning, so it’s on us to fix it.”



Richard

by Kim Horner



Richard left Terrell State Hospital with nothing but the clothes on his back and his meds.

There was Seroquel, for bipolar disorder; Celexa, for depression; and trazodone, a sedative.

Richard was suicidal when the state psychiatric hospital admitted him. He was hearing voices telling him to hurt himself again. The hospital diagnosed him with “major depression with recurrent psychotic features, alcohol and cocaine abuse.” His records said he has tried to kill himself before.

But after three weeks, it was time for Richard to go.

After he was discharged, Metrocare Services, a local mental health provider, gave Richard a ride back to one of its Dallas-area clinics. Richard was supposed to meet with a caseworker there and get connected with a boarding home.

But later that night, the thin, 48-year-old African-American man in a jacket far too light for the near-freezing January weather, was wandering through downtown Dallas looking for a place to sleep.

Richard may have disappeared into the streets that night if it wasn't for the city's annual homeless count. That's when teams of volunteers go to shelters and outdoor spots where homeless people sleep to get an estimate of the population on a given night and to survey people about their needs. It's a rough guesstimate at best. Volunteers cannot possibly find all the people who sleep under bridges, in tents in the woods, and cardboard boxes under the freeways, especially those who do not want to be found.

Our team had just parked on a dark downtown street to look around. I was tagging along as a reporter for The Dallas Morning News. I was writing a story about the count and looking for people to follow for a story about chronic homelessness and the revolving door that people with severe mental illnesses and/or addictions face as they bounce from shelters to psychiatric hospitals to jails. The three of us were walking in opposite directions, surveying the area. It was after 10 p.m. No one was around. Downtown was silent aside from distant car sounds. Then I saw someone headed our way. At first you could barely see him in the dim hazy glow from a street light farther down the street. As he came closer, I couldn't tell if

he was homeless. He didn't give off any obvious signals. He wore plain, dark work pants, dark sneakers, and his lightweight tan jacket. His hair was closely cropped and he had a well-groomed mustache and slight beard. There weren't many other reasons, though, to be in that deserted part of downtown so late at night.

I crossed the street, debating what to say. There's no way to ask someone if they are homeless without it being awkward.

"Excuse me sir," I said as I approached him on the dark sidewalk, trying to be as polite as possible when I was about to ask such an intrusive question.

He stopped. I introduced myself and held out my hand. He shook it and said his name was Richard Antwine. I told him I was working on a story about the count for the paper.

"Can I ask you - and don't answer if you don't want to - are you homeless?"

He nodded.

"Would it be OK if I asked you a few questions?"

"OK."

Richard's voice sounded like someone had rubbed the inside of his throat with sandpaper. He spoke in quick, jagged bursts. He said he didn't feel ready to be out of the hospital and that he had nowhere to go.

"I don't like being on the streets," he said.

Richard's responses were brief but he answered my questions as if being stopped on the street late in the evening and asked personal questions was nothing out of the ordinary. He was candid and matter of fact about having bipolar disorder, a criminal history, addiction, and that he'd been in and out of psychiatric hospitals more than 30 times. It was as if he had lost so much, there was nothing left to hide.

Richard fit the textbook definition of chronic homelessness, a subset of people who have been homeless repeatedly, possibly for many years, who have serious mental illnesses and/or addictions. The chronically homeless are predominately men and disproportionately African-American. They are disabled, ill, and vulnerable and we leave them to fend for themselves on the streets.

In a previous era, Richard might have spent most of his life in a psychiatric facility. These days, people with severe, persistent mental illnesses like him are more likely to end up in jail, a shelter, or a cardboard box under the freeway.

The federal government had been putting money into housing that came with treatment and other services meant to help chronically homeless people rebuild their lives. I wanted to find out if it was working. I asked Richard if I could keep in touch with him for my story. He said OK. He didn't have a phone. I gave him my card.

"Where are you going - do you have somewhere to stay?"

Richard looked uneasy. He shook his head.

"Do you know about The Bridge?" I asked. The Bridge, a new shelter at the time, was probably full at this hour. On really cold nights, the shelter would let people sit

in the rows of uncomfortable chairs in the Welcome Center. At least it would be a place to stay warm.

“Where is it?” he asked.

I pointed past City Hall, a few blocks away. I asked him to come by the newspaper soon.

“Thanks for talking to us, Richard.”

A few days later, our receptionist called my extension. I had a visitor. I went downstairs to the lobby. It was Richard.

We sat down in the stylish but stiff and uncomfortable chairs in the lobby. His hands fidgeted and his foot tapped while we talked. Richard said he had walked from Oak Lawn, a few miles away, and that he spent his days walking and looking for odd jobs such as sweeping parking lots for extra cash.

As we talked, I found out that Richard had grown up in the area. He attended a South Dallas barber college. He was divorced, with three grown daughters, and a sister in Garland. He was a father, a brother, a barber, and at one time a husband.

Richard’s criminal record offered more clues about why he was homeless – he had spent most of his adult life in prison or jail. Richard got locked up mostly for theft-related charges and parole violations rather than violent acts, according to records from the Texas Department of Public Safety and Dallas County Jail. When he was 18, he was sentenced to two years of probation for unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. After that, he was in and out of jail. When he was 28, a judge sentenced him to 25 years in prison for unauthorized use of a vehicle. Richard was in his early 40s by the time he got out. Then he was arrested for cocaine possession and spent more time in and out of prison before being admitted to Terrell State Hospital. It didn’t seem like Richard could fall much further. He never “hit” bottom – he seemed to be there from the start. What were the chances that a guy like Richard could get a job, apartment, and live a so-called normal life? There was serious mental illness and addiction. Plus, he had felonies that would make it difficult to find work. And a lack of work experience since he’d lived so much of his life behind bars.

A couple weeks later, Richard called from Medical City Dallas Hospital. He said he had been robbed and stabbed after he cashed his Social Security disability check near downtown. (He received a monthly check due to his illness. It wasn’t much; about \$700 a month.) He rambled in a fast and fierce paranoid garble.

“I don’t know how I got to the hospital,” he said. “Nobody knows who found me; nothing. I don’t know if it’s a cover up.”

Richard talked about being kicked out of another hospital, having his clothes stolen and not having bus fare to leave. I hoped he would stay in the hospital a while so he could heal.

I wanted to know more about Richard, his family and his childhood. He had given me the number for his sister, JoAnn, who lived in Garland, so I called. JoAnn said she has watched her brother go in and out of psychiatric institutions, shelters, and jails for years. She tries to help but she has her own children to take

care of. She faces a common problem for people with relatives with serious mental illnesses: Richard needs more help than she can provide.

“I don’t know where he is from one day to the next. If I don’t hear from him, I don’t have no way of calling him. He don’t have a phone, and I don’t know if he’s dead,” she said. “Sometimes I am scared to watch the news.”

JoAnn did not want to talk any further about her brother. She did not return my calls when I tried to follow up.

After I started asking public mental health officials about Richard’s case, he was assigned to an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team. ACT teams provide the most intense level of service in the public mental health care system next to hospitalization, reserved for the most vulnerable patients, or “consumers,” as they were called. ACT teams are designed to watch people with severe mental illnesses more closely and help them get to places like appointments or boarding homes. Maybe Richard wouldn’t have been roaming downtown late at night after being released from Terrell if someone had made sure he got to his appointment earlier that day.

As one psychiatrist who worked with people with severe mental illnesses told me, it was unrealistic to expect people struggling with schizophrenia, major depression and other illnesses, serious side effects from medications, the withdrawals and temptations of addictions, to navigate multiple bus transfers to get to appointments with caseworkers or psychiatrists.

The ACT found Richard at the ER at Parkland Hospital in early March. He had a catheter because of his recent stab wound, and it had become infected. Once Richard was able to leave the hospital, the team helped him get situated in a boarding home called Faith House. The modest three-bedroom house offered the standard deal – \$500 a month for room and board, which would eat up most of Richard’s disability check. He shared a small nondescript bedroom with two beds on opposite sides of the room, two dressers and not much else. The room was neat, clean, and bare. Richard had no photos or belongings to give his living space a personal touch. I knew so little about him. I wanted the kinds of details that help readers connect with him, to root for him. Richard was not a talker. He had the serious tone of a man in survival mode. I don’t remember ever seeing him smile.

A couple of other residents watching TV in the sparse living room looked over and smiled as we walked outside. It seemed like it could be a place where Richard could work to get back on his feet. Then again, what is a person who’s spent his life in prison, psychiatric hospitals getting “back” to?

I didn’t hear from Richard for a couple weeks. A quick check with the Lew Sterrett Justice Center showed that he had been arrested for a parole violation. I filled out a form to request an interview with Richard. The next day, the jail spokeswoman said he accepted.

At the jail, I went through the metal detectors, put my purse in a locker (I wasn’t allowed to take it with me) and a correctional officer took me up the elevator to another floor. He led me down a narrow hallway and into a tiny interview room with a stained white wall and a large cloudy Plexiglas window that looked into

another tiny room on the other side. Within a few minutes, Richard sat on the other side of the window, wearing a prison uniform with thick horizontal black and grey stripes. His voice was muffled. He said he was arrested when a police officer stopped him downtown. The officer discovered a warrant for Richard's arrest because he had missed a meeting with his parole officer.

Richard had a good excuse for missing the meeting – he was at Terrell State Hospital at the time being treated for suicidal depression.

So, Richard spent more than a month sitting in a jail cell where he was fed skimpy bologna sandwiches and staring at the wall since he couldn't afford to buy anything to read. All because he missed a meeting with his parole officer while being treated for a life-threatening illness.

"I don't know what's going on. I'm just sitting here doing nothing when I shouldn't be here," Richard said as he stared at the counter between us.

A hearing was scheduled in April. Richard was led into the courtroom in handcuffs. He sat at a table facing the judge.

His attorney, a public defender, argued that her client tried to do everything right.

Suddenly, a few minutes into the hearing Richard's arm started jerking. He slumped over and fell to the floor. Within a few minutes, medics came and took him to the infirmary. The hearing was over. Nobody could or would explain what happened.

"Could it have been a reaction to antipsychotic medication?" I asked a mental health care worker later.

"Maybe," he said. "But crack can also do that to you."

Richard finally got out of jail in early May. The ACT team was expecting a call when Richard was released. The plan was to pick him up from jail and take him to a boarding home.

The call never came.

After his release, Richard disappeared. He did not show up in the jail log or prison database. His sister did not answer calls. Her comments about being scared to watch the news haunted me.

Metrocare discovered later that Richard went to his sister's house to pick up his disability check that day. Nobody knows exactly what happened next. But he showed up at Green Oaks Hospital, another psychiatric hospital, the night he was released from jail, suicidal. He also tested positive for cocaine.

Sometime after that, another parole violation – this time related to a 1989 car theft – landed him back in prison. He was released to a halfway house but had to leave after using illegal drugs there, according to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

I did not hear from Richard after that. I hoped he'd get back in touch. Months passed with no word and no trace.

Until November 2010.

That month, a man hung himself from a downtown bridge. It made the news because evening rush hour traffic was stopped for hours. Police did not release the man's name at the time. A few days later, I received an email with the subject line: "Mr. Richard Antwine."

I opened it slowly.

It was from a priest who had met Richard only days earlier. He wrote to let me know that Richard had died, that it was Richard who had hung himself from the bridge.

The police report said that Richard was dead when officers arrived 6:30 p.m., when it would've been getting dark. He had a shirt wrapped around his neck. It was attached to the bridge railing with his belt. The Medical Examiner ruled the death a suicide. His body was released to the Chapel of Mercy and his family had a small funeral service.

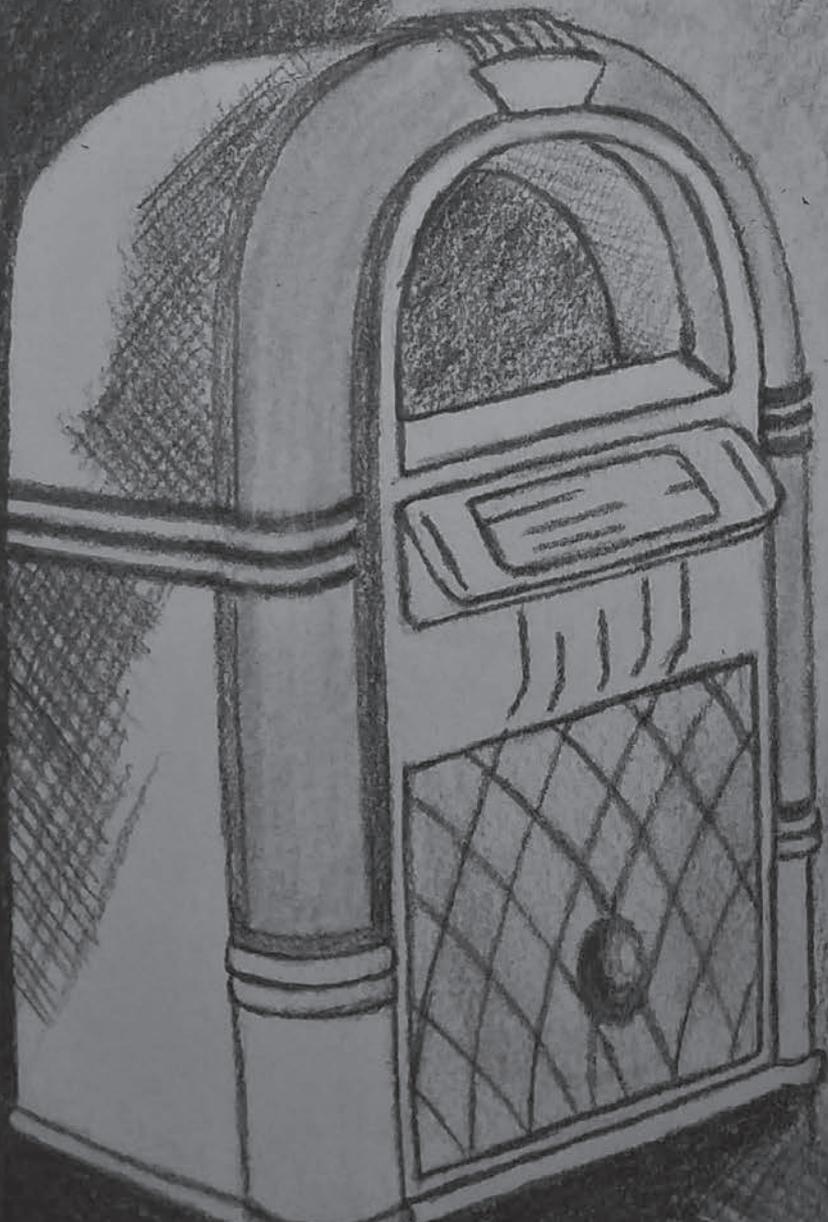
The only comfort was knowing that the day before he died, Richard at least got to experience some kindness.

One of the last people Richard met was the Rev. Jemonde Taylor, of Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Dallas, who sent me the email about his death. Taylor said that Richard had approached him outside the Jubilee Community Center near Fair Park.

"He said, 'you are just the man I need to see,'" Taylor said. He said he had just been released from prison. He needed clothing.

"I fed Richard and inquired about DART passes," Taylor said. The reverend drove to Rockwall to pick up a donation of clothing for Richard – five shirts, jacket, slacks, underwear, socks and shoes – from a ministry dedicated to helping men released from prison. He never got to deliver them.

"I did not find Richard during my several trips to the boarding house. No one seemed to know him there," Taylor said. "I'm still riding around with the clothes in my car."



Jukebox DNA

by Timothy Miller



Jessica passed the white paper across the Papisito's table and turned it upside down. "Daddy, you know how you always wondered why you didn't look like your Dad? You know how you always joked about somebody else being your Dad? The names on this list match my DNA results from Ancestry.com. Not only do they match but they match 98 percent." The name at the top of the list was Ely. Beside that name was the word GRANDFATHER. A 45 plops down in the jukebox of my mind, a record not a revolver, but the words are like a shot. "Eli's coming, hide your heart, girl. ..." Cold condensation on my white margarita unplugged the jukebox. My collapsed straw and this news deliver a DEFCON 1-level brain freeze.

The record by Three Dog Night was released in 1969 and John D died two years later. Jessica never met her Grandad. Wait, she never met John D. In 1971 Daddy (John D) left me a Remington Savage 12-gauge pump shotgun, \$400, and a broken heart. While other 13-year-old boys got new toys I got a weapon of mass destruction. But oh yeah, I keep forgetting, John D wasn't Daddy. He was not on the list, Ely was.

Jessica pointed to the list. She described how she matched DNA with this other family heretofore unknown. "Who on earth were these people?" Beside each name Jessica had written a descriptive note. "I know this is a shock Daddy, but you now have eight new brothers and sisters." She went over each name. Five sisters and three brothers. Two brothers were dead. I would never meet them, but a question crossed my mind. I already had two brothers by way of "Daddy," I mean John D. Did they know Ely? Hell, did everyone know except me?

My oldest brother Robert would be the most likely. He and Johnny were so different from me. Hell, they looked and smelled Cherokee. They were tall and handsome in dark contrast to the fair-skinned, white-haired kid standing next to them in family photos. Johnny looked like Richard Gere in American Gigolo and Bobby was a tall, dark and handsome Prince Charming. But come to think of it, he never once came to my home or to visit my family. At least Johnny did once and stayed the night. But I don't fault them. If they were aware it was only at some subliminal level. I love them too much to consider the alternative. Jessica is so wise. She said hindsight is 20/20 but the heart creates mirages to make reality more manageable. She is oceans deep.

Speaking of reality, Jessica brought me back to it. She described her mother's reaction. Her mother and my ex-wife became my sweet 16 girlfriend in 1974. We

married in April 1979 and Jessica was born on Presidents Day 10 months later. Jessica added, "You know she still loves you, Daddy. She cried when I showed her this." My ex-wife still loves me. I have that going for me. She filed for divorce 21 years ago. I always wanted to go back (before that Super Bowl weekend in 1996) and somehow fix my fuckups. Yes, the expletive is plural. But you know, it's taken 21 years and it sounds strange now, but I'm glad I can't go back. It was an obsession at one time. I wonder when that changed. Another 45 plops down in the jukebox. "Half of My Mistakes" by Gary Allan plays:

*"Half of my mistakes I made stone cold sober
Half of my mistakes I've made at closing time.
Half the time I never saw it coming, until it was over
Oh, and half of my mistakes I've made with love on the line.
Half of my mistakes I swear, I should've known better
Half of my mistakes were just among friends
You get a little distance on it, the truth is clearer
Oh, and half of my mistakes I'd probably make them again."*

I wish Daddy could hear those lyrics. I think he would like those words. Seems my imaginary jukebox, though perpetually unplugged, is powered by emotions that plop 45s whenever it wants.

Mama's 1971 words come back. Legendary words. Daddy was fresh buried and my two brothers and I were sitting around the supper table listening to Mama wax melancholic, "Your Daddy was the love of my life." This was a bit awkward since my Stepfather James was sitting at the head of the table. Mama had a Scarlett-like gift of delivering backhanded comments. I called her on it with a sarcastic smile. "Mama, I don't think James quite heard you. You may need to repeat that for his benefit." Mama paused and waited for the room to hush. Her next sentence was a "Gone with the Wind" Oscar-laced moment impregnated with the reminiscent declaration only Mama could deliver. She closed her eyes and a punctuated tear rolled down her cheek. It fell from an eyedropper held by an angel's hand. She took in a slow, deliberate breath and sighed, "Once you've loved a Miller no one else will do."

To say we laughed out loud was understatement. We fell out. We were all Millers except James and this was just too good. Mama could be so melodramatic. I looked over at James and he even laughed. You had to give him credit. He had learned to untie himself from the mast of Mama's influence and her siren songs no longer shipwrecked his days.

At least now I know what happened to my own 22-year marriage. I really wasn't a Miller. If I was a Miller, then "no one else would do" and my Ex wouldn't have fallen for a little man, a former horse jockey named Phil. She married him too fast for me after our divorce. I remember when she first introduced him at my son's football

game. He had fallen off a horse and his left arm was still in a cast. He extended his right hand, moist and trembling. "You know Phil, I was with her 22 years and she never broke my arm." He smiled, and the jukebox plopped the classic by George Jones, "He Stopped Loving Her Today." Apparently, someone other than a Miller "can do."

Mama cried every time George Jones sang that song. Both hands covered her eyes. All this time I thought Daddy was the one. I refuse to believe Mama cried for Ely. He could never be the one to inspire such repentance. If it were a song instead of a Mama mantra, George Jones would be my choice to sing, "Once you've loved a Miller no one else would do."

I wonder if Daddy knew I wasn't his. He drank like he knew. Was he medicating invisible pain? Was he conscious of this illegitimate entity from the beginning or was it a slow dawning? Or maybe he never knew. He must have realized something after the manifestation of this blue-eyed blond apparition appearing in front of his Native American eyes. Whatever he thought we will never know but he pushed it back with inebriated consistency. Mama knew but it was such a secretive time. Not just because of Daddy. Mama gave indication that her generation, although labeled the greatest, could sail over tempestuous seas of deep denial.

I believe Mama almost told me once. I turned 30 and she told me right to my face, "I need you to know that I didn't want you." I remember telling her, "Well Mama you don't hear that every day." Seeing the emotional sting imbedded in my brow, she added, "It took time, but I grew to love you."

"Oh, ok Mama, whew, now I feel better!"

Now I know why she packed me up and left Daddy and my two older brothers and put Greenwood, Mississippi, in the rear-view mirror. Mama didn't drive. I was 6 when we left Mississippi in a 1963 Greyhound bus.

Back and forth to Mississippi was painful. Daddy only cried one time out of our too few times together. He was a good tractor mechanic and he never let the booze or his emotions get the best of him, at least not in front of me. Except for one time. It was the Friday before I would take the bus back to Texas. It was August of 1965. It was in Drew, Mississippi.

Daddy would take me to his favorite bar every Friday evening after work. His tractor mechanic paycheck singed a hole in the olive green pants of his Case Place uniform. He sat me on his lap and I watched him play dominos for money. Sometimes he would play poker and I learned a thing or two. In the corner was a jukebox that played one song for a dime or three songs for a quarter. Daddy would give me a handful of quarters and tell me "pick something lucky, Nim." I always picked good songs and his perfect poured ice-cold Budweiser was an acquired sip for an 8-year-old palate.

Daddy got drunk and the quarters decreased in direct proportion to his winnings. The evening entertainment shifted from the jukebox to a pattern of predictable but perilous piggyback rides. I know what you're thinking. Same as the bartender. I couldn't hear him, but I could sure read his lips, "Oh shit" as I mounted up and we staggered out of the bar. Daddy didn't stop stepping at the bottom step.

My right arm reached high as he went down. There was no buzzer and we didn't make 8 seconds. I dismounted to help Daddy up. We stumbled down the alley to his one room Drew, Mississippi, efficiency. Laughing faded behind us with each unstable step. Inside the house Daddy dropped in front of me on green and black knees. He leaned close and I recoiled from his hand-rolled-Camel-without-a-filter-Budweiser breath.

"Tell your Mama about 'Yesterday.'"

What about yesterday, Daddy?

"Nim, you know 'Yesterday'! You played it on the jukebox. It's the number one hit on the radio. That goddam radio."

I knew instantly what he meant. The radio was on top of the nickel Coke machine with the gray handle. It was the main attraction at the Case Place. I suddenly saw that radio through his eyes. This was no barroom jukebox. It was a one speaker Emerson radio now forever damned in the deep recesses of my memory.

Daddy asked me if I heard the song. I said I wasn't sure. He became more focused and though he slurred at first, he sang Paul's 1965 words:

*"Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.
Now it looks as though they're here to stay.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.
Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be ..."*

He broke off and fought back his tears, then continued,

"There's a shadow hanging over me. Oh, yesterday came suddenly."

Seeing Daddy cry primed my tears.

"You promise me now you will tell your Mama about that song. Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Yes, Daddy I promise, cross my heart and hope to die!"

I didn't know what else to do. A greasy thumb wiped away tears, his and mine.

I never told Mama. I've always felt bad about it. Probably had something to do with not getting picked up. Remember, I was 8 years old. Yes, I know it was a promise, "cross my heart and hope to die!" But listen to me. The Greyhound bus drove all day and half the night from Drew, Mississippi. We arrived downtown Dallas at 2 a.m. It seemed odd that no one was waiting on the platform. No one was inside either. Just drunks and perverts looking for 8-year-old boys.

I stood at the pay phone on the wall and couldn't remember my home phone

number. A man watched me from across the room. I pressed my forehead into the cradle and hid behind the handset. The rain fell outside the bus station and I remembered my first big Texas storm. The first grade teacher, Mrs. Cannon, made me stand in the corner because I cried. I could see the drops making khaki shadows on the beige painted concrete outside. I cried because I knew no one would pick me up from school. I would have to walk home in the storm. I remember what it felt like pressing my 6-year-old face into the corner of the room trying to hide. Mrs. Cannon Ball, my name for her after that day, told the class, "Look at him students, afraid of a little rain." She wrote a note for me to take home to Mama. I opened it and read how I was afraid of the rain. It was humiliating but by God I made it home. This was two years later but felt the same. I peeked out from under the phone handset. I looked outside and the thunder boomed. It was still raining, but this time I could not walk home.

I called the operator and asked for help. After giving her my address, she gave me my own phone number. I called, and it rang a long time. Mama finally answered. She sounded sleepy. "We aren't coming to get you. James's back is sore. You need to take a cab home."

I told her, "Mama I don't know how to do that."

The phone was quiet a long time. "You can, and you will, or you'll stay there."

She hung up. I stared at the receiver a long time. It blurred, and I returned it to the cradle.

The man watched me walk outside. I carried an old, yellow suitcase with both hands and dragged it to the street. The green street sign said South Lamar. It sat on top of a gray pole made fuzzy by invisible diesel. The white guy Yellow Cab driver was drinking coffee inside his cab. He saw me in his passenger side mirror and stepped into the street. He didn't say a word but grabbed my centrifugal flying suitcase and pitched it in the trunk. He threw open the rear passenger door and the stale smell of his Pall Malls watered my eyes. Once in the driver's seat he looked back over his shoulder. He looked pissed.

"Shut the damn door, boy!"

I shut the door.

"You got money?"

He sounded Texan thick like he was LBJ's cab-driving cousin.

"Yes sir."

"I'll have to keep that their suitcase if you can't pay."

"I got money!"

I didn't want to tell him how much. I had 37 single dollar bills wrapped in a roll with a hundred-dollar bill tucked inside. I earned that money baling hay and chopping cotton and was dead set on keeping all I could. I put my calloused hand into my pocket and squeezed the roll.

We pulled into the Mesquite driveway at 3 a.m. The fare was \$5.25. I handed him \$6 cash. He reached over the seat and snatched it up. I waited for change. Change

never came. I didn't intend to tip, not because he was a prick, but because no one ever showed me how. I stepped out of the cab. He pulled my suitcase out of the trunk before I could make a step. He left it standing on the driveway and jumped back in the cab. He drove away like he stole it. That is a cliché but, in his case, quite correct. He glanced back over his shoulder. Six years later I fantasized about introducing that cab driver to a newly acquired Remington Savage 12-gauge pump.

I knocked on the door of our house and no one answered. I went around to the side of the master bedroom and stopped cold. I got scared. My stepfather had a pistol by the bed and I knew it. I went back to the front door and banged hard with the side of my fist. Mama cracked open the door. She seemed surprised to see me and wiped sleep from her eyes. I walked past her without saying a word. I had not seen Mama for three months. She went back to bed.

I didn't talk to Mama for days. Being left at the downtown Dallas Greyhound was memorable. Taking the cab home was an adventure. Both were decent enough reasons for not keeping my promise to Daddy. If I am honest I was not cognizant of revenge. I wish I could say that I knew what I was doing. That I didn't tell her because of some grand reason, like not wanting to give her the satisfaction of being wanted. After that trip I just didn't give a flying fuck. From that day forward, loving expectations existed in an alternative universe. In that world no one paid for cab rides and the jukebox played songs that are never sad.

Daddy died in 1977. Jessica told me Ely died 20 years later in 1997. I wondered if Ely knew. How would I introduce myself to the new siblings who remained?

My daughter told me about the Ancestry DNA kit. She gave it to me for my birthday present. My head throbbed as I opened it. She explained how you had to spit in the plastic tube that comes in the kit. I spit and thanked God for my daughter. She always kept her promises.

"Are you OK, Daddy?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just thinking about a country song that keeps playing in my mind."

"Oh, yeah, which one?"

It's called "Half of My Mistakes."

*"Nobody can tell you a thing if you ain't listening
Half of my mistakes I've made cause I couldn't let go. ...
Half of my mistakes I'd give anything to change how it ended
Oh, and half of my mistakes, God, I wouldn't change one thing
You can lean too hard on a prayer, but I don't recommend it
Cause half the good things in my life came from half of my mistakes."*

Jessica squeezed my hand. I asked her to excuse me and walked to the Papisito's restroom. I stood using the urinal on the right. I've been here many times before.

It was different now. There was the same framed 8 by 10 photo over the urinal. A bullfighter is kneeling and leaning back. He is the essence of macho with cape draped over a fully extended sword. The bull rages inches behind his back. He is a perfectly poised bad ass. I see Daddy's expression in his face. John D is the essence of power, serene and in perfect control. I see my reflection in the glass frame looking back at me. I want to be him. I want to have his expression. But the reality is in the reflection. I'm not half the man I used to be.



Night and Day

by George Newtown



“And then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

– Martin Niemoeller

1

Born 14 months apart, Glen and I shared childhood diseases, shirts, and a bedroom. Adults thought we were twins. But as one of his pals said, “You two are night and day.” It was clear who he thought lived in the dark. The guys would leave me, the Indian, tied to a pine while they pedaled off to do their cowboy things – like whooping through the fog behind the DDT sprayer at Camp Lejeune. Seemed dumb to me, but what did I know? I was only the little brother.

Glen threw himself into the role of man of the family during Pop’s overseas deployments. One midnight the loaded pistol under his pillow clanked onto the bedroom floor. No shots fired, but still. I hadn’t known I had more to fear than falling from the top bunk. Now I could lie awake anticipating a bullet in the butt.

Eventually we moved into separate bedrooms and then into separate states. I happily escaped what he called “Indian wrist burns” whenever he thought Mom wasn’t looking, and he rejoiced that he’d never again hear, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” Not that he ever did much beyond bending his curfew to eat AQ Chicken with his pals. He resented how easily I landed on Mom’s good side, and I resented how tight he was with his buds. Much later, he got to keep his hair while I lost mine to chemo. Seems unfair to resent him for that too, but I do.

We both turned out all right. A government bureaucrat, Glen skimmed thousand-page reports written in passive voice while overseeing Superfund cleanup sites. A college teacher, I marked infelicities, including passive voice, in thousand-word student essays. Now retired, Glen supplies weekend warriors with guns and ammo at Bass Pro Shops. I breed horses in a money-losing operation that may keep me from ever retiring. He insists the Second Amendment right to bear arms trumps any other guarantee in the Bill of Rights. I focus my apoplexy on violations of First Amendment free speech. We’ve each mastered the dialect of half a divided country, but it’s not clear we’ve ever spoken the same language.

The evening of Donald Trump’s inauguration, my wife Barbara said, “To see somebody acting presidential, we’re going to have to watch ‘The West Wing.’”

By summer she and I had binge-watched that series not once but twice. Glen, on the other hand, was over the moon. A year earlier – sporting a red “Make America Great Again” ball cap – he had declared Trump “a hoot,” who “tells it like it is.” Of course Glen will be peeved to find himself here in another of my essays. He quit talking to me when our school literary mag printed my account of him peppering a lizard with BBs. It wasn’t like I made it up. But did I have to use his name? I figured though, since I have only the one brother, it wouldn’t help much to call him Sam.

My daughter Elizabeth reports that when she last visited Uncle Glen he had her laughing ’til she farted at his stories about growing up with her “goody-two-shoes” and “know-it-all” father. It’s pretty clear he and I both recall those years. What they mean depends on who gets the microphone.

2

In Marine base housing, built by the lowest bidder, as green 2 x 4s warped under vinyl siding, neighbor families arrived and left unannounced. Then it was our turn. The Tarawa Terrace development should have been razed after they found out the water supply at Lejeune was laced with dry cleaning chemicals. Still, I treasure our bungalow at 1643 Orote Place as the last outpost on a cul-de-sac, close to the lure of wildness – as we would re-learn whenever the eye of a hurricane passed over and snakes slithered out of the swamp toward our door.

We transferred coast-to-coast from Lejeune to Pendleton and back again over long weekends so that Glen and I would miss no classes in the interchangeable schools. I should regret having no high school friends I’d known since kindergarten, but I never felt nostalgic so much as relieved that I’d get another crack at making a first impression. I figured Glen was okay with the moves. He’d always hoped to follow our dad into a military career. He might have done it too if his 20/200 vision hadn’t been such a deal-killer.

From where I sat, Pop was a swarthy stranger who showed up between foreign tours to compete for Mom’s attention. After he retired, he and Glen would hunt deer together on the steep hillside near Devil’s Den. I assume they found things to talk about. Pop and I spoke only in the odd crisis. In the rawness after Gram’s funeral, when I whimpered, “I’ve always wanted you to be proud of me,” he looked mystified. “I’ve always been proud of you.” We moved on to parceling out Gram’s worldly goods. I asked only for her wedding rings.

“I might need them someday,” I said to the quizzical faces around the table.

The diamonds were small enough that no one arm-wrestled me for them. But I doubt anybody believed I would put them to use. Probably not even Pop. *He was there when I gaped at those half-naked Marines. When the Assistant Scoutmaster said, “Put my hand in this one’s pocket, I’ll be feeling a little queer.”* At least I’d seen Pop fuse his eyes on his locker as he snapped the ties of his swim trunks. The judgment felt huge. For years I would know the familiar flush as I fingered cold remedies while mesmerized by the “Pony Boy” magazine in my peripheral vision – the one with the stick-on dot inviting me to peel and reveal the most naked part of the naked boy on the cover. Drugstore clerks surely pegged me as the sort who

shoplifted mental images. How could I have fooled my father?

My brother had known since preschool, when I'd brushed my dolly bald-headed as if the act carried no shame. When I first met Glen's bride Ann - in the early '70s in an Army billet at Schweinfurt - she asked me, "Since you won't be having children of your own, would you leave your stuff to Peanut?" (That's what they called their infant son.) She and Bro seemed to think everything was decided, when I knew only that I would remain a monk until I could figure out the rest of it. Either way, it looked like my backpack and riding boots would be up for grabs.

I confirmed their suspicions the next morning by harvesting plums in front of their apartment and baking *Pflaumenkuchen*. I didn't want nature's bounty to go to waste, but Ann cackled over the collection of fruits. She brought up Hank, her limp-wristed organist brother. I suppose she just meant to acknowledge that this sort of thing happens even in the best of families. It must have surprised her when both Hank and I married sharp, independent women.

In my first encounter with Ann, however, no such future beckoned. Instead, we alien "others" would never measure up. She especially lit into black GIs and 'Rades (her put-down for native Germans) - groups that should be lynched for cutting her off in traffic. Glen didn't call her on it, though to his credit he did guffaw when I announced I would make a bequest in Peanut's name to the NAACP. Years later, though, when they adopted their mixed-race daughter Miranda, my smug judgment rang hollow. *Wait*, I thought, *I'm supposed to be the liberal here*.

If Glen wasn't Lutheran and married, he could be the Pope. He's that happy with what he knows - likely to eat fried shrimp at the Catfish Hole every Saturday, read "Dagwood" right after "Peanuts" every Sunday, rattle the same saber throughout the half century between Goldwater and McCain. In those years I migrated from Goldwater to Obama, so I am the will-o-the-wisp - although it took me ages to get there.

At Fayetteville High I specialized in American Legion oratory. The only insight I remember offering was "Stay home and don't vote," advice I'd cribbed from Life or Saturday Evening Post. The gist: ignorant folks shouldn't darken the polls lest they dilute the will of the right-thinking. Clearly the Legionnaires and I had to save democracy from the barbarians. During the applause in the Legion Hall the two black vets in the back row sat on their hands. Clueless about contemporary events - this was Arkansas in the early '60s - I was disappointed they didn't admire my rhetoric as much as their white counterparts. But I treasured the whoosh of affirmation when the grandfatherly Legionnaires pinned their medal on my chest.

But actually join the military? Boys I knew were dying in the jungle. In the fall of '64, the high school principal read us a letter that Howie had sent a month before he died. We all remembered Howie - buck-toothed, garrulous, the butt of jokes. "I want to be an inspiration to them," he wrote, referring to us still at FHS. After the assembly I heard a teacher say he'd hoped the army would make a man out of the kid. That's when I felt a flicker of doubt. Not in cosmic terms - I just wanted him

back so I could be nicer to him, so he wouldn't have to try so hard. But I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want them to think I was weird.

In "The Best Little Boy in the World," Andrew Tobias reports he was a breath away from declaring himself a homosexual when doctors at his draft physical disqualified him for a lump in his groin. When I drew their attention to the S-curve in my spine, they pooh-poohed it. Tobias says he knew from age 12 that he was queer. I knew only that I didn't want to be. And I wasn't about to tell some sergeant where my eyes strayed in gym showers, not even to keep myself out of the jungle.

"Could you be a conscientious objector?" asked my undergraduate advisor.

"But I'm a Missouri Synod Lutheran." A professor of German, he saw the point.

Could I follow my brother into ROTC? Then I could go to grad school and do things I might be good at. The ROTC-certified doctor brandished an X-ray in which my spine curled like a sidewinder among boulders. "The Army will never want you, son."

"But they've already invited me to slog through rice paddies as a grunt."

He shook his head and signed his name, affirming I had the makings of a lieutenant.

"Sir," I said to the colonel after I'd located Yale's ROTC building, "there's a conflict. Drill meets the same time as Methods and Problems of Comp Lit. It's my only required course."

"Well, then," he said, "you'd best decide why it is you've come to Yale."

"Excuse me," I said to the corporal behind the massive oak desk outside the colonel's door. "I haven't finished filling out my application." He handed over my file and returned to his typing, while I, not 10 feet away, removed the fudged health certificate and flipped through for other damning proof of my competence. I shivered with the same frisson Daniel Ellsberg must have felt while fingering the Pentagon papers.

Back in Arkansas for the draft appeal, I produced documentation that my spine was a mess. "Besides, my brother's already in the Army. And my parents have spent their lives in the Marines." The lone woman on the appeal panel dabbed at her eyes while predicting our pride when I joined the rest of the family in uniform.

In the inaugural draft lottery I drew number 244. Months later, after half a generation of boys had gotten draft notices or peptic ulcers or both, the selection terminated at 195. I could fall back below the radar. Write a dissertation. Get a job. Decide what kind of man I would become someday.

In July of 2005, through the Great Plains, the Badlands, the Rockies, and the Cascades, David and Elizabeth compete for their mother's new digital camera.

"It's my turn!"

"I never get to have a turn!"

My best shots break the rules, visions of geysers taken into the sun.

Nearing Seattle, Barbara and I relive the buzz we felt holding hands in front of the first King Tut exhibition 25 years earlier. We stay with Max, a heartthrob from her preteen sailboat years. I can't see what all the fuss was about: Max looks grayer than I feel, even without the excuse of recent chemo. At dinner he loses the fight to remain seated and lopes around the table. Looks like even as a kid Barbara foresaw a life's work of socializing ill-fitting men.

We tour her old stomping grounds on Mercer Island, where she's relieved to see so few McMansions. Approaching the salmon ladder at Ballard Locks I observe a pair of Ken dolls holding hands. *We aren't in Kansas anymore.* At Lake Union I study the houseboats, one readied for a frat party. *So this is where Joel and I might have set up housekeeping.* He'd said he'd end up in this most beautiful city in the hemisphere. I can see us there on the deck, after skinny-dipping at midnight, me smoothing the droplets from the long, slow curves of his back under the gaze of God and the indulgent neighbors.

Back at the house, Barbara retreats to a darkened bedroom with a migraine and I slip down to the basement to Google his name. As if surfing for porn, I listen for footfalls that will alert me to close the guilty windows. I figured he'd plunged from an unanchored rappelling hook off the West Rib of Denali or succumbed to the virus that lurked unannounced beneath the '70s, but I discover he's alive and well, teaching Spanish in a private school in Seattle. His internet presence features a write-up on the thousands of plants that he – still the committed vegan – and his partner of 15 years cultivate on their third of an acre in the suburbs. I could don dark glasses and attend one of his garden seminars, but it would be a mistake. He and Mr. Partner either snuggle into the cozy domestic relationship I couldn't have tempted him with, or they seek extramural pleasures, as Joel had expected with Maynard in the old days. *I hope he's had sense enough not to bed his students.* I taste unexpected acid reflux.

By 10 the next morning Barbara's head has improved enough to let us drive east. *Good. I'm ready to get home and saddle up a horse.* That night in the motel, after the kids have drifted off, I describe the Googling scene to Barbara, who is reading a *policier*. She says she should have known – her migraine had to come from some concentration of ozone.

"But you know I couldn't do anything now even if I wanted to."

"Poor you," she says. "Be grateful the heart keeps ticking."

"Yeah, and the bladder keeps draining," I say, swinging my legs over the side of the bed for one more trip to the potty. She takes up her book again.

"Hey," I say from the doorway, "I'm not the only one mooning over an old beau, you know."

"Max? He never paid any attention: he was 19, I was 12."

"Same here, except he was 19 and I was 30."

The next day in Glacier Park my acrophobia kicks in over the achingly beautiful thousand-yard plunges from the Going-to-the-Sun Highway. Listening to the whine

of the minivan, I recall the possessive awe in Joel's voice when he returned from Denali that summer – almost as if he owned the highest mountain on the continent and I could never experience what he'd felt there. I am as stunned, though, by Going-to-the-Sun. So are Barbara and the children.

“There's got to be a love story in here somewhere,” Barbara insists. As usual, she's right, although getting there was rockier than rappelling in a quarry. She wants me to remember that I'd considered intimacy with Joel before she visited in the spring of 1978. But it's not true. He and I drove into the country for our day of fasting during the idyllic weeks after her visit, when she and I wrote long letters and spent hours on the phone.

“You mean you were two-timing me?” she asks, only half in jest.

“It appears that way.”

Barbara and I met in graduate school in 1973 – her first year, my last. We loped movie to movie between Lindsley-Chit and the law library. She asked for seconds of my steak-and-kidney pie. “A woman of appetites,” I joked. She was a good sport at least.

When I left Yale to become an academic migrant worker, Barbara continued her musicology studies. In 1977, dissertation still unfinished, I landed back at my alma mater in Fayetteville. On the porch of a loden green student ghetto they called Bertha's Barracks, I saw a couple entwined on a sofa so covered in cat hair that it looked upholstered in gray burlap. The girl with spiky black bangs stared at me as if she'd felt the ping of a fly landing on her web. The sandy-haired fellow, harder to read, offered me his hand from under her back as he looked up through grey-green eyes from a thousand yards below a polar ice cap. “Joel,” he said.

The next week I saw him stretching fluidly from a ladder while stocking shelves at the food co-op. “You could work here too,” he said – and pay member prices for pippins and miso and 40-pound tins of Moroccan cashews. I declined, but over the next weeks I returned with surplus vegetables from Mom's garden – green beans (\$.15/pound), tomatoes (\$.50/pound), zucchini (free to a good home). We shared sun tea and talked.

Mostly I filled in the silences while he looked into some real me 2 feet behind my chair, someone who vaguely disappointed him. After he challenged me for eating beef and riding horses, I figured he was the right moral agent to counsel me about my love life. I gave up meat – I couldn't bring myself to renounce the horses – and returned to ask, *how do you know when it's right?* I wanted to learn how to be at home in my body. He seemed to know. When he pierced me with those never-ending eyes he seemed to know everything. Afterwards I'd park on off-ramps, indent my forehead into the steering wheel, and talk to him as if he sat beside me in the passenger seat.

I recognized what was going on. I'd had crushes all my life. Eventually the pretty boys seemed less pretty. It took longer for the smart girls to seem dumb, but either way no one ever had to know. Then one warm fall day Joel visited our family farm

with yet one more girl on his arm – a fellow cast member from our rehearsals of “Cabaret.” As I walked beside them among the pines he let his hip brush mine. Not once but several times. *So at home in his body that he doesn’t need a protective bubble.* My bubble burst.

I made a convincing Schultz, an old man caught up in a hopeless love affair, who sings “Somebody wonderful married me” – but of course she doesn’t, because he’s Jewish. I mocked myself nightly, slurring “Meeskite, meeskite” like a minstrel in whiteface. Neighbors didn’t recognize me. Seeing me fold my costume between acts, a fellow performer observed, “Wow, you’re in character even backstage.” I forced myself to quit bumping into Joel, but by then I’d begun dropping weight as if the Cotton Mather within had sentenced me to suicide-by-anorexia.

“Have you been sick?” fellow actors asked at the annual Arkie awards in the spring. When the head of the drama department opened the envelope for best supporting actor, she smiled, said it pleased her to honor such a nuanced performance, and read my name. Method acting really works. At the end of the evening the best actress winner, who’d played Sally Bowles, grabbed me. Over toddies in a dark booth, she hissed, “He didn’t have the guts to give me the award himself, the bastard.” It turned out that during the run of the show she’d had an affair with the director. She didn’t ask about my emotional state. I didn’t volunteer.

A month later I sent my semi-annual letter to Barbara. I enclosed a photo of a foal in our pasture. “*Want to meet him?*” The guy who came to pick her up at the airport was 40 pounds lighter than when she’d last seen him. Midweek I brought her and Joel together at the health food café. I thought I was introducing the two neatest people I knew, but I don’t doubt I wanted to show him, *See, I have a woman interested in me.* And I was showing Barbara, *See, if we throw in our lot together I will keep no secrets.* The contrasts could not have been starker: he was prettier, she was wittier. Joel or Barbara, male or female, blond or brunette, slender or *saftig*, charismatic or brainy, plants or animals, burn or marry. I sat between them and chewed.

As I review our courtship, Barbara reminds me – she knows only because we talked about it later – that I’d thought about asking her to marry me during our daytrip to Hanging Judge Parker’s courtroom in Fort Smith. As the breeze riffled our hair atop the Mt. Gaylor tower, we fed each other strawberries. But no words came. I went back to Joel to learn how to approach her. *How do you know when it’s right?*

I had resolved I wouldn’t be the kind of man to say “I love you” to score a fleeting thrill, but the euphemisms were vague about just what Anna K got out of it when Vronsky filled her with love. Didn’t women swoon or think of Mother Russia? It’s probably obvious I read books better than people, since I’ve reported walking beside a fellow who rhythmically bumped my hip while asking me to confirm for the girl on his other side that guys too like their breasts tweaked during sex. It had been news to me that a man’s breasts were more than evolutionary oddities.

Barbara shakes her head. “Didn’t you stand in the Dickson Street version of City Lights Bookstore and thumb through sex manuals? Doesn’t everyone?”

“Not me,” I said, “at least not then.” Joel was the first person I ever talked to

about sex as if the taboo subject had anything to do with me.

As I mounted the steps in the morning mist to collect him for a day of fasting and talk, his roommate Maynard glared at me through slits. He knew what I wanted, even if I didn't.

"Need to change my shirt," Joel said from his bedroom. The bare bulb behind him kindled the golden down like a halo as he stripped to his jockey shorts and then lowered even them with unselfconscious ease. *Is this what it's like to see the face of God?* As the one who had reason to feel ashamed, I looked away and expelled my breath. *Why*, I wondered after a moment, *is he changing even his underwear?*

We drove to a leaning farmhouse on Maynard's grandparental homestead, where we walked through drizzle and sat under rock ledges and reviewed Joel's encounters with women. His gradual revelation that he preferred men sucked the air out of me. It was safe to have a crush on him when he was so obviously heterosexual, but now? He spoke about the fuck buddy who'd shown him the ropes, the rabbit kid who picked him up in the library and left following a rapid climax, the student union director he'd confronted at midnight after the guy had looked past him in the daylight. "I wasn't going to let him get in my pants again, but he did." *Can't he see these people don't know how to value him?*

Inside the farmhouse, on a stairwell flanked by cabbage roses, he recalled the breakthrough he'd had with Maynard in a sleeping bag right there while others snored mere feet away. "Sex," he said, "is perfectly natural between friends." I locked onto his eyes like an enraptured mouse. *This must be who I am after all.* I couldn't envision how we'd fit together, but I wanted to experience his fluency in the world. If not that, then at least look at him every day for the rest of my life.

I drove us back to the Barracks at dusk. It appeared I'd have to be the one to ask. As I opened the door of the Beetle, the dome light came on. *Let them see. If I'm going to say the words, I should say them in the light.* I edged my arm around his shoulder. "So what do you think? Should we do it?"

"Sure," he said, "why not?"

Why not? I could think of a hundred reasons why not. After a long moment I squeezed his shoulder, placed both hands on the steering wheel, and said, "I never make decisions on an empty stomach." On the way home I knew I wouldn't settle for so little. Or maybe I just lost my nerve as I had so many times before. Months later, Joel would confide about the angular fellow with him, "He's my first frat boy," as if he filled out the life list of a birder. No, I wouldn't be his first balding virgin college instructor, not if all he offered was a how-to book from the lending library.

Barbara doubts I really loved Joel, but felt fascination or obsession. I couldn't have told the difference. I remember the stab of recognition when the news trickled out that fall about Jonestown. Would I have drunk the Kool-Aid if he had asked? It had felt that way. Of course he was no Jim Jones. Yes, he cultivated his charisma to bolster his ego – do charismatics ever love anyone besides themselves? – but he was no different from thousands of boys in that decade between Stonewall and AIDS, boys who saw no reason they might not deserve whatever sensations their

bodies offered them.

I talked to Joel when he wasn't there, to Barbara when she was. And she talked to me. I ought to let her say what she felt. "Not love," she reports, "so much as the shove of a great hand and a voice saying, 'You must marry this person. You must save him from himself.'" Before I could waste away entirely, we embarked on something like an arranged marriage, although we did the arranging ourselves. Once we had talked about everything there was to say - including the boys who showered suggestively in my wet dreams - Gram's rings eased onto her finger as if they'd been made for her. And we committed ourselves to making our marriage work.

Had I gone for a roll in the sleeping bag with Joel I might have made a more sympathetic life-partner, less eager to judge loved ones from my moral perch. On the other hand, what options would have remained once Cotton Mather had stared me down in Joel's bathroom mirror? Jump from an eighth story ledge? Cut off my organ? Surely my cells would have refused further nutrients. Instead, with help from serotonin reuptake inhibitors, I gained back all the weight I'd shed. I think Barbara and I are happy. Mostly what makes it work is that we talk. Through all this cancer stuff I've stayed alive more for her than for me. It's not altruism; I want to hear what she'll say tomorrow.

I've never lied to Barbara, and she's never felt the need to forgive me for what goes on in my head. Eventually I resolved to take a public stand too on things that matter, even if I end up looking like a crank or a pervert. But my long-practiced reticence held sway until 2003, when my country invaded Iraq and surgeons carved out my prostate. As I got dragged through puberty backwards, it felt like déjà vu all over again - facing an unwinnable war while obsessing over my nonexistent sex life.

Our inability to kick ass quickly in Iraq should have inserted a question mark into our post-9/11 mythology. Maybe it did. Maybe I was too caught up in chemo to notice. By 2005 I did finally protest sending young guardsmen on their second rotations to face Iraqi zealots in vests lined with nails and ball bearings. My protest emerged, I admit, only after I'd heard that my nephew Glen III (the former "Peanut") was in Baghdad driving an under-armored Bradley. Of course he would never have questioned his orders. Neither would my brother, recently retired from the Army Reserve. Mom, though, had her doubts. This war, unlike the one she and Pop signed up for in '43, had no clean moral lines. What business did we have in Iraq anyway, beyond expunging the shame of Vietnam?

It's silly for me to wave a firebrand after all these years - especially when Obama's presidency should have signaled a more reasonable time. It didn't, of course. Bush and Obama each enflamed the opposition - who saw Bush as a know-nothing fascist and Obama as a foreign-born socialist. Both factions decried a stolen election - engineered from hanging chads or a faked birth certificate. (Of course, there really *were* hanging chads.)

Like brothers in the 1860s, Glen and I lined up on opposite sides of this cultural divide. I felt like a Northerner in secessionist territory. The night before the 2008 election, redneck goons ripped off the Obama/Biden sign from my yard, just as they'd snatched Kerry/Edwards four years earlier. This time I nursed my anger for less than a day, since my man won. In '04, on the other hand, the goons not only suppressed my speech, they gloated over it for four more years. My brother became just as resentful in '08 – not that anyone, as far as I could tell, suppressed his speech. I tried to understand his feelings about Obama by recalling how I felt under Bush. It isn't whether you've actually lost your voice, but that no one listens except the other losers banished to the same barren island.

Caught up in the Tea Party tirades, Glen joined the “pass it on or you're not a patriot” clan of email forwarders. “But Glen,” I wrote back, “Lee Iacocca didn't say any of those things about Obama. His book came out in '07, before Obama even won a primary. Iacocca dumped on Dubya. Which means somebody appropriated his name and made Obama the target.”

“What difference does it make who said it so long as it's true?”

“But it's not. And aren't you worried people will think you'd lie about more important things?” I recommended snopes.com for debunking email myths, but he removed me from his mailing list and continued sharing misattributed screeds with other true believers.

Glen would hate it if he suspected I'm once again making him look foolish. I doubt it would help even if I pointed out that we anti-Bushies never resisted half as effectively as the anti-Obama trolls. At least he and I have come to appreciate one another's gifts – so long as we steer clear of politics. Like when we joined Mom in 2009 at the Ozark farmhouse for a powwow. She was still spry at 90 – only a little bent and now-and-again forgetful – but it seemed time to settle on what she wanted us to do with her effects after her appointment with eternity.

“Let's get together, just you and me and Mom, no wives or children to distract us,” I suggested. I figured Glen would sign on, since his wife was the one who'd asked if I knew what Mom planned to do with all her stuff. (I sometimes think Ann has made it her life's work to slam the latch on the U-Haul before a clod can ricochet off a coffin.)

“Well, okay,” Glen said, “I guess we could do that.”

By 6 a.m. on both December mornings, while I still dreamed in the cherry three-quarter bed, Glen had started combing through file drawers. He located burial and life insurance policies, trust documents, a will, some receipts he could have used in Mom's previous IRS filings, even some unpaid bills. Mom and I padded through the house noting her chosen recipient for each heirloom – her grandmother's Rope-and-Anchor pattern Haviland china (for Glen – had to go to the oldest child), oak thresher table (me), cedar chests (one to each of us boys), Aunt Phoebe's rocker (to a grandchild), the lacquered brass lamps Pop brought back from Japan (to another grandchild), the '95 Dodge pickup (also to a grandkid) that Pop had set her up with in his last months – and that she'd driven off the road three times on account of her borderline narcolepsy.

“Gosh, bro,” I said on the second evening as I stirred spaghetti sauce over low heat so as not to splatter on the stacks of church bulletins and address labels on the counter. “How’d you dig through 20 feet of files? I couldn’t have done that in a month.”

“Not hard,” he said, “not if you’re used to looking for the big picture.”

Later that evening as we readied our duffels for our respective minivans, he said, “This was a good idea after all.” And later still, “I’ll leave the coffee pot plugged in for you.”

By morning he’d forgotten the coffee, but it didn’t really matter. It’s a shame we had to grow paunches before coming to this place. The real shame, though – assuming he should ever read this essay – may be that I’ve ruined our rapprochement by calling his wife a grave robber.

7

We eventually extricated ourselves from Iraq – sort of. In December of 2015 Mom turned 97 in a veteran’s home in Kentucky. I’m grateful that Glen helped place her there. For each of the previous five Christmases, Barbara and I drove our son David – first a high-schooler, then a college boy – up to Kentucky to play Bach solo suites on the cello for his grandma. This time, on our way back to Louisiana, we stopped in Paducah to visit Glen. David and his cousin Miranda thumbed their handheld devices in parallel play. Ann and I avoided sniping at each other. Could be we’ve matured.

In the morning as Barbara and I repacked the Prius, Glen carted out a big cardboard box. “Some of Mom’s dishes,” he said. “We don’t have any use for them.” Apparently Glen III, next in line, didn’t want them either. Ann called out from the porch, “They’re all mismatched.”

Back at home, uncrimping newsprint from around the crockery, I recognized the intertwining white and gold of the Haviland Rope and Anchor dinnerware. Mom thought so highly of her grandmother’s china that she never used it, but the thinned gold bands on the near rims of teacups confirmed that generations before her had. The “mismatched” pieces? Heavier German-made replacements for dishes that had shattered over the years.

The place settings looked at home on the oak thresher table, where Illinois farm hands had celebrated harvests a century ago. *Doesn’t Glen know how to value these treasures?* But I reflected that once again – much like adopting biracial Miranda – he’s living the Gospel. I may say I’m not defined by “things,” but he’s the one downsizing while I tune in to “Antiques Road Show.” Surely it’s time I quit judging my brother for not being me.

8

In May of 2016, five months after her 97th birthday, Mom suffered a stroke and never regained consciousness. A week later we buried her alongside Pop in the Fayetteville Veteran’s Cemetery. Riflemen fired volleys to celebrate the service of

this venerable Woman Marine. A cornetist blew taps achingly enough to call down eternity.

Two sergeants in dress blues lifted the corners of the American flag draped over the coffin. Standing up seemed the right thing to do, and then the other mourners rose behind me. For five minutes we watched the choreography of white gloves as the two servicemen folded the flag into a triangular bundle. Then each in turn cradled the flag in the crook of his elbow and tightened the outermost tuck, while the other raised a gloved hand in a slow-motion salute.

One sergeant held out the flag to me. Until that moment I'd pretty much anticipated the moves, but not now. *This isn't right. The flag should be Glen's.* Still, I took the taut bundle and mumbled my thanks. The sergeant saluted and turned on his heel.

After the ceremony I took the flag to Glen. "This belongs to you," I said.

"No, it's yours."

"But...."

"No, you keep it. I have Pop's."

A contingent of Legionnaires – old men looking like McDonald's servers in their pointed caps and short-sleeved white shirts with red and gold accents – expressed their gratitude for being invited to the service. "She was one of the first WMs, joined in '43," I told them. One of them said, "I was only a year old." Another, "I wasn't even born yet." *Me neither*, I thought, as I realized these old guys are my age mates.

"You know, you should never unfold that flag," the last Legionnaire said. I hadn't known. He handed me a black velvet bag containing three shell casings from the honorary volleys. Now these potent symbols would find a place in my home. I know I'll still feel relief, though, whenever our son tells eager military recruiters about his food allergies. *A kid unable to eat chicken and beans? Not fighting material. Not even if we reinstitute the draft.*

The flag was a generous gesture from Glen. Now that I think about it, I have to hope he won't stumble across this essay. I doubt he'd understand why I'm writing it, not even if I explain that it's part of a series relocating my identity after prostate surgery. In each of the dozen-or-so essays I've mostly focused a jeweler's loupe on facets of my sexual history. (Not much of a stretch, really: preoccupation with the prostate leads pretty directly to questions about sex.) A year ago a participant in a writer's workshop demanded, "So are you gay or straight or what?" I sighed, unable to imagine a short answer to a question I've evidently spent decades teasing out.

I recalled an earlier workshop when Wayne, a puckish fellow, 45-or-so, with horn-rimmed glasses, wrote that he'd recently divorced his wife of 20 years and entered the Dallas gay bar scene. At the climax of his essay, the narrator watches as his one-night-standee rolls his naked haunch to the edge of the bed, places his cowboy hat on his head, and says, "You queers're really sick. I wouldn't even a'shown at the

Boot Heel if I coulda hooked up at Billy Bob's. Them bitches don't give you the time of day." Or words to that effect.

"But Wayne," I said, "the narrator in this piece is so bright and so articulate. How'd he end up taking this bozo home without knowing him any better than that?"

"I don't know. It's the way it happened."

"But the wife in the story is his best friend. He gives that up for a fuck with a redneck who insults him?"

He shrugged.

"But something must have been going through your head. That's what you need to write."

"I don't know," he said, "maybe I'll just turn it into a short story."

I'd still need to see the logic, I thought. But I suppose even straight guys couldn't have answered my questions: *What got you into bed with this person? How did you know it was right? Did it still feel right afterwards?* Enough blood to run a brain or a penis, not both.

Later, when Wayne said I was the first straight guy he knew who actually "got it," I said, "Straight? I'm as queer as they come; I just don't go to bed with people I haven't made commitments to." "Queer" - a state I have come to own only through crafting these essays - hits it pretty well. That or "Barbara-sexual." Actually it's hard to think you're any kind of "-sexual" when you can't get an erection. We had flickers for a while after the chemo, but in 2010, when the PSA rose again, radiation ended all that silliness. Barbara has remained a good sport. Now at bedtime I read cop novels aloud to her until she falls asleep.

Glen encouraged his teenaged sons to tape "Hustler" centerfolds above their beds to help them turn out "normal." I suppose we all hope to help our sons negotiate the minefields. When David was younger Barbara insisted that a boy needs to hear about sex officially from his father, who might serve as a model of commitment. I cringed remembering "the talk" Pop gave Glen and me in our early teens - probably too late for Glen, but well before I wanted to hear it. I wouldn't have entered into this rite of passage with a 9-year-old, but after hints from college freshmen about their middle school debaucheries I feared for David if I waited.

I'd heard that drugs entwine with sex for kids, but my authority on substance abuse is laughable - a single bad trip in the '70s after two hash brownies that had seemed dangerous only from the obvious sugar and probable caffeine. *Midget red-hooded slashers in every alley. Never again.* Besides, how could I counsel him against foreign substances when he sees his graying parents pop a dozen pills with breakfast?

Driving to school, as NPR airs an exposé on drugs, I turn down the volume and ask, "David, what'll you say if someone comes up on the playground, offers you a pill, and says, 'try this - it'll make you feel really good?'"

He studies the question, then says, “No, my mommy already has those.” So I figure he’ll make out all right on that one.

But sex? Like boys everywhere he’s fascinated with his crotch, though not yet with anyone else’s. When he was younger, we would shower together after his day in the sandbox. I wasn’t sure I should place my organs in front of his face as I shampooed his hair, but I went ahead with the movements that seemed least contrived. So far, to my relief, he showed more interest in his mother’s brassiere than in his father’s boxers.

Our opportunity arose during his fourth grade project on the human endocrine system. He’d made clay replicas of organs, and we talked about them, the pancreas, the hypothalamus, the ovaries, the testes. I did the best I could.

“It’ll feel good to touch yourself,” I told him. “It’s a private thing for your bedroom.” I didn’t want him to crumble under the shame I’d felt. Sex is less important than that.

“People who don’t really care about you will want to touch you too – people who’ll say it’s only fun, but they’re wrong.” Sex is more important than that.

I’d begun to wax poetic about the sacredness his mother and I attached to our intimacy, when David asked, “Can I play Pokémon now?” So we stopped, probably a relief to both of us. I wasn’t sure how to approach sexual orientation anyway. I hoped he wouldn’t have to confront being attracted to guys. *But whoever he becomes, will he know I still love him? Will he know that’s what I’ve meant by the words I’ve left unsaid?*

Ten years later, I recalled that conversation as we parked outside the Northwest Arkansas Regional airport after my mom’s funeral, an hour before David’s flight back to New York. As he and Barbara readied their good-byes in the front seat, she cornered him into talking about his boyfriend. “Name’s Stephen,” he murmured. “Music student. Half black. He’s really sweet.”

I felt a stab of jealousy at how effortless it seems for him. At his age, I’d have been obliged to slash my wrists. When I first told Barbara about growing up in that dark night of the soul, she asked, “How does that make sense theologically? Isn’t suicide going to send you to Hell?”

“Suicide,” I said, “saves you from the only sin more damnable than the despair driving you into the Pit.” Nobody had to say it. Even in church it was clear I’d be better off dead.

I’m glad David hasn’t had to twist himself into such a shape. Thank God boys who love boys in America no longer have to hear that they’re uniquely reprehensible. Sitting there in the backseat behind him, though, I found myself wishing he’d made the same safe choices I made at his age, no matter how perverse the reasoning that got me there. On the other hand, he could rightly say I was a coward for refusing to acknowledge the person within.

As I ruminated behind them, Barbara said to David, “At least it’s a good thing you’re not as screwed up as your father was.” When I agreed, David looked around like he’d forgotten I was in the car. I waved. “You know,” I said, “if I’d approached adulthood the way you’re doing it, you might never have appeared on the planet

to confront your own gay gene and emerge smiling out the other side.” We both scrunched up our faces, the way you do when you’re not sure where the conversation might go if you actually said something else. Meanwhile Barbara grinned in the rearview mirror.

Whatever happens, I hope David will share his life with someone as upbeat as his mother. I love talking to her in the car, on the phone, in bed, at the dinner table. Okay, maybe my ramrod-straight brother has secrets he shares with his spouse. I can’t imagine what they might be, but I should give him the benefit of the doubt. And maybe toss Ann a bone too – drop a hint that her grandkids might someday inherit David’s “stuff.” On the other hand, Barbara, hugging him goodbye at the airport, did venture the hope that he might still have children of his own, “maybe with a lesbian and a turkey baster.”

I’ve been one of those liberal academic perverts who, right-wingers say, lead astray innocent Southern undergraduates. Having been one of those innocents myself – and having fashioned a teaching career in the flyover states – I am flattered to be assigned such an important role in the conspiracy theory. On the other hand, until recently it looked like a fairly harmless exercise. Then we elected Donald Trump.

I probably shouldn’t have been surprised at the vote – not after hearing Lindsey, a suburban Dallas blonde in my first-year seminar, complain that a black girl in her high school had gotten into Harvard and she hadn’t. “My test scores were higher,” she said. “That proves there’s discrimination against whites!” A young black woman across the classroom rolled her eyes; I struggled to avoid imagining the blonde’s doomed application essay.

During the jaw-dropping vote count in November I flashed back on my brother’s “Make America Great Again” ball cap. I dreaded hearing him gloat, but so far he’s forwarded only cutesy doggy pix and fluttering American flags in the emails from his fellow conspiracy theorists. I assume they’re quietly celebrating the providential recovery of their alienated country. I have to hope my side will reclaim ours again, much as we did after eight years of waterboarding under Cheney and Dubya. For now, though, we’ve returned to an America where boys like me grew up unwilling to acknowledge we might be queers.

At the end of David’s Christmas break we drove him toward the Dallas airport.

“So you and Stephen met at a concert, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, at intermission.”

“And?”

“We struck up a conversation.”

“And?”

“Stephen posted something on Facebook. About composing. We met for coffee. Had a lot to talk about.”

“Come on, son, how about some specifics.”

“Mom, is he autistic or what?”

“Your father doesn’t understand dating. And yes, he is on the autism spectrum.”

“Well, okay,” he continued after a minute, “I was leaving his place one day and he said ‘Fuck it’ and kissed me. I liked it. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

I don’t know what I wanted to hear. Maybe an answer, after all these years, to “How do you know when it’s right?”

“So is this, like, for the long term?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not like we’re getting married or anything. God, do we have to talk about this? It’s private.”

Barbara pulled into an outlet mall to buy David dress shirts and Nikes.

Back on the road, he said, “Stephen and I went to Pride last summer. You know the LGBT parade. An old lady spit on me in front of a church.”

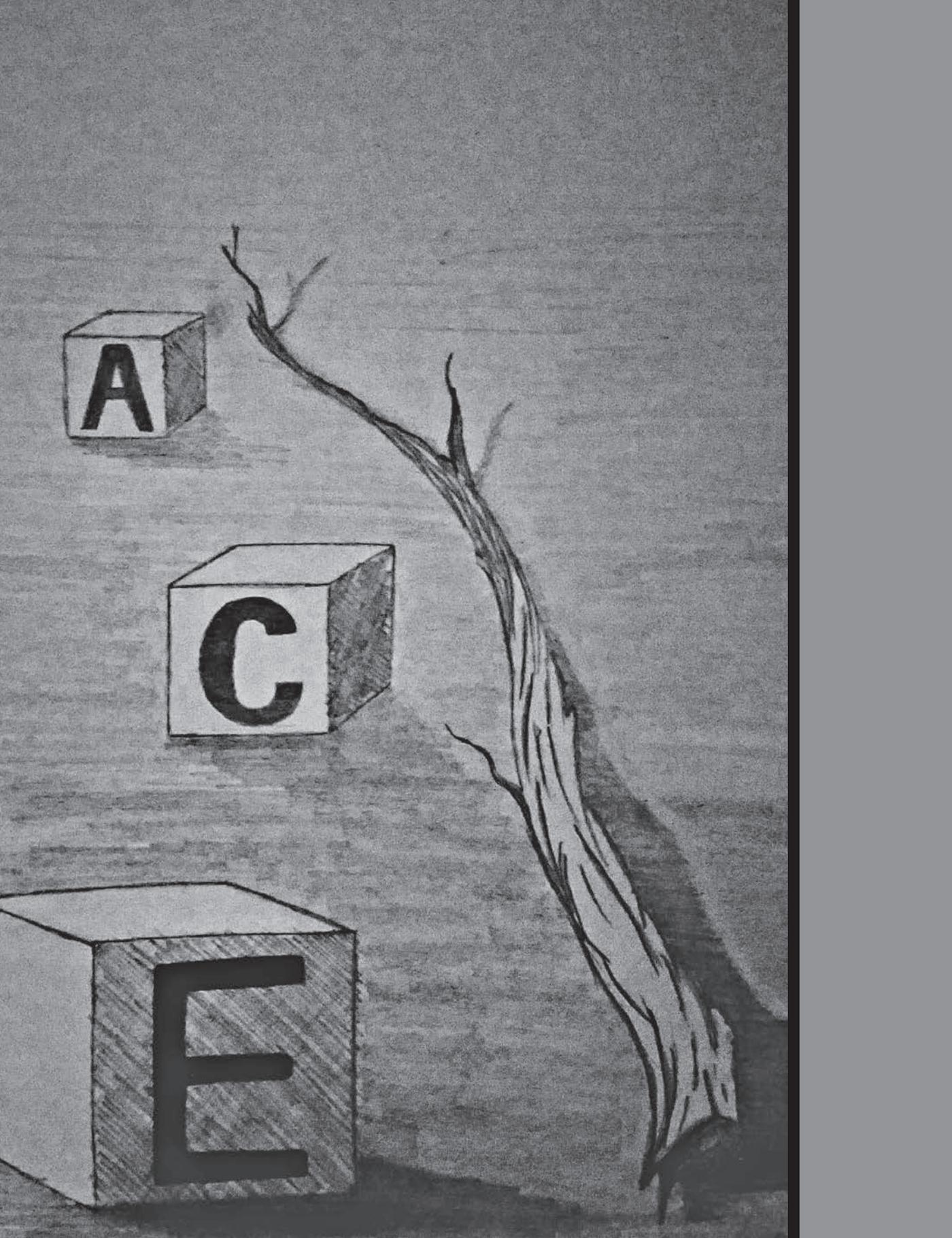
“Did you spit back?”

“No. She was a black lady.”

After a second I said, “I get it. A black boy holding hands with a white boy, it’s like you’d clapped him back in chains.”

As we riffed on discrimination, the conversation caught an updraft. But on the way home, Barbara told me I’d been out of line to keep pushing for details. Just because I’ve resolved to hold no secrets, I shouldn’t expect my son to rip out the seams between his public and private selves. I emailed him an apology. I can hardly justify embarrassing him about how he negotiates a world where straight white guys once again make the rules. But when Trump’s Border Patrol finishes rounding up Mexicans and Muslims and starts herding us queers behind the Wall, I don’t want to sit here wishing I’d said something earlier.

I worry about what my brother will do if Trump decides black lives really don’t matter. Miranda gets her milk-chocolate skin and tight curls from her biological father. Does Glen really think she’ll end up on the white side of the Wall because her adoptive father is a lifelong Republican? Or a lifetime NRA member? Aren’t we finally more alike than different, Glen and I? No father – not in the red states, not in the blue – is going to welcome the exile of his child.



later when I asked him about the day I was born. We, God's Angels and I, brought Momma and Daddy together at a Cherokee gospel singing held at the Illinois River Baptist Church near Chewey. I wished I had told him I chose them to be my parents and how I volunteered to be a Cherokee. They may have laughed then, but they're not laughing now because they know everything. The near death experience comes with a prize inside and the death experience sends a person on the journey home.

Sue and Cordell died 11 days apart in the fall of 2011. Nearly eight years an orphan and 58 years of life on earth, yet I try to forget to remember to forget I forgave him, my great uncle Eli.

ELGT

"Amazing Grace," how sweet the sound flowed out of the Illinois River Baptist Church. The singers sang the beloved hymn in Cherokee. It was an old-time Cherokee gospel singing and the entire Chewey community was there. Sue sat in the front row of the church helping the singers with her sweet voice. She was dressed in the latest spring fashion of 1951 and she was home for summer vacation for only a few days. She had just finished her sophomore year at Sequoyah Indian Boarding School in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. She would soon be leaving for Neosho, Missouri, to work for a doctor and his family like she had done the previous summer.

Sue loved to work and save money so she could buy the clothes and makeup popular in the early 1950s. Her black hair was curled and styled perfectly. She wore deep red lipstick, black mascara and eyeliner, and sparkling earrings made of silver. She was a beautiful 16-year-old Cherokee girl. And I loved her and wanted her to be my mother. As the song came to a close the church doors opened and more people walked in from the cool spring night. Not everyone turned to look, but Sue did and she saw Cordell for the very first time. Everything I asked God and his Angels to do hummed like an electrical current and they smiled at one another and though they didn't marry until seven years later, my spirit helped bring them together on that cool spring evening.

DᎠᎦᎵᎠᎦ

"You had so much hair on you we didn't know whether to keep you or give you to the cats," he would laugh and give me a big hug. I loved cats and this sparked my imagination of what it would have been like to grow up cat instead of American Indian.

Not just American Indian - Cherokee American Indian - from a long line of ancestors who wove their way back to the beginning of the earth, time out of mind, time immemorial. No matter how assimilated Cordell and Sue were by the time I was born, they could never dilute the Ancestors' blood in my veins. They both still spoke the language, they took us to the Cherokee ceremonial grounds at Chewey, Oklahoma, and they both held mainstream jobs in Claremore and Tulsa, Oklahoma. They were my parents. I chose them before I was born.

Jobs and working were important to them. Mom spent 14 years in the government boarding school system. She was removed from her parents' home in

1941 at the age of 6 and sent to Seneca Indian School in Wyandotte, Oklahoma. Though her sister, Carrie, and her brother, James, went with her, I know she missed her mom, Betsy, and her dad, Homer. Sue and Cordell were my parents and I chose them before I was born. Though I would not fully realize this until 1992, the year I stopped drinking and doing drugs; the year my spirit and body were reunited.

I was a girl who roamed my dad's five acres without fear. I didn't care if I got dirty or wet or covered in seed ticks. I loved being barefoot in the woods. It was full of all species of trees like black walnut, hickory, elm, pine and mimosa; the Oklahoma landscape and climate supported an abundance of plants and wildlife. Even prickly pear cactus found its way up from the dark soil and it bloomed soft and yellow along the rocky hillside.

ASSB

The mimosa tree was full of pink blooms. They looked like pink pompoms and I climbed up to them with the intention of harvesting enough to make cheerleader pompoms. Though I was only 4, I knew what a cheerleader was and I wanted to be one.

I wasn't scared of heights, and I had to have those pink blossoms. I didn't do much tree climbing after I fell, but I don't remember the actual fall as much as I remember my hospital stay. I had to be put in the hospital for observation as if my brain was scattered in the green grass of my parent's Cherokee American Dream.

I was 4 years old when I fell hard to the dark earth, got knocked unconscious and had to spend the night in the 1940s stucco buildings of the Claremore Indian Hospital while Mom, an Albuquerque Nursing School graduate, worked the graveyard shift. She was 30 years old, the same age as my father, Cordell, and though they were fully institutionalized and assimilated into American society they still spoke the Cherokee language.

Capitalism cut out their children's native tongues and forced its language - English; good-ole-boys-club American English - down their throats like a bar of lye soap. I didn't fully realize the impact of not knowing my language till decades later when all I felt was rage.

I cried for Mom. I remember standing in a white crib with tall wooden rails. She would appear in the doorway, walk in and soothe me for only seconds and then an entourage of her fellow nurses would appear in my pediatric hospital room. They took turns during the night making sure I didn't fall asleep. I stood up and shook the white rails calling for my mother.

"Mom!" I yelled.

I yelled.

I yelled over and over again in English.

I had a concussion. It was my first concussion and the only concussion for which I was ever treated. My bruised brains slid around in my skull. Though I was accident prone, bones were never broken; only my heart, flesh, and my spirit were undone. The scars are embroidered on my flesh like scriptures of memory. I was a blemished Cherokee girl.

The next year, when I was 5, my face was rearranged and now I have two distinct profiles.



“Look out!” Dean yelled at me while we played near the cast iron swing set on the west side of our little white house. Two cast iron poles stuck out of concrete and a bar was welded across the top to form a homemade swing. There was an old tire strung up by a rope in the middle of the bar.

I turned my 5-year-old face upward and asked, “For what?”

The steel pliers hit my face with such force that the right side of my nose split open in a gush of blood. I screamed and fainted, and came to in a Claremore City Hospital emergency room.

Then I remember Dad holding me down and he had on a red shirt. There was a bright white light in my eyes and I was struggling to sit up, but he wouldn’t let me. Hot snot and tears came with my every scream. His strong hands were holding my arms above my head and I knew he only wore white shirts during the summer. *Why was his shirt so red?* Then I remembered the blue sky beneath the tire swing as Dean yelled, “Look out!” Or did he say *Look Up?*

The blood had turned my dad’s white shirt red. I don’t remember Mom being in the Claremore City Hospital Emergency Room where I got seven stitches in my right nostril and a new face.

Daddy beat Dean for destroying his baby girl’s unblemished face. I had to start first grade in a few months and the scar gleamed like a star on the water. I began raiding the Band-Aid boxes from the medicine cabinet and wandered through my war-torn childhood like a wounded soldier. I stuck the Band-Aids to my smooth, unblemished cheeks just for fun, but now I know I was accumulating points for my adverse childhood experiences (ACE).



The public school system in Rogers County, Oklahoma, was a continuation of my institutionalization into American society and it was a love/hate relationship.

Being a first grader with a large scar on my brown face probably added to my anxiety, but I remember knowing how to read the day I walked into Mrs. Isaac’s first grade classroom. Sue taught me to read. She taught Dean to read, too. We took to it like otters to water! Dick and Jane had nothing on us. By second grade, I learned all teachers weren’t going to be as nice as Mrs. Isaac.

Mrs. Bancarron loved to hit me with her open hand in front of my second grade classmates. I couldn’t even go to the pencil sharpener without getting whacked on my ass with her bony, white hand. During board game time, I retaliated by sticking a pinto bean up my nose. We used them to mark our bingo cards. Of course, it got stuck and I rode the bus home Friday afternoon with a bingo bean stuck up my scarred nostril.

I had to sneak around the house with a damn bean in my nose for two days, until finally, after blowing my nose repeatedly, it shot out and slid across the scratched wooden floor. I learned my lesson about putting the bingo beans up my nose. If

Mrs. Bancarron had known, she would have hit me so hard that bean would have shot across the classroom and ricocheted off the silver pencil sharpener straight into the trash can. She could have called my parents and told them whatever she wanted. I'm sure she was glad to see me promoted to the third grade. When adults were angry and hurt, they hurt themselves and they had to hurt others in order to lessen their own pain. This is how I was first introduced to the world of racism. More ACE points, please.

By the time I was 8 and a third grader at Sequoyah Elementary, Daddy stopped drinking beer and eating pills. He didn't spend his time at the beer joints between Claremore and Tulsa anymore. He spent more time at home fighting a drink and Dean and I looked for new places to hide. Though he said Sue was the one who helped him get clean and sober she wasn't immune to his mood swings on those angry days of his first withdrawals.

Cordell seemed to look for reasons to spank Dean or gripe at Mom and me. It was like he held a grudge against his only son. Just because I was scarred for life didn't mean I escaped every thrashing. His thin leather belt wrapped around his waist like a black snake ready to strike at any time and when he reached for his waist we were overcome with sudden dread. It had a silver buckle, but we always felt the leather on our legs and backsides, never the metal. I guess we were lucky.

DL600b

Daddy was mad again. He was always mad since he started coming home from work earlier than he used to. He used to stay out late and I would hear him and Momma outside my bedroom door. I heard glass breaking, and they would start shouting. It scared me. Momma said Daddy's knuckles were white and he had to get well. Dean and I tried to stay out of his way when he was mad, but there were times we just couldn't.

"Anita, I told you not to eat green beans out of the garden!"

"Sorry, I'm hungry."

"Go get your switch!"

I hung my head and tears welled up in my eyes. Slowly, I put one foot in front of the other and made my way around the gray tin garage. Daddy couldn't see me. He and Dean stood on the white gravel driveway with their arms crossed waiting for me to bring the switch that would deliver my punishment. When one of us got switched, so did the other. Fair and square.

"Get over here with your switch, I haven't got all day." Dad had no patience, especially when he was mad at us and he was fighting the demons of alcoholism and addiction, hence those white-hot knuckles.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can. This switch is heavy." I almost giggled.

Dean's eyes got big as they met mine and he raised his hands to his mouth to hide his smile.

"Here's my switch!" I almost laughed.

Daddy turned to grab the switch from my small brown hand and when he saw it, he bent over and began laughing. Dean joined him and I dropped the switch at

their feet. A puff of white dust jumped off the driveway and drifted away.

Why?

My switch was the biggest branch I could carry, a mimosa branch as tall as I was and as round as my dad's skinny leg. I dropped it at my dad's feet.

The mimosa branch saved me from a whipping and I still didn't stop eating green beans out of the garden. It was the dirt; I needed the dirt on my tongue and the crunch of the freshly picked green bean between my small teeth. My young body craved the Oklahoma dirt and the long hard rains of early spring.

After every spring and summer rain shower I would go to the part of the woods where my parasols grew. Mayapples have single leaves when they are young. Though I had shied away from climbing trees due to a fall from the mimosa when I was 4, I still loved trees. I'd pick a mayapple and run from sapling to sapling, shake the water from the leaves and hold my parasol over my head, then laugh with complete joy. Mom and Dad scolded me for coming into their little white house soaking wet and they would chase me into the bathroom. One of them would bring dry clothes and much later I don't remember ever telling them about my parasols or the Molecular Memory of the paths between my island villages. I had strong memories of the woman I used to be.

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I walked down a foot path on the island jungle in my bare feet. A white tunic hung around my young female body. My wavy black hair hung down around my brown face to my shoulders. I was on an island and the footpath was well worn and wide enough for groups of people to travel between villages. I met an elderly woman on the path. She had gray hair, pulled back from her brown face. She was wearing a bright red and yellow tunic and she carried a beautifully carved wooden parasol. It looked like it was made out of fine slabs of bamboo. We smiled at each other as we met and as she passed me the wind blew and water that had collected in the green folds of the island's tropical foliage fell down upon me. It was refreshing and made me smile, but I wished I had a beautiful parasol too and when I turned around to ask her about the lovely bamboo parasol she was gone.

I wasn't a baby anymore. By the time I turned 9 my world became more than the little white house surrounded by five acres of dense foliage and dark earth. The first and only family vacation rattled my traveling bone.

AW

"Memphis! Why do we have to go all the way to Memphis," I whined.

"Because I-40, then south, is the fastest way to get to your Great Aunt Alice's house," Cordell said as he was packing the suitcases into the brand new blue Chevy Impala.

I took a deep breath and sighed. I already hated Memphis. I didn't care about Elvis Presley, but I knew Mom and Dad listened to his records on their high fidelity stereo. Now, we had to listen to static and country and western music for 721 miles. Elvis wasn't so bad, after all.

We left Oklahoma on a hot July day in 1970 bound for Chunchula, Alabama, near

Mobile. Daddy's Aunt Alice was his mom's big sister. I'm named after his mom, who died when he was only a teenager. I don't recall much conditioned air in that Impala, but I don't remember much of anything about the one and only family vacation except for Timothy Johnston, Aunt Alice's three-story plantation house, stinging jellyfish, and the Beatles.

We put 721 miles behind us and when we rolled up in a cloud of dust into the Johnstons' driveway, Dean and I barely waited for the Impala to come to a complete stop. Mom yelled for us to settle down and wait for Dad to stop.

"Get your hands away from the door!" she yelled. Like we were getting ready to bail out and kill ourselves turning her vacation into funerals instead.

"Hurry, I see them waving at us, speed up!" Dean screamed.

"Settle down! Don't go nuts on me now!" Daddy jammed both feet into the brake pedal and came to a stop. Dean and I jumped out and ran all the way up their drive way to greet Timmy and his sister Dixie. I gave them each a big hug and turned to see Sue and Cordell open the blue Impala doors simultaneously. A wisp of Alabama dust curled up behind them and vanished in the hot noonday sun. I couldn't wait to see the ocean in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Grover, you and Sue get up here and get some of these hugs," Aunt Alice drawled. She had the most beautiful southern drawl I had ever heard. Timmy and Dixie had it too, but not to the extent of their mother and father, Uncle Bill. I was oblivious to the fact that we were in a very dangerous part of the United States; all I cared about was having fun, playing and swimming in the ocean for the first time. I was eager to take in all the exotic sights. Though Timmy was older than me, he let me into his 1970s teen dream world. He loved me and I loved him like he was an Alabama angel until the day he died and many days after; I love him still.

"Nita, come up here!" Timmy yelled as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. We had been excited and full of adrenaline when we first got there, then we crashed out on pallets in front of two bronze oscillating fans. Sue and Cordell sat in white rocking chairs on the vast porch, drank sweet tea, and admired the giant oaks draped in Spanish moss. It's a wonder they wanted to sit at all after the long road trip. I listened to their conversation then I heard Timmy call out to me again from somewhere high above me.

"Where are you?" I yelled to him as I looked around the front room and up at the high ceiling of his momma's house. Dean was still sound asleep on his pallet of quilts. His hair ruffled like overgrown grass each time the fan oscillated air his way. He usually had a buzz cut. The sweat rolled down my neck and I reached to wipe it away. Summertime in Alabama was just as hot as summertime in Oklahoma. I could see the sweat on Dean's brow and I didn't try to wake him up. I wanted Timmy all to myself. Our time together was short.

"Take the stairs to the third floor, my room is the second door on the right," he yelled.

"What are you two yelling about?" His daddy wanted to know as his head suddenly appeared through the dark green screen door.

"Uncle Bill, Timmy wants me to go to his room, is it OK to go up and visit with

him?" At 9 years old, I knew grownups were in charge and asking permission for everything was my way because this is how it was for this institutionalized indigenous girl from Claremore, Oklahoma. In those days, rules were not made to be broken.

"Sure, honey, you can go up to his room," Uncle Bill said as I got up from my pallet of cotton quilts. I held onto the bannister and looked up the staircase. It was nothing fancy, just dark wooden stairs with years of scuff marks. I ran up them with all my might as sweat splashed onto my arms and hands. Then it hit me and nearly tumbled me down the stairs.

Singing, drums, cymbals, and guitars flooded over me and drifted down the stairs as I neared the top until finally, I was at Timmy's door knocking and swaying to the songs rushing out of his room.

"There you are, little sis, listen to this," he turned up the volume of the phonograph. I watched as the inside of a green apple (white) spun on the silver record player rod. Timmy started to sing along with the music. He watched me, his eyes bright with life and wonder, hear the Beatles sing for the first time in my life and his smile grew impossibly wide. I couldn't believe what I heard. I felt that music in my soul and I knew Elvis might have to share his rock and roll crown with these long haired boys from England. Timmy and I played that album over and over and over until the needle wore out. He replaced it with another one and we sang along with every Beatles record he owned. It may have been the dog days of an Alabama summer, but I felt like a real cool kitty.

The next day, the Gulf of Mexico became my newest swimming hole. It was warm, salty, and full of stinging jellyfish. It made me miss the cool streams and creeks of Oklahoma. I wanted to go home.

Sue and Cordell had jobs to return to and we said our goodbyes and promised to write and keep in touch. I hugged Timmy, Dixie, and my aunt and uncle, then jumped into the backseat with Dean. Daddy turned the Impala around in the driveway. We all stuck our hands out the windows and Dad gave the horn a toot as we drove away. Sue clutched her belly. She sighed and smiled at Cordell. He reached across the front seat and lovingly laid his hand on her belly. I hummed a Beatles tune and fought sleep but lost to the sound of the wheels rolling on the hot Alabama asphalt. I dreamt of Timmy and his wide, wide happy smile.

We rolled toward Memphis, going home on the same route we had come on a week earlier. I didn't hate Memphis anymore. Especially after I discovered a street with Daddy's last name. McLemore Street, we got lost on a street baring my last name. It's not odd, maybe it was just a God thing.

DPFP6DJ

I was 10 years old when I first lost Mom and Dad. The new home on the hill made of white brick and green wood trim offered little comfort. The flawless construction was no solace against the dread I felt in my heart.

I lost them to the defect-ridden bodies of my twin brothers nine days after I turned 10 in the winter of 1971. February 15, 1971, brought twin baby brothers and intense sorrow.

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Mom and Dad dropped Dean and me off at my Uncle Tommy and Aunt Myrtle's house on the way to the Claremore City Hospital. Myrtle was Sue's baby sister. There was a cold drizzle falling from the February sky. My cousins, Jerri, Mary, Frankie, Ronnie, and Tommy Jr. were holding a séance when we walked into the house. We dumped our stuff in the hallway and joined the fun. Before long, I was scared out of my mind when the séance table jumped beneath my hands, then the kitchen lights flickered, and went out followed by a loud crash in the master bedroom. We screamed as all eight of us piled onto the tiny couch; Kevin, my littlest cousin, ended up on the bottom. The front door of the house on Seminole Street rattled as a crash of thunder shook the house. Our screams turned to wild laughter. I loved being with my cousins. Then, I heard the loud knock at the door. Daddy had returned to pick us up.

There would be no trip to the hospital nursery to see my baby brothers. It was a quiet ride home in the cold rain with Daddy trying to explain birth defects between giant claps of thunder and how being brave and helpful was synonymous with happiness. Lightening flashed as he told us we needed to make sacrifices. How does a child make sacrifices without becoming one? Dean would learn to sacrifice his sanity and sobriety. My self-esteem and well-being was traded for a world blotted with loss and violence. I thought I had no choice but to learn to love my Sue and Cordell less.

The term birth defect soon became synonymous with sadness. I was sad for Mom and Dad. I was sad for the twins, Dale and David. I was sad for my older brother, Dean, and I was especially sad for myself. I felt sorry for all the things I had done to cause my family sorrow. There was no logical reason for me to blame myself; yet, since I blamed myself for getting molested, why not blame myself for the cause of my parent's newborn sorrow? If knowing is half the battle, then forgetting is an endless, ugly war. The silent struggle etched deep within my memory was a creased and grainy photograph that kept turning up like a rotten apple - mushy and gross.

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In the photo I'm wearing a green and white print short set. Great Uncle Eli is standing beside me smiling with his arm draped over my shoulders. He had purple lips, no teeth are shown, but I was not afraid. The expression on my face is contained humor. My eyes are looking directly into the camera and I'm smiling. I see the secret in my eyes. He was wearing a blue shirt tucked into his indigo blue overalls. He was wearing a straw cowboy hat. I was 11 and a year had passed since he fondled me; since he sexually abused me. I wasn't happy when he died just relieved, but the memory remains clear as Oklahoma spring water. The tally of the ACE points rattled in my brain and my blood. Yet, I was smiling. I. Was. Smiling.

YE

I love Uncle Eli; he is so nice to me. He even gives me candy and lets me play on his giant feather bed. He's my Granny Betsy's brother and he's always smiling.

Sitting on his feather bed makes me feel happy. He sits down beside me and my happiness soon turns to confusion and sadness.

His hand finds me and I freeze. I can't move, scream, or run away. A rattlesnake bite fills me with poison and I'm paralyzed and wait for the child in my heart to pass away to cross over to a place where Great Uncle Eli don't succumb to pedophile urges. Why couldn't it have been just a hug? Why couldn't it have been a sweet warm hug like a breeze swirling by the high grass down by the spring?

The water dipper hangs above the spring, swaying gently in the late evening breeze. Grandpa Homer opens the wooden lid covering the cement box set into the deep part of the spring. With a splash, he dips the metal bucket into the water. The spring water splashes and sloshes all around him as he hauls the bucket up the small embankment. I want to help him, but I can't. There are tender green leaves dangling from the branches and they wave as the breeze finds them. Grandpa's legs are bowed and he toddles toward me. I'm sitting on the porch watching him. We can't talk to each other because he speaks only Cherokee and I speak only American English. There's a creak from a porch board behind me and I stiffen. Great Uncle Eli reaches out and takes the water from my grandpa's large dark hand. He touches my head and I jump down off the porch, puke, and run around the back of the cabin to the red handled water pump.

Water washes over my hands and I splash it against my face. Water spills down the front of my blue dress. Mom opens the back door to the cabin. She's wearing an apron made of thin cotton with a faded pattern of happy vegetables. I hear Granny Betsy toss cut potatoes into the hot grease with a loud hiss.

Mom's voice sounds like a hiss as she complains about my wet dress. My intention to tell her about Great Uncle Eli evaporates like the water off my brown cheeks. I am alone and must carry the poison within my bones until now, until today.

I didn't rat out Great Uncle Eli till I was 31 years old. Mom didn't even flinch.

I wonder if Great Uncle Eli got to Dean.

"Why were you so angry, Dean?" I asked.

"I was angry at Dad," he replied.

"What do you remember about Uncle Eli?" I asked.

"He had a big feather bed that I loved to play on," he smiled as he remembered.

Mom and Dad didn't know who Eli Oakball really was; they didn't know what he was. I knew and I have been forgiving him every day since. I won't let it become the slimy rock of self-loathing and anger deep within the well of my essence. Forgiveness demands resilience.

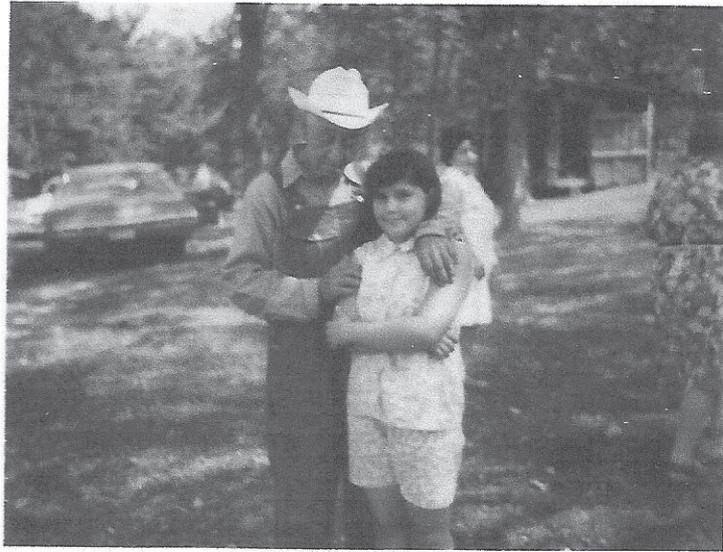
The photo surfaced at my Cousin Lisa's funeral dinner. I thought it was lost in the horde of stuff left in my mother and father's house. Though I tried to find it, the photo remained buried until Lisa's funeral. The memory of what happened in 1972 at Grandpa Homer's cabin in Chewey, Oklahoma, rearranged my DNA. It hurts less and less, but never, ever goes away.

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I was 10 years old and Great Uncle Eli robbed me of my childhood. I couldn't wait for him to be rotten and black in his grave. I don't even remember when he died. I

don't think I went to his funeral. I have never been to his grave. Once I told Mom what he did to me, once I even thought I had forgiven him. Today, at this moment, it's doubtful and hopeful all at once. Being willing to forgive is not forgiveness. Some folks might say I've overcome it, that I got over this adverse childhood experience ...

Those people are liars.

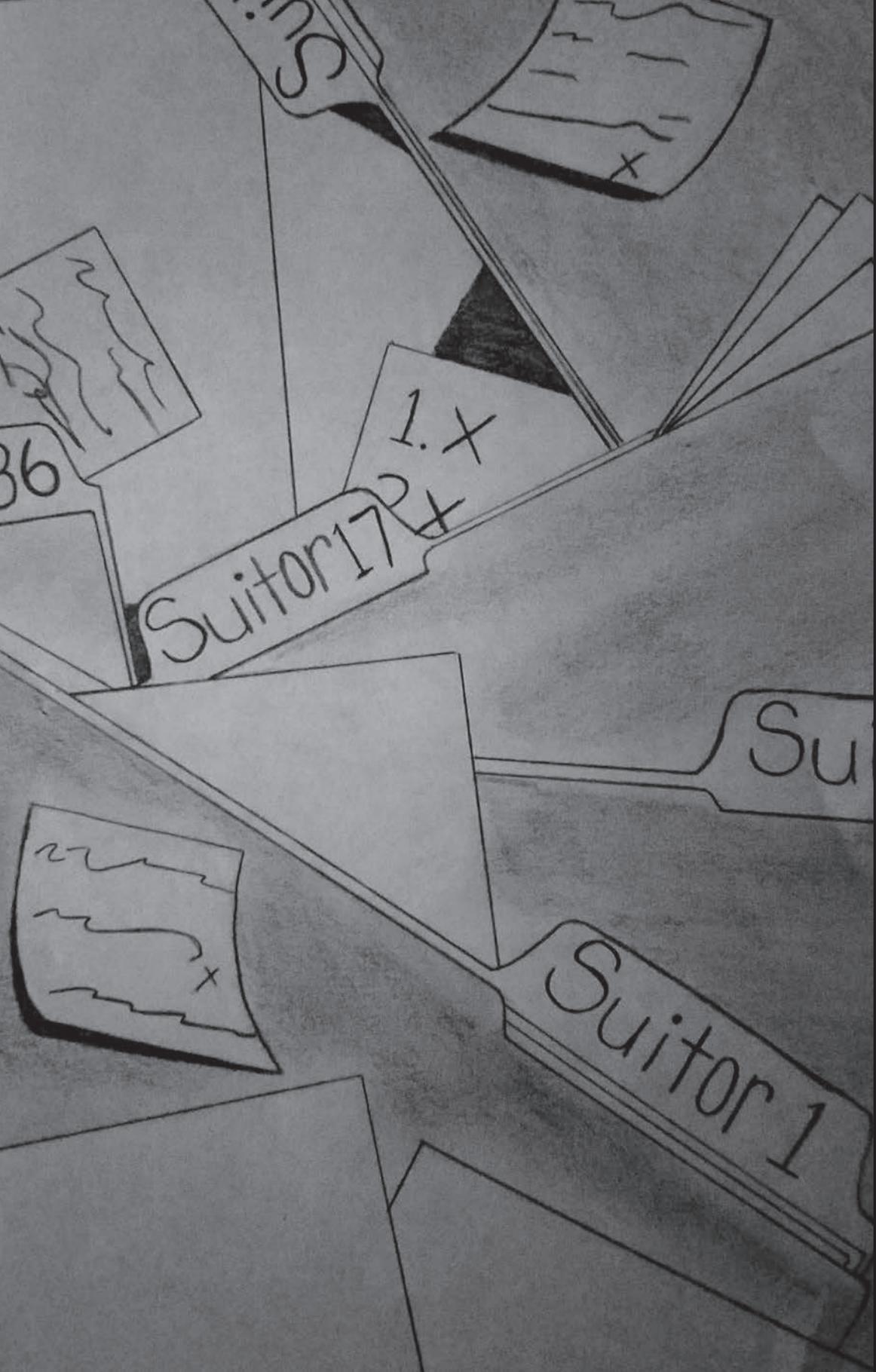


Eli and me; Mom looks on as Granny walks away. Photo by Grover Cordell McLemore, 1972

List of GWY (Cherokee) Words

ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	u-s-di-ga-nv-nv	path
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	tsv-da-da-tsv-s-do-di	marriage
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	gv-ge-yu-i	love
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	a-ma-ga-nu-go-gv	spring
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	di-ga-du-si	hills
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	u-ka-dv	face
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	di-ga-ti-le-gi	adverse
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	a-da-s-nv	lucky
ᎠᎵᎠᎳᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ	di-nv-da-di-s-do-di	memories

AW	go-la	bone
DFFPᄎᄎᄎ	a-li-he-li-s-di	happy
ᄎᄎᄎᄎᄎᄎ	u-yo-a-ye-lv-nv	sorrow
Gᄎᄎᄎᄎᄎᄎᄎ	tsa-ga-tli-lo-s-ta-nv	photograph
iC	v-tla	never



Su.

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1. x

2. x

Suitor 17

Su

Suitor 1

Marriage of a Different Kind

by Jaya Wagle



I'm on an overnight train from Indore to Ahmedabad with Ma to meet with a prospective suitor. We sit in the general compartment, in the dark (until the generator can kick in) and before we can move to our reserved compartment three stations down. This trip was not planned like some of the others, with Ma doing months of research and planning to set up a meet with a potential match and his family.

I am not taken with the suitor's photo - mustache, big glasses, and he looks 40, but his biodata says 30. He works for a software company in America. I am tired of meeting and rejecting men - disappointed with their personalities, attitudes, expectations - though the last one rejected me, so there is that. I am tired of watching Ma worry about my unmarried status as a 26-year-old. I am tired of being lonely. I am tired of feeling claustrophobic in my home town, surrounded by relatives, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins.

Reluctantly, I have agreed to go meet the suitor, because Ma said, "What if he is the one?" and my younger sister said, "His photo doesn't look too bad if you take away the mustache and the big glasses." A boy cousin contacts a friend, who knows a friend, who gets us reserved sleeping berths on the Friday overnight train, where I sit with Ma, silent and distant and silent and distant.

In the morning, Ma calls her niece, my girl cousin, from Ahmedabad station and asks her for her address so we can take a rickshaw to her house. She has no idea we were planning to visit, and we had no idea we'd be visiting, but she guesses, correctly, it must be something to do with an arranged match. On the way to her house, the radio news on the rickshaw announces the kidnapping of actor Rajkumar by the bandit Veerappan and George W. Bush's presidential nomination.

We rest at my cousin's house, take a shower, eat lunch, and get ready. The meeting is at 4 p.m. I wear a salmon-pink salwar kameez that Ma packed the day before, a pair of gold studs, tie my hair in a pony tail. I pointedly avoid eyeliner and lipstick. My cousin fusses, "You are dressed for the shops - not to meet a suitor." She offers me some lipstick, which I refuse. I've been meeting suitors for the last four and a half years, approximately one every two months. In the last four months,

since moving to Indore, my hometown, I've met three. I doubt tinted lips will change the outcome of this meeting. Behind me, Ma beams in the mirror.

Swayamvara (Sanskrit): *Swayam* = self + *vara* = groom.

Definition: In ancient India, *swayamvara* was the practice of choosing one's groom from a group of assembled suitors. Sometimes, tests of physical strength were set up to find a worthy suitor.

Example: In the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, princess Sita marries prince Ram from amongst the gathered princes and kings of neighboring kingdoms and principalities because he was the only one who could lift and string the Shiva *Dhanush*, Shiva's bow. Or in the Hindu epic *Mahabharat*, princess Draupadi marries prince Arjuna, because he is the only one to pass the archery test, piercing a mounted fish's eye with his arrow by looking at its reflection in a pool of water.

One of the first suitors I met lived across the street from my aunt's house. I was 22. I had a bachelor's degree and a job at Usha Martin Telecom. I was thinking about another diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication.

My aunt and uncle had known the young man since he was a kid. The meeting had been arranged for four o'clock in the afternoon. Shortly before that, I changed out of my jeans and dressed up in a pale blue *salwar kameez*, the color of spring sky, a yellow *dupatta* that reminded me of mango juice dripping down my fingers during hot, sultry summer days. My mother insisted I put *kajal* in my eyes, my aunt offered ruby earrings for my ears, and my cousin loaned me her gold necklace. Surrounded by my parents and aunt, bedecked in shiny metal chains, eyes stinging with black eyeliner, the *salwar* bunching around my legs, I crossed the street.

It was a two-story house, the first floor rented out, for "extra income" according to my aunt. I looked up at the steep narrow steps leading to the second floor and sighed. My uncle decided to join our entourage at the last minute. Ma, Pappa, me, aunt, uncle. We climbed the steep, 17 stairs to the landing where the parents stood, the mother with graying hair, her husband with his hands behind his back, an untucked striped shirt, baggy pants. They'd seen my photograph, but I sensed the mother's eyes boring into my face looking for imperfections, checking to see if the photo matched the girl in front of her. I felt her eyes checking out my outfit, my braided hair, my accessories. I heard the father invite us in. We walked in behind them in a living room filled with potted plants, an explosion of green in a sunlit room.

My aunt and uncle introduced my mom and dad and chatted with the suitor's parents. They talked of politics and favorite TV shows and shared neighborhood gossip. I sat on the edge of a chair, restless, wishing to be anywhere but here. The prospective suitor was nowhere to be seen. My uncle finally asked, "Where is Manish?" The parents looked at each other. "He's resting. He'll be out in a minute." The mother got up hastily.

She went through a curtained door and came back with a tray – six cups of chai and a plate of sad-looking Parle-G Glucose biscuits.

Everyone sipped their chai nosily. Nobody picked up the biscuits. I gulped the saccharin brown sludge and fought the impulse to throw up. I saw movement behind the curtain. A tall shape was moving around in what was possibly a passageway connecting the kitchen and bedrooms. I heard the tap running over a sink. And then a loud, “Aaaaaachccch.” The tall man behind the curtain had expelled phlegm lurking inside his throat, probably since morning, because the “aaachch” took forever. He had to know we could hear him outside. He was clearly not trying to make an impression, or he didn’t care to make an impression.

“He has a little congestion,” his mother piped up in between the phlegm expulsions.

She went in to check on him. We could hear angry whispers. He followed her a little bit later, a lanky man with a wide forehead and a full head of hair. He sat in a corner, a sullen look on his face. I spotted a fleck of spittle on his mustache. His white crumpled shirt had been tucked hastily in his pants. We sat, talked awkwardly, and left shortly.

Six months later, my aunt told Ma that the “Phlegm-Boy” was arrested by the police on charges of harassing and stalking. Apparently, he had been making obscene phone calls to his elementary school teacher.

As Vedic religion evolved into classical orthodox Hinduism (ca. 500 B.C.), parental control of marriage seems to have emerged as a mechanism to prevent the intermixing of ethnic groups and castes.¹ This system, for the longest time, took away a woman’s autonomy in choosing her spouse. Marriage and family alliance became synonymous with maintaining social and caste structures. A family friend or a Brahmin, who knew a family whose daughter or son was eligible for marriage, would act as an intermediary. Introductions were made, horoscopes matched, families united. It was never about the boy or the girl, the bride and the groom. It was all about families coming together through the younger generation. If the families were compatible, the marriage was compatible. Until it wasn’t.

After India’s independence in 1947, with expanding social reform and female emancipation, particularly in urban areas, parents became more open for marriage-ready sons and daughters to meet with multiple potential spouses with an accepted right of refusal.² By the time I came of age, it was matrimonial magazines and marriage bureaus, expanding into matrimonial websites five years later. Names of prospective brides and grooms catalogued by age, education, caste, and language.

By the time I turned 23 and moved to Bombay for work, Ma had put my name

¹Johann Jakob Meyer, *Sexual life in ancient India: a study in the comparative history of Indian culture*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1989, ISBN 978-81-208-0638-2,

²Patricia Uberoi, *Freedom and destiny: gender, family, and popular culture in India*, Oxford University Press, 2006, ISBN 978-0-19-567991-5, ..

down in matrimonial magazines that sent her 20-page booklets filled with boys' vitae: age, occupation, education, income, caste. She'd scour them, look for possible matches: Not too old, not the same age, never younger, at least a master's degree.

She'd communicate with the mother, father, or guardian of the suitor. One time she found out the guy was married with a kid on the way (his family had forgotten to update his marital status and take him off the bachelor list). After days, weeks, months of correspondence, a meet was arranged, for the two families and for me and the suitor. Sometimes, we'd travel to their city, other times, it was at an aunt's house or in a restaurant.

Sita chose Ram because he passed the test. But *Ramayana* also says she was destined to marry Ram because he was Vishnu's incarnation and she was Laxmi's. They are bound together for eternity, in every lifetime.

Sita left behind her father's home, the kingdom she grew up in, to live with Ram in Ayodhya. She followed Ram into the wilderness when his father banished him from the kingdom for 14 years. She lived on berries and wild game, cooked and took care of him, while they moved from jungle to jungle, hermitage to hermitage. When the Lankan king Ravana kidnapped her, he followed her trail to the end of the Indian subcontinent, raised an army of monkeys, and crossed the Indian Ocean to rescue her.

In Ahmedabad, I sit with the software engineer – who lives in America and is on leave for three weeks – in his older brother's bedroom, the door to the wide balcony open. A sun-bleached curtain printed with birds and flowers blows in the warm breeze. He looks 30, not the 40 of his photo from three years ago, when he was 20 pounds heavier. He wears a navy-blue shirt and khakis, silver-rimmed glasses, no mustache, a warm smile. He sits on the edge of the bed. I sit across from him on a steel foldout chair. A ceiling fan whirs tiredly above us. Ma and his family – parents, two older brothers, their wives, two kids – sit in the living room, talking, drinking chai.

The two of us have been at this game for so long, we start comparing notes.

“How many girls have you met so far?”

“Um ... every time I visit, at least two dozen, give or take, over the last four years. What about you?”

“About a dozen, every year, for the last four years,” I say.

We both chuckle. I tell him I never thought I'd be in an arranged marriage. Me too, he says.

I feel my reserve melting away for the first time since boarding the overnight train. His easy, unassuming manner puts me at ease. I tell him marriages are a matter of fate. He counters, tells me it is a lazy excuse for not striving toward what we want. I know better, though I don't tell him that. It'll have to wait for another day, another time.

We go back and forth, arguing like old friends. His sister-in-law parts the curtain

on the bedroom door and says it's been 45 minutes, were we done talking or did we need more time to get to know each other? Yes, please, I want to say. But he is nodding his head, "I'm good," and looks at me. I'm good.

Later, back in my cousin's home, I refuse to tell them anything about the meeting. I don't want to jinx it. I want my destiny to be linked with the bespectacled man I left behind on the edge of that bed.

My attempts to find love:

1990: I'm in 10th grade. He's five years older than me, a high school dropout who dresses well and brings me bars of Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolate. We meet under street lamps, he on his motorbike, me walking back home from tuition or market, and later, in coffee shops and restaurants. It's an ephemeral, tenuous relationship, based on me being wooed by an older man. I can't remember why he liked me. I break off the relationship, as it is, because my family moves back to Indore, and the thread connecting us isn't strong enough.

1994: He is the out of townner who lives in a rented room, the oldest in my group of college friends by two years, soft spoken and mature. It is an attraction fueled by hanging out together in street-side chai shops, movie theaters, and study sessions. He is in love with his childhood sweetheart and his best friend is infatuated with me. It's a clichéd love triangle, not even that. We are sexually frustrated 18-year-olds feeling attracted to those in our proximity. By the time we graduate, we are all on different career paths, scattering to different parts of India, parting as good friends.

1996: My first job at Usha Martin Telecom, a pager company. We are accounts executives, a fancy name for taking messages over the phone and sending them to Motorola pagers. He is part of the sales team and asks me out. I am ambivalent but decide to go out with him anyway, because I am 22 and bored. I feel I will never meet the kind of guy I want to settle down with. I like someone fawning over me. I break it off after a few months because it isn't fair.

1998: I'm in metropolitan Bombay, single, lonely, and working as a journalist for Screen, a Bollywood magazine. I meet him by accident at a film awards function. He is from Indore, an out of townner like me. We know each other through mutual friends. We have a connection, forged by weekend dates, dinners, movies and bike rides, daily phone calls. I realize I'm falling in love and puzzled why he won't say it when I can feel he feels the same way. Eventually, after a couple of years, he tells me he is engaged to a girl in another city. And that's the end of that.

When the Ahmedabad boy's parents call four days later, I know I want to hitch my life to him. Ma and my sister aren't so sure. After all, we haven't done the usual background checks and referrals, and there is the question of him living in America. My younger sister is in tears: "Why do you want to go so far from us?"

Just the day before, on my way back from work, I had been thinking of sending him an email. I'd like to be your friend, I was planning to write him. At 26, I was deeply aware that strong connections – like the one I felt with the soft-spoken,

gentle, unassuming man who argued with me about destiny, sitting on the edge of the bed – did not happen often. Like Sita, I wanted to follow him to the unknown of America. Eight months later, after we were married, I asked him if he'd have replied to my email. "No," he said.

By the age of 25, I had rejected almost all the suitors that came my way. A worried Ma asked my grandfather, Baba, to study my horoscope.

He said, "Her stars are aligned such, she will never stay close to her parents, her birth place, her hometown."

Ma did not tell me this until after I got married and moved to America. I am ambivalent at best about astrology and horoscope predictions.

Now, sitting in a foreign land, two oceans away, I wonder.

On a humid Saturday afternoon, I sat in the living room of my cousin's apartment talking to a young man who was there to meet me. The thin, nasal tones coming from the bespectacled man made me drowsy. I excused myself to go in the kitchen for a sip of water. I couldn't remember his name. Amit, Amar? Who cared? Not only did I not like the way he looked – tall, thin, pale sunken cheeks, beady eyes – I also didn't care for what he was telling me.

He was a software engineer who wanted to save up enough money to buy a farm and retire to a remote village by the age of 40. I conjured up an image of me living on a dusty farm, tending cows and picking vegetables. I was 24 years old, a rookie journalist with one of India's leading Bollywood magazines, living an exciting life of interviewing actors, covering movie shoots and music recordings. I enjoyed working in the big city, away from family, living an independent life. And now this guy, whose name I couldn't remember, wanted to marry me and retire to a farm and buy a tractor. I entered the living room to tell him what I thought of his retirement plans when he asked me if I'd like to go out for a cup of coffee. I didn't want to, but my cousin said, go. "You don't have to marry the guy just because you have coffee with him," she said. Hers is a marriage of love. She's never had to go through the rigors of an arranged marriage. I suspected she vicariously enjoyed seeing me go through the options, picking and choosing and rejecting.

The wannabe-farmer and engineer was the son of a family friend, so for the sake of propriety, we headed out to a coffee shop two bus stops away. I remember the slight incline we walked to reach the bus stop as he droned on about how he disapproved of workplace romances and social outings of men and women in his office.

"I mean, can you imagine all these young men and women going to the movies and restaurants after work, sitting in a dark theatre?"

I could imagine. I had plans to go out with some friends later that evening to watch the latest Bollywood blockbuster.

By the time we reached the bus stop, I had tuned the ambitious, old-fashioned farmer out. The city bus came to a screeching halt a few meters ahead of us. As he

boarded the bus, I lingered behind two men chatting on about cricket scores. The wannabe-farmer was looking for a seat in the bus and turned around to find me. I stood glued to the pavement, my feet refusing to get on the bus. He looked out from the bus window and saw me standing at the bus stop, looking at him. The bus started moving. His eyes were two giant saucers behind his glasses as I raised my hand and waved a slow-motion goodbye. I watched the bus disappear around the corner, then turned around and started walking back to my cousin's apartment. I don't remember if I was smiling.

The Boy-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Bed and I are engaged, a week after that first 45-minute meeting, three days before he leaves for America, six months before we will get married. I'll email him almost every day while we are engaged: tell him about my day, ask about his. He will reply once to my four emails. He will call me once a week and we will talk: about his work, my work, about our families, movies. Bush v. Gore presidential election is gearing up in America. I read up all I can about it, so I have another topic to discuss when he calls. He remembers my birthday and calls. I remember his birthday and call.

On the morning of my engagement, I sit patiently in front of the henna artist piping intricate designs - paisleys, circles, curlicues, a discreet Om - on my hands and think of my paternal grandmother who caught a glimpse of her betrothed, my grandfather, from the upstairs attic window; of my maternal grandmother who eloped with my grandfather; of Ma's three sisters who had marriages of love and Ma, who had an arranged marriage; Papa's two sisters, my aunts, in marriages of love and his youngest sister, whose arranged marriage ended in divorce. Except for her, most of them are happily married, or so it seems. They are all, certainly, in stable, long-standing marriages.

The arranged marriage wisdom is: love comes later, you learn to love the person you are married to, a marriage is built on love but also compromise and adjustment, give and take. I have tried finding love and come up empty. I will marry and find love, because this is the closest I have felt in a long time to giving it another try.

Arjun and Draupadi, walking down the street, he disguised as a Brahmin, she, a princess, bedecked in silks and jewelry, trying to keep up with him as he hurries through the dusty streets of her city. She has no idea she has married a Pandava prince in disguise, one of the heirs to the throne of Hastinapura, till his older brother Bheema comes up from behind, calling for Arjun to slow down. They reach the small mud and thatch hut outside the Brahmin quarters.

Arjun calls out to his mother, "Ma, look what I brought home today." His mother is busy cooking in the house. Without turning, she says, "Distribute equally amongst your brothers." A mother's word is sacred. So, the five Pandava brothers decide an equitable distribution of the new bride. One year for each brother, the older brother gets to go first. Under the stipulation, she must go through a fire purification ritual, so she can lie down with the next brother, pure in mind and body, but mostly virginal is the subtext. She gets to sleep with Arjun in the third year.

When Draupadi asks Krishna why she should be fated to marry the five brothers, he tells her in her previous life she did penance for the perfect husband. “You asked for a handsome, wise, skilled, powerful, articulate husband.” Since no man is accomplished with all these qualities, in this life she gets her wish, for each of the brothers embodies one of the characteristics she desired.

Three days before our wedding, the day my fiancé lands in Ahmedabad, an earthquake of 7.7 magnitude devastates much of Gujarat, his home state, killing 20,000 people, toppling buildings and collapsing schools and houses, disrupting communication and travel. I hope the earthquake is not a foreshadowing of our married life to come. I am 27. He is 31.

After the wedding, our first night is spent on the overnight train to Bombay to apply and obtain my American visa. I stand in line for a couple of hours outside the embassy, on the pavement with other newly married brides, students, parents, all seeking visas, all seeking a new life, a new direction, a reunion. He stands across the busy street till I go inside. When I come out a couple of hours later, he is still there, waiting patiently. We have been married for 24 hours.

That evening, after I get my passport back, with the American visa stamped, we call his family, in Ahmedabad, and my family, in Indore, to tell them the good news.

A few hours before, he told me he’d very much like it if I stay with his family for a few months, to get to know them, before joining him in America. I am too tired from the marriage festivities and the train journey and standing in line for the visa to argue. I want to tell him I very much would like to know him first before I got to know his family, but I don’t.

His family tells him to book my ticket on the same flight as his, if possible, because it’s not safe in Ahmedabad. The aftershocks of the earthquake are still being felt after a week. They’d very much like for him to take his new bride with him to America. I am too tired to feel angry or sad or mad or happy to fight on the first day of our married life.

After Ram defeated and killed Ravana he went to see Sita in the garden where she had been kept prisoner. The two hugged each other. They had been apart for almost a year. But their love was stronger for it. When they returned to Ayodhya, the city celebrated by lighting oil lamps. Ram sat on the throne of Ayodhya as the rightful king, with Sita by his side. The tragedy of Ram abandoning a pregnant Sita in the forest doesn’t apply to this story.

Both of our families come to see us off at the airport. It is a sweltering February afternoon in India. The air is hot and stifling. I feel the sweat trickle down my back, hips, thighs and legs. I long to be in the cool, air-conditioned air of the terminal – to escape my stagnant career, the dirt and the garbage in the streets, the disillusionment of trying to find love in a metropolitan city. I desire to be alone with the Boy-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Bed I married, to get to know him, live with him, in a foreign land where no one knows me but him. If I was apprehensive of living

with the Boy-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Bed in a foreign land, I don't remember it now.

On the day of our engagement, I had asked him why he chose me. He said I was the only girl whom everyone in his family liked unanimously. "They said you smiled a lot." He is not good at compliments.

We have a 32-hour airplane ride ahead of us. The two of us, exhausted from wedding festivities and visa procedures and an endless stream of visiting guests, two marriage receptions, one in Indore, one in Ahmedabad, sleep the first leg of the journey.

Later, we talk on the plane (me in the middle seat, he on the aisle) about his friends, my friends, his favorite newspaper columnist (Harsha Bhogle), my reading habits, his music (Dire Straits, Eagles), and sleep some more. As far as I can tell, from this conversation, and the countless other telephone calls we have had before, we don't have much in common. He loves sports, watches and follows cricket, golf, baseball, football, soccer, basketball. My sport affiliation doesn't go beyond one-day cricket matches. I like to read fiction, he likes nonfiction. He is into yoga, I'm into cardio. He is a pessimist. I'm an optimist.

"Our differences will balance each other, keep us on an even keel," I say.

"Or we will fight, a lot, over every little thing," he says.

Draupadi became accustomed to her five husbands. She ruled over them, with her beauty, her charm, her anger, her wile, her cunning. She was the catalyst for the bloodiest, deadliest war in the history of India, the Mahabharat. Some say she loved Arjun the most out of her five husbands. Some say she always loved Karna, the estranged, bastard brother of her husbands. I believe she loved all of them and none of them. I believe she loved herself the most, was proud of herself the most, honored herself the most.

When we land at Dallas International Airport, the temperature is in the 40s with a 20-degree wind chill. I stand in the cold sunless afternoon, in the passenger pick-up zone with my husband and hug my inadequate leather jacket. An icy wind whips at my legs through the thin fabric of my salwar. I look at the bleak concrete parking garage, the antiseptic airport terminal and the silent cars pulling up to the curb to pick up passengers. I think of my family, my siblings, my friends, my career, that I've left behind in my birth country to set up a new life in a new country with a man I hardly know. I long for the heat in India, the sweat trickling down my legs two days before.

The car his friend picks us up in has heaters on full blast. I sink back in the plush leather seat. My tired eyes observe the curlicue highway ramps and barren trees lining the streets with a mixture of sadness and hope.

As I step on the shag carpet in the hallway of our small apartment the heater kicks in. A warm hum fills the bedroom. I open my suitcase and breathe in the aroma of home ground spices I have managed to smuggle through customs. A bead of sweat trickles down my back.

No...

No?...

NO!!



Dark Blots

by Debbie Williams



*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me ...*

The invitation song had begun. I didn't have much time. "Just as I Am" was widely used in 1960s Churches of Christ by visiting preachers – well, actually, by any preacher who hoped his sermon might play on the heartstrings of some sinful soul. Its six verses offered sinners time for the wavering to repent and "step out" to meet the preacher for baptism or a public confession of sin.

On this Sunday, the preacher knew I was in the "salvation queue"; my parents had told him. My dad was even leading the congregational singing. Dad must have been nervous, though, because he blew softly into his shiny, round silver and black pitch pipe rather than relying on his own perfect pitch. He caught my eye as he began the song.

I didn't open a songbook. I knew the words. Yet I wasn't singing. I wasn't moving either. I don't know if Dad looked at me as he began verse two – I couldn't look up. Yet as afraid as I was of hell, I couldn't step out. Instead, I tapped the toe of one shoe on the tile floor, trying to imagine what hell smelled like when I realized verse three was almost over.

Somehow, I waded gingerly into the center aisle of the auditorium, head down. After what seemed forever, I stood in front of my father, the preacher, and the front pew.

Dad finished out the song, leaving me two and a half more verses to reflect on what had brought me to this point.

It hadn't occurred to me to read the note my teacher handed me, especially since something about her expression had struck me as odd, perhaps a caution not to do so. Peeking into my brother's room, I whispered to Mom, "I left a note for you on your dresser. From my teacher." Mom slowed her rocking, raising her cheek from my brother Curtis' matted blond curls. She smiled weakly and mouthed, "Thank you." Closing her eyes, she settled and returned to rocking my 5-year-old brother, who was wracked with cystic fibrosis. I backed out of the room, stepping in rhythm to the creak of the rocking chair to keep from disturbing them further. I began

gathering the pile of vomit-laden towels Mom had dropped outside the door of Curt's room.

I'm not sure what I did next or how much time passed, but I certainly remember my mom's strained expression when she later called me into the kitchen.

"Deb?" Her voice was hoarse from lack of sleep. "Your teacher sent this? Did you read it?"

"No." I may have smiled. I tried to be more agreeable the sicker Curt got.

"Why aren't you wearing your bra at school?" She plopped the folded note on the table. I could see my teacher's perfectly formed cursive letters. Scooting out a chair from the kitchen table, Mom sat and pointed to the chair catty-cornered from hers.

"I don't need - " I began, taking a seat.

"Don't start with that."

Mom knew well my long-argued core beliefs: I didn't know why I had to wear a bra, as wearing one called more attention to my body than *not* wearing one, and there was a lot wrong with being a girl, my grandparents even said so. But Mom was exhausted, so I didn't press my case.

Or tell her.

Just a few days earlier I *had been* wearing a bra and something terrible had happened. I had leaned forward across the top of my wooden desk, the kind with the top that could be lifted to reveal a metal belly for holding school supplies and books. Gary, the kid who sat in front of me, had turned around to ask something. I had raised up and leaned forward to reply. He poked my chest. I jerked back, wordless. Crossed my arms.

"Squishy!" he grinned.

The rest of the week, I had carried a binder or book chest-level and hadn't spoken to him. He grinned in a maddening "I have a secret" way that I wasn't sure how to respond to. I couldn't punch him, even though he was shorter than I, because nice girls didn't fight. I wanted to tell on him, but I wasn't exactly sure what that "tattle" would be. He had poked me, but kids poke each other. Instead, I pulled all the erasers out my pencils, lined them up on my desk and punched pencil lead into them over and over until they were pink shreds. The next day, when the teacher took the lunch count slip out of the classroom to leave for the cafeteria ladies, I smacked him hard on the back of the head with my slide rule. He jerked around, angry, but said nothing. He kept his shoulders hunched forward the rest of the day. We never spoke about the poke or the hit, but we both knew something had happened. We weren't friends after that.

"Now, honey," Mom's voice called me back to the table. "I know this is embarrassing, but it's actually worse when you don't wear one."

Still musing over who had done the worse thing - Gary or me, I decided against telling Mom, but my anger got the better of me. "The guys pop my back strap." I focused on digging my fingernail into a groove on the table. "Every day. I hate that."

Mom was quiet for a minute. "Do you tell the teachers?"

"They say that the boys shouldn't do that."

"They tell the boys that?"

"No. They say that to the girl who tells." Our eyes met.

"No, boys *shouldn't* do that. They know they shouldn't, but not wearing a bra still doesn't help. It makes you look ..." Mom sighed and looked at me for what felt like forever. "Things will get better."

I wasn't sure what things would get better. I wasn't sure what not wearing a bra made me look like. I wasn't sure why if boys shouldn't do something, they were able to not get in trouble for doing it. Some of my friends, like me, had, as Mom said, "developed early." Strap popping happened to them, too. We didn't talk about it. But I saw it. Other girls wore what my mom called a "training bra." For some reason, they didn't get popped much. My mom had a point, though: Wear the bra and get popped or poked. Don't wear it and stay in trouble with Mom.

I promised her I would wear the bra. I promised myself I would also wear a sweater over whatever else I had on whenever I could, that I would always carry my books against my chest, I would always try to walk in the middle of a group, and I would *never* be friends with Gary.

*Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt ...*

Everyone was still singing; there was one more verse to go. I was standing as still as I could, studying the black flecks on the tiles between my feet when I felt a hand squeezing my shoulder, pushing me down. As my knees were locked, I took a step back to keep from falling and looked up. The preacher's shoulder met my eyes, as he whispered, "Just relax, Cutie. I thought you might chicken out." He winked as he stepped away from me. I sat, waited for singing to stop, and thought about hell.

Hell was a major worry - hell and being left for an extended time with Mildred or Jewel, my grandmothers, while my parents took Curtis 250 miles away to the cystic fibrosis doctors.

Only a couple of days after the "talk" about the teacher's note, my parents took that trip, leaving me across town with Jewel. I had already been fairly convinced that I was hell-bound, but being sent home with a teacher's note, having hit Gary, and then this stay with Jewel left me with little doubt. Jewel and Eddie - my paternal grandparents - for as long as I could remember, had been telling me what a shame it was that I hadn't been born a boy, pronouncing it as "such a waste." During this stay, they repeated their disappointment several times. Each time, I'd puzzle over my waste, wandering through their dark house, careful not to touch the expensive furniture. Although by the time I was a middle-aged woman I would realize that, in a twisted way, both were acknowledging inequities of gender roles,

as a 12-year-old girl, their pronouncements made being who I was seem *bad*. For some reason – likely because I didn’t really understand puberty, I kept hoping that if I just acted good enough, I might not have to be a girl when it came time to grow up.

This “change” that I actually prayed for had nothing to do with gender questions. It had everything to do with not knowing how to negotiate the “girls can’t do that” and “girls are a waste” parameters that firmly hemmed in choices made for and about me. Accepting that I would forever have to wear a bra underscored my profound disappointment that I would forever be stuck in womanhood. Even the term “womanhood” was one my friends and I had snorted about when hearing it in the animated “Having Your Period” movie we had to watch in fifth grade. The word still conjures images of thick-soled, lace-up “old lady” shoes that kept hose from ultimately falling off the trunk-like legs of the women at church.

Yes. I was headed for that.

Instead, I decided that I had do things my way. Had I known the expression, I would’ve said that I “needed to take risks to reclaim my life.” So, I rode my uncle’s boy bike instead of my gently contoured girl bike; I read books about rocks, bugs, snakes, and astronauts; and I practiced saying bad words. I’d stand in front of my mirror trying to curse, to take the Lord’s name in vain in the worst way I knew: “Gaaww---sh, Gaaallee,” over and over, faster and faster until the words sounded like when kids at school said them. *Gosh. Golly. Gosh. Golly. Gosh. Golly.*

The first time I incanted each word, I studied my carpet for cracks, just in case I might really slide into hell. Or something.

My guilt, though, was becoming unbearable. What if I were too evil for God even to bother punishing? I don’t know if I was actually taught this, or I had just come to this assumption, but it seemed logical that if God thought a person too bad, He wouldn’t do anything. No punishment. Just off to hell. The bra, the slide-rule smack, the bad words, and being a disappointment – I was, most definitely, depraved.

My only hope was going into the water.

*Just as I am, and waiting not
to rid my soul of one dark blot ...*

Mercifully, I now found myself standing in the front row of the church auditorium where only men sat. Dad hadn’t had to start the song again. So, I was finally doing something right and should be able to sort myself out.

Our preacher was my dad’s age. He laughed loudly and had a family of five children for whom I babysat from time-to-time. With the singing stopped, he sat beside me, handed me a white index card, and whispered to me to write. Even though everyone knew why I was sitting there, I still had to write, “I want to be baptized” on the back of a white attendance card with a short yellow pencil. “B-a-p-t-i- ‘s’ or ‘z,’” I mused. He jerked the card up before I could decide.

I don't remember the exact words he said to the congregation – probably something about “Debbie’s having decided to follow Jesus” and that the baptism would happen shortly. Then, taking my hand, he tugged me to my feet. Pointing me in one direction, he went in the other.

I felt Mom’s hand on my arm. She guided me to a changing room where we were joined by Jewel and Mildred. A white robe was handed to me over the top of a bathroom stall. “Uh, Mom?” I began.

“Yes, keep them both on,” she half whispered. The sound of my grandmothers’ laughter made my cheeks and ears feel hot.

I cracked the stall door and hissed, “Mom!” She leaned into the opening. “I forgot another set ...” She sighed like she did when I had let the laundry sour or hadn’t fully cooked the meat through.

“It’s okay. Keep them on anyway.” The white robe was actually more like a dress, but heavy. Even though I felt better about its extending past my calves, I thought about white T-shirts I saw the teenaged girls wear at the pool to hide their banned-by-adults two-piece bathing suits. Once wet, the shirt betrayed them. I didn’t know if this robe was going to do any better. I stepped out of the stall to see Mom, already holding a towel. She hugged me, smiled and pulled my arm to walk. There was no time to ask.

I turned into a doorway where the preacher stood waist-deep in the baptistry. He wore waterproof rubber waders that encased all but his shoulders and arms. He held his hand out, but with my being a good swimmer, I felt no need to take it. I placed my hand on the wall instead, as I stepped barefoot into the warmish water. My other hand pushed frantically at the white robe that had begun ballooning higher with each step. Once I stood flat-footed in the water, he turned my shoulders to face the church, asking me “if I believed that Jesus was the Son of God.” I nodded or whispered enough of an assent for the event to continue. As he spoke about angels in heaven rejoicing at my decision, he abruptly turned me to the side, stepped behind me, put a folded handkerchief over my mouth and nose, and dipped me back. My white robe swirled. I tried to stand but couldn’t until he pulled me up. After being dipped, as frantic as I felt, I knew the importance of doing everything perfectly so that I would truly and faithfully be saved. I turned back toward him, waiting for what to do next.

All he did was smile in a way that made me think of Gary and his poking finger. It began connections in my thought processes, and that smile also made me think of the preacher’s earlier wink. Frantic, I spun, splashing up the steps into my mother’s arms.

Catching sight of myself in the mirror of the changing room, I was horrified to see the heavy robe clinging to my breasts and hips, the parts of me I was always so desperate to hide. I was equally appalled at the thought of wearing wet underwear under my church dress, knowing that they were likely to be seen through my dress. Standing in the stall, I watched water drip on and around my feet onto the blue tile floor. There weren’t enough towels to dry off and to clean the mess.

“Debbie! What are you doing in there?” It was Mildred. “Everyone’s waiting for you.”

“I need to tell Mom something.”

“You can tell me.”

“I need Mom.”

“She’s with your brother. Get dressed and come on out.”

I walked out in my church dress, my wet underwear sending water trickling down my legs. I clutched the towel like I clutched my schoolbooks. I even jerked it back from Mildred, who laughed, “It’s okay, dear. You can’t help that hair.” I hadn’t even thought about how funny my curly hair always looked when wet. I dropped the towel.

Mildred stepped in close to begin picking out and re-forming curls. When I jerked away, frowning, she reprimanded me, “That’s not the way a Christian lady acts. You need to do better now.”

Flustered, I turned away from her, bursting out of the bathroom door, almost bumping into the preacher who was now dressed in shirt-sleeves and slacks. He stepped toward me and hugged me, lifted me off the floor. I couldn’t breathe. I don’t know how long that embrace lasted. I don’t know whether someone rescued me, or if he finally let go. Head down, I looked for my mother’s shoes, then stood, head down, between my parents. As people murmured things about God, Jesus, and obedience, I wondered whether people could see the outline of my wet underwear under my dress.

That afternoon, during “forced naptime,” I was troubled that I didn’t feel any different. Not safe. Not peaceful. Not clean. Not forgiven. Still wearing that “one dark blot.”

That night after the evening service, the preacher spotted me. “Come here, you!” he laughed. He was on me before I could react, hugging me hard like before, facing him. This time, though, he slid his hands under my arms, his fingers pushing my elbows up until my arms were on his shoulders while his hands rubbed down my sides. “I didn’t realize how much you’ve grown up!” When I felt again like I couldn’t breathe, it occurred to me to tuck my elbows down and push against his chest. I looked up at him as he released me. He grinned, “Think we’ll need to have you come babysit real soon. Wouldja like that?”

Without answering, I backed away and into my father. Sliding behind him, I asked for the keys to the car. Scrunching into a corner of the back seat, I steeled myself for the truth I now knew: that baptism hadn’t “taken.”

I was still a bad girl. I wore guilt like soft skin that no water could wash away.

*Just as I am, though tossed about,
With fears within and foes without ...*

I sat facing Dr. S. in his office. A second semester graduate student, I’m quite sure I had an eager “What-can-I-do-How-can-I-please-you” expression.

I was attending a large land-grant state institution after having been an undergraduate at a small, private, church-related school that had only just begun to allow women to wear pants my first year of college. As a college student – and maybe just as a woman in general – it felt like I wore an invisible mark on my forehead: “Yes, you can do anything to me because I don’t deserve better.” I had quickly lost that girl who had defended herself with a slide rule. Maybe because of the guilt that could never be washed away. Maybe because I had learned to be a good caregiver in my family by setting aside my own boundaries. Maybe because I had learned to lie to myself. My sophomore year of college, an incident occurred. Until this day, I haven’t told anyone the whole story. I’m still not really sure what the real story is. Even with the re-visioning and rehearsing of five counselors, I still say, “Things aren’t important if you don’t think about them.”

As I entered grad school, I either wore my “you can do anything to me” mark into my master’s program or somehow seemed unbelievably naïve. I thus became the subject of “straw-drawing” among my professors. Years after I graduated, I would learn the full account: the losers in the “draw” actually considered themselves winners. The winner? This was the poor soul who would have to tell me the academic version of the “birds and bees” before the department let me fly away to my first conference.

I sat, pen poised above paper for Dr. S to speak. He began by telling me that he hadn’t been surprised my paper was accepted for presentation. Then Dr. S began telling me that conferences could elicit different behaviors among academicians than I might expect. As he spoke, I guessed where he might be headed. Based on the other grad students’ descriptions, a conference seemed to be a cross between a party and a thesis defense.

Dr. S finally said it: “You may have men ... , that is, men may ..., what I mean is you may be asked to ...”

I don’t remember his exact words as much as I remember his fumbling speech, his blushing, and then my supportive blushing, even before I was quite sure of his point. It felt like one of those rare, awkward “dating” talks with my father.

I flew to Florida. I fidgeted through sessions all afternoon until my own presentation. I thought it went smoothly. I fielded questions well, so well that I dared entertain the thought that someday, I could be like the other presenters – a real professor. I wished I could call someone besides my mom to brag. Remembering the directions for an Indian and a Cuban restaurant close to the conference hotel that the other grad students had given me – types of food I was excited to try – I decided to change to flats before venturing out. In my exhilaration, I told myself I would walk all evening if I felt like it.

In the elevator, I found myself with a professor who smiled and asked me if I wanted to go with him for a drink. When I stammered, he stepped toward me so I backed into the side of the elevator. Smiling, he placed one hand against the wall by my ear, then told me how musical he thought the word “vagina” was in French. Questions whirred in my head –

Why is he doing this? How will I get out of this elevator? What is that sweet smell on his breath?

Thinking of the preacher I had learned to hide from, I ducked under his arm. I may have even said, “No, thank you” as I frantically pounded the button for my floor. Once safely in my room, I realized I was hungry, but now I was unwilling to leave. I ordered room service. Waiting for my hamburger, I stood at the window, watching faculty drift from the hotel into taxis, wondering how I might have thought to react without Dr. S.’s warning, wondering if the professor in the elevator would have treated me like that if I had been a professor too. I picked up the phone to call my mom, but I didn’t know what to say. I hung up without dialing.

*Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind ...*

I never got around to being re-baptized. Instead, I married a preacher who had dated me four weeks without trying to kiss me and proposed after four more, even after I had told him how terrible I was. I think I hoped that the years I spent as a preacher’s wife afforded me some grace to mask the rank smells of those parts of my life I’d let sit too long.

Our 10th year of marriage found my husband and me living on the Kona side of the Big Island with daughters, aged 9 and 5, and a son, 2. He had left his family ministry job in Lafayette, Indiana, and I was “all but dissertation” from Purdue, both of us, late 30s. On the Big Island, my husband preached at a small non-denominational church, actually preached and taught adult Bible classes every service, sometimes, even leading singing in our non-instrumental worship, praying, and performing other parts of the corporate worship – a one-man show. I taught the only children’s Bible class and during the week, taught part time at a small community college in the next town. Since we had chosen to live at poverty level as our congregants did, I gratefully accepted cleaning jobs from Lana, when she needed extra help. Lana, one of the church women, was the age of my mother, so I always volunteered to scrub bathrooms and floors – any jobs she found harder than others.

That morning, I was up at 2 a.m. I dressed quietly in the kitchen, as our house was tiny, and my husband and children woke easily. I walked down the block to the entrance of our subdivision where Lana would pick me up at 2:30. She was always chirpy in the mornings from years of this routine. During our drive to work, I liked her reminiscing about her girlhood in Texas, how she had come to live in Hawaii, her adult sons and their children, and the price of paper goods on the island – the reason we used rags when we cleaned.

This was to be an easy job: the condos fronted a hotel in the lava desert on the northwestern side of the Big Island. No one had been staying in them for several weeks, and we only needed to clean two units to be used as models. American businessmen were buying from the Japanese, or vice versa, but either way, the units needed to be perfect. Lana began stripping beds. I started with the bathrooms.

By 7, we were almost done. Because Lana had asked me at the last minute to dust

the blinds and fans, I still had one bathroom left. Suddenly, I heard Lana holler from the kitchen.

“Beth. Got a call from the head man. They’ll be here in 10 minutes. Try to hurry.”

“OK,” I yelled back.

I had wiped down the entire bathroom but was on my hands and knees still scrubbing grout around the base of the toilet when I heard male voices. I never stopped. Never looked up. Never spoke. They’d likely glance in and continue their tour.

Walking into the bathroom, though, they spoke as if I were deaf or couldn’t understand English. It started with the garden-variety cat-calling-type phrases, “Hey, wouldja look at that ass.” Then they used words I hardly ever heard, not even in movies, words I’d never heard my husband say. I scrubbed maniacally. I don’t know if it was my silence or their deteriorating dynamic, but one of the Americans began describing what they would do to me and how I would “scream and moan.” Their laughter changed in a way I couldn’t quite describe.

I felt like vomiting, knowing that Lana’s presence might be my only salvation. Yet, it also occurred to me that something could happen to Lana, so something else could happen to me.

Enough.

I stood, gingerly, having knelt too long on tile with basketball-related, surgery-stiff knees. Standing, I couldn’t distinguish what was being said, so loud the whirring of my own heartbeat in my ears. Thinking of Lana, remembering the preacher, I pivoted deliberately and let loose in a low, dark tone. “How dare you speak to me in such a fashion?” I used words like “godless” and “aberrant.” I spoke of “litigation,” “depravity,” and “turpitude.” I closed with “wife,” “daughter,” “sister,” and “mother,” having used every Ph.D.-sized word I could summon. I stared at the men, my small blue scrub brush dripping on my toes.

The Japanese men didn’t meet my eyes after “perverted” and “harassment.” One Caucasian man didn’t meet my eyes after “lawsuit.” The fourth? Although he looked down at his shoes as I spoke of daughters and mothers, his expression remained dark under his dark hair. When I had finished, he shot me a “you’ve-crossed-the-line-now-bitch” look before shoving his way past the men into the hallway.

I wanted to scream and laugh and rip down the shower curtain, I was so proud of myself. I wanted to call my dissertation director and my third therapist. “You’ll never guess what I just did!” Deciding that I had scrubbed enough, I knelt to wipe the floor dry and retrieve my cleaner.

However, a few seconds later, Lana appeared in the doorway, ashen. Apparently one of the men had confronted her in the kitchen.

“Hon, I don’t know what happened, but I can’t lose this job. I’m *gonna* lose this job if you don’t apologize.” I dropped to sit on the toilet lid, feeling dizzy, like I might faint. Lana patted my shoulder, but then squeezed it in an “I’m-sorry-but ...” message.

I can't remember what I said as I apologized, standing barefoot in my jean shorts, while holding a cleaning brush and rags in front of four men in closed-toed shoes, slacks and short-sleeved shirts. As I talked, I looked past them, focused on a plastic bamboo-framed cheap print of women in bikini-style tops and knee-length grass skirts, forever caught in a hula between coconut trees and the ocean.

"Now that's more like it, bitch," the dark-haired man leered.

I never learned whether Lana kept that job. She didn't talk to me much at church after that. She only invited me to clean one more time, and that time, we were uninterrupted.

Just as I am ...

Giggling and hollering burst from the living room into the kitchen where I was cutting a melon for grandkid lunches. Stepping into the hallway, I watched two siblings wrestling.

"Don't take things too far," I directed 8-year-old Jessilyn, who was straddling her 2-year-old brother.

"We're fine," she shot back, followed by "Git you, git you!" directed to her brother, as she returned to tickling.

"Again. 'Gain!" He egged her on for more.

I had taken two steps back towards the kitchen, when I heard the shift in his tone.

"Stop! STOP! STOP!" He was screaming.

Walking back toward the mass of writhing arms and legs, I used my sternest voice, "Stop it!"

"He likes it," Jessilyn returned, not looking at me. Not stopping.

Sliding my arms around her waist, I lifted her from carpet to couch. Then, scooping up her now wailing brother, I cuddled him, carrying him to sit in my lap by his sister. As we sat, he turned away from her. She responded by turning away from him. Rocking him and patting her knee, I leaned towards her. "Jess, no means no."

"But he liked it."

I explained as best I could to an 8-year-old and a 2-year-old. It wasn't the first time. It wouldn't be the last.

Authtors

The Authors



Jonathan Auping

Portrait of a “True Crime” Character

Jonny Auping is a Dallas-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in Texas Monthly, Longreads, D Magazine, The New Yorker, Slate, VICE, New York Magazine, McSweeney’s, and elsewhere. He hasn’t quite gotten the hang of this writing thing, but he’s more or less having a pretty good time.

Story Behind the Story

I worked on this story for just over two years, starting in December of 2016 when I saw a 90-second local news clip about the anniversary of an unsolved crime. I emailed an editor of mine that night asking if she wanted me to look into whether there was a bigger story there. I waited about 12 hours before sending a follow-up along the lines of, “I’m not sure why I asked, I think I was going to look into it regardless.”

That editor moved on to a new job a few months later and I assumed this story was dead numerous times over those two years, but I kept coming back to it with no publication in mind. My biggest issue was that, although I felt like I had made a few connections and discoveries no one else had, the case felt completely unsolvable. It would take a much more accomplished investigative reporter to find any more real answers. Finally I realized that if I wasn’t qualified to write a “true crime” story, I was capable of writing about a character in a true crime case and the effects that role has on one’s personality and life.

By the time this is in “Ten Spurs,” this story will have been published in Longreads. While this version is very similar to what I submitted to the Mayborn last year, there were some key structural and thematic changes that I implemented partially based on feedback I received in the Mayborn workshop. I think those changes allowed me to find a home for the story.



Matt Crossman

Going Remote

Matt Crossman, a freelance writer based in St. Louis, has written more than 40 cover stories for national magazines. He has written for ESPN, Southwest the Magazine, Success Magazine, Men's Health and many others. He is married and has two daughters.

Story Behind the Story

I first read about Ryan and Rebecca Means several years ago in a regional adventure magazine. I am an avid hiker, and I'm fascinated by quests, so Project Remote intrigued me.

I didn't pursue a story at the time because it was too early in the project. A few years went by, and I checked in to see if they were still doing it. They were, and I thought a story about it would have a lot to offer readers. The project itself was compelling - identify and hike to the most remote location in each of the 50 states.

The idea of taking 50 epic hikes sounded like a blast. I was surprised to hear from them that large chunks of it weren't fun at all - that what they had found in what is left of our wilderness areas made them mad. That gave the story a thrust I wasn't expecting at all.

On top of that, they were great characters. Ryan, full of fire, spits anger at over-development. Rebecca also full of fire, dances with hope that they can change things.



Daniel Garcia

Endlessly

Daniel Garcia's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Write About Now Poetry, Button Poetry, Hawaii Pacific Review, Crab Fat Magazine, SLICE, and more. A Pushcart nominee and semifinalist for the Frank McCourt Memoir Prize, Daniel is the recipient of the Myong Cha Son Haiku Award, and a Rustbelt Poetry Slam Champion. Daniel received the first place Personal Essay Award at the 2018 Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference.

Story Behind the Story

Though I've written extensively about being a survivor prior to "Endlessly," it wasn't until the end of 2017 that I'd started to write this story, the abusive relationship story. I'd like to say something brave, something about closure and righteous justice. It's not that dramatic - I simply had a bunch of love for a man who did some really awful things to me. Personally, I believe one of the most powerful things we can do is tell our own stories. I wanted to write something honest, something where he couldn't interrupt me, where my words would be taken at face value. Indeed, if I'm putting my abuser's cruelty aside, things were often good when we were together.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our current sociopolitical climate: I also wrote "Endlessly" in response to what I perceived to be a lack of representation within the #metoo movement. After all, my story isn't exactly the one you hear when domestic or sexual violence is discussed. Because of this, I wrote "Endlessly" so others could know they aren't alone.

Things are easier now. I went to therapy. I confronted a lot of demons. I cried for months. I learned I merit respect, that abuse isn't just physical, that love shouldn't hurt. I lost my love and found more of myself than I thought possible. Once, I believed I could not go on without him, and each day I prove that belief wrong, even when I wake up swollen with grief and I miss him desperately. On those days, I remember "Endlessly" ends with us dancing in a room covered in sunset, and that it's just that, an ending. What he did does not define the rest of my life. My life is not over. He is not forever. He isn't, nor will he ever be, the only love in life. I can dance on my own.

Sunrise is always just a few hours away.



Christine Heinrichs

No Condor Falls Unnoticed

Christine Heinrichs actually likes people, but she often finds herself writing about animals and nature. Her story about the killing of three protected Northern Elephant Seals at the Piedras Blancas rookery near her home on the California coast, “Death Before Dawn,” won a “Ten Spurs” award in 2011. As a volunteer docent, she continues to spend time with the seals and writes a monthly column about the seals for the local weekly. Her three books about raising heritage poultry in small flocks are helping backyard keepers succeed. She became a certified California Naturalist on her way to writing about condors.

Story Behind the Story

The California Condor is a top scavenger along the beaches of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, ready to clean up the uncontaminated carcasses of seal pups that, for whatever reason, don’t survive on the beach.

When the Ventana Wildlife Society began releasing captive-raised condors nearby, I looked up, hoping to see one. The condors’ powerful charisma, the Native American Thunderbird reigning over land from the sky, drew me in. As I learned why condors are still threatened in their home range, I knew it was a story I needed to tell.

Big Sur, where most of the condors fly, is about an hour’s drive north of where I live. It’s a wild coast, and free. I felt that wildness in the condors’ desperate saga of near-extinction and recovery. Those great winds off the wild seascape swept me up, to help get the word out about how toxic lead ammunition is, and how simple the solution is.

Simple, but not easy. Lead persists on ranches and open range, in the ammo ranchers and hunters use. Changing to non-lead ammunition is a hard sell. But this is a problem with a solution, and the condors are depending on us.

Six more condors were released in our area in 2018. Every day, I look up, hoping to see the wingspan of the Thunderbird soaring overhead.



Kim Horner

Richard

Kim Horner worked as a journalist for 21 years, including 13 years at The Dallas Morning News, where she focused on issues including homelessness, mental health care, and poverty. She has bachelor's degrees in English and journalism from The University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Arts in Humanities/Literature from The University of Texas at Dallas.

Horner is author of “Probably Someday Cancer: Genetic Risk and Preventative Mastectomy,” about her experiences after being diagnosed with a BRCA2 mutation, which put her at an extremely high risk for breast and ovarian cancers. She received first place in the Book Manuscript competition sponsored by the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference in 2017. She lives in Richardson.

Story Behind the Story

I was working on a series of stories about chronic homelessness for The Dallas Morning News, supported by a Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism, when I met Richard Antwine in January 2009.

In the year I was able to follow his life on the streets, he was in and out of jail, prison, hospitals, and psychiatric hospitals. Richard graciously signed a release allowing medical and mental health providers to discuss his illness and experiences with the public mental health system with me. I'll never forget him or his story, which demonstrates everything that's wrong with how we treat people with severe mental illnesses.



Timothy Miller

Jukebox DNA

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 6 years old. After high school in Mesquite, Texas, Tim joined the U.S. Air Force and specialized in non-destructive inspection, detailed work meticulously detecting defects in jet aircraft. Tim was honored with the Air Force 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 Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Tim later obtained a nursing facility license from St. Phillip's 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 an upset individual and so turning the situation around there becomes a new sense of calm. When it comes to writing, the inspiration and motivation are 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

"Jukebox DNA" is about my daughter Jessica's results of her recent DNA test. I learned that she has a new grandfather and I have a new father. This news had a surprising effect. It resurrected deep emotions and painful memories that had long since been buried. It also brought an epiphany coupled with a new identity for me. We may be done with the past but the past may not be done with us.

"The ability to turn someone's life from toleration into celebration starts with your words."

-Sarah Rowan



George Newtown

Night and Day

George Newtown recently retired from Centenary College of Louisiana after a 40-year career of teaching literature, language, and essay writing. He lives with his wife Barbara on a horse breeding farm where they raise Oldenburg sport horses suitable for the Olympic disciplines of dressage, jumping, and three-day eventing. He is currently working on a memoir.

Story Behind the Story

The backstory of “Night and Day” should be clear from the piece itself, a self-reflexive essay-memoir. I wrote it in the context of 12 earlier autobiographical arguments that I submitted annually to Mayborn’s Personal Essay Writing Competitions. The series began with my prostate cancer diagnosis in 2003, continued through my subsequent treatments over the next decade, and morphed over time from an odd cancer chronicle into an even odder coming out story.

“Night and Day” incorporates the cancerous background and my flailing over sexual identity into reflections that bring the story up to 2018. My other submissions selected for inclusion in “Ten Spurs” are “Vair Dire” (2007) and “Goofy, or Practicing What I Teach” (2014). Two other pieces in the series have been published elsewhere: “Body Language” in *The Southern Review* (2006) and “Et in Arcadia” in *J Journal* (2014). I am now expanding the series for book publication.



Anita Roastingear

ACE: Anita's Childhood Exposed

Elizabeth Anita Roastingear is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma. She is the 2018-2019 Department Chair of the School of Arts and Humanities at Navajo Technical University (NTU) in Crownpoint, New Mexico. She has a MFA in Creative Writing: Nonfiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Anita is an Associate Professor and teaches creative writing and humanities classes at NTU. She is a wife, mother, and dog person. She cares for three rescue dogs; Big Boy, Annie, and Otter. She lives in Crownpoint, New Mexico, with her husband, Johnny Roastingear, at the Roastingear Resort and Dog Ranch.

Story Behind the Story

In September 2016, James Redford came to our campus in Crownpoint, New Mexico. He came to show a film he made called "Resilience" then he asked us to go to a website to take a quiz; the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) quiz. I scored a 6 out of 10. So what did it mean to score a six?

Apparently, it measures my degree of trauma from childhood abuse. I am more likely to write about it and let others read it so that I can harvest some healing power from the sharing. This is by no means science, maybe science fiction, but I had to let myself go over the edge and seek out the healing.

I forgive my great uncle for anything and everything real or imagined. This simple prayer helps me get through the day, moment by moment. Isn't it all we really have? There are those days when I wake in a rage and then I hear a whimper and feel a muzzle against my knee. My furry friends help me forgive from sunup to sundown, from the time I open my eyes till I fall asleep.

I'm thankful that more is constantly being revealed and the truth cannot remain hidden forever.



Jaya Wagle

Marriage of a Different Kind

Jaya Wagle writes creative nonfiction that focuses on her Indian immigrant experience and her struggle to balance two different cultures. She binges on “The Great British Baking Show” on Netflix and is currently trying to perfect the Madeira cake. Her work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Hobart*, *Little Fiction Big Truths*, *The Write Launch*, *Litro Magazine*, *THAT Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is an adjunct professor of world literature and developmental writing at the University of North Texas. She lives in Fort Worth with her husband and 13-year-old son.

Story Behind the Story

I have been writing the story of my arranged marriage for the last 17 years. I wrote a short fiction story of how I met my husband and my first impressions of America, a year after our marriage. It was my attempt to explain to American friends and colleagues how arranged marriages work in India. Their idea of arranged marriage was archaic, where the bride and the groom are forced to enter a union on the behest of their parents. However, the fictionalized versions of my real-life experience never read right on the page and I put the story away for 15 years.

Two years ago, as I started work on my creative nonfiction master thesis – about my Indian immigrant experience – it was natural to pick up the thread of my first step of my journey to America. I realized that the best way to approach my marriage was to write from a nonfiction, first-person point of view. It felt right to write from the vantage point of a more mature woman examining some of the prospective suitors I rejected, weaving in how I met my husband in present tense.

I have been married to the-boy-on-the-edge-of-the-bed for 18 years now. We have a 13-year old son. Our story is by no means a reflection of all arranged marriages. Just as not all marriages of love don’t always end up as happily every after, so do some arranged marriages end in divorce or unhappy married life. There is no way of measuring arranged marriages versus marriages of love. Each is a different journey, a different experience.



Debbie Williams

Dark Blots

Debbie Williams directs the writing program at Abilene Christian University where she has taught for 24 years. She studied creative writing at Texas Tech University from which she received an M.A. and holds a Ph.D. from Purdue in Composition and Rhetoric. Her research interests and publications are focused on the discourse of illness, politics, and pedagogy. She lives in West Texas with her husband and cranky cat. When she is not teaching or enjoying conversations with her adult children, she enjoys having adventures, both real and imagined, with grandkids.

Story Behind the Story

The #metoo movement jolted the author from the veneer developed through years of counseling. The series of vignettes traces her attempts to negotiate gender roles, until she comes to the realization that the issue at hand is less one of gender and more one of power – lessons about which need to be accepted and taught rather than avoided.

The Staff

Staff

Michael J. Mooney | *Editor*

Michael J. Mooney is the co-director of the annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, and a member of the conference advisory board. He is the author of “The Life and Legend of Chris Kyle,” and he contributes to ESPN the Magazine, Rolling Stone, Outside, SUCCESS, Texas Monthly, and Popular Mechanics. His stories have appeared in multiple editions of “The Best American Sports Writing” and “The Best American Crime Reporting.” He lives in Dallas with his wife, Tara.

Neil Foote | *Associate Editor*

Neil Foote, co-director of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, is currently a principal lecturer at UNT’s Mayborn School of Journalism. He teaches classes in digital and social media for journalists, multimedia storytelling, business journalism, and media management. He also is a contributor to the textbook, “Race, Gender, Class, and Media: Studying Mass Communication and Multiculturalism” (Kendal Hunt Publisher, 2011). Foote has worked at The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, The Dallas Morning News, the Belo Corporation, the Tom Joyner Morning Show and ASNE. Foote is chairman of the National Kidney Foundation Serving North Texas, president of the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc., and a past board member of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Jo Ann Livingston | *Mayborn Writing Contest Coordinator*

Jo Ann Livingston is a reporter and editor for the Waxahachie Sun newspaper. An award-winning journalist, she previously worked for 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.

Caitlen Meza | *Illustrator*

Caitlen Meza, University of North Texas alumna, graduated with her Bachelor’s degree of Fine Arts in Studio in May of 2015. Since then she has joined the Mayborn School of Journalism as the Administrative Specialist, while continuing her craft through commissioned pieces and personal projects. She developed her personal technique of hand stitching images onto painted canvas while she earned her degree. In the past few years she exhibited the sewn pieces in the Fort Worth Community Art Center shared show titled “Light and Dark” as well as The Women’s Museum at Fair Park at Texas Women’s Caucus for Art mass show titled “Vignette.”

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 completed 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 alumnus 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.

“Since the earliest humans smudged cave walls with charcoal, we’ve been telling stories to make sense of all that bewilders, terrifies, and enchants. Whether they reflect our deepest selves, the fascinating strangers among us, or the dizzying complexity of the natural world, stories are the expression of an ancient impulse. The writers inside this volume of Ten Spurs couldn’t help but heed the irresistible call.”

— Brantley Hargrove, journalist and author of “The Man Who Caught the Storm: The Life of Legendary Tornado Chaser Tim Samaras”