

Rescuing Van Weyden

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
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Master of Arts

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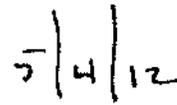
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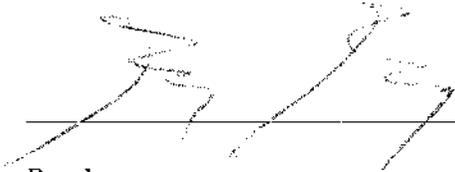
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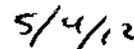


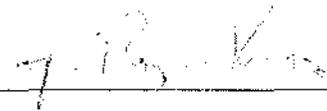
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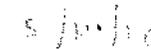


Chair, Graduate Committee





Chair, Department of English



Dedication

In loving memory of my sister Pamela Joy, UB class of 1978, and of my mother
Rosamond C. Kerner (who wanted to write one of these herself), and with sincere and
loving gratitude to my lovely wife, Helena.

Your unwavering support was inspiring.

Table of Contents

The Smoothness of the Grain	1
Breakfast with Mom in Summer	4
Old Lady Gordon	9
In Northern Wood	16
Endless Winter	17
The Fox	19
The Oswegatchie	21
The Sand Woman	40
How I Got Here	43
Works Cited	64

Abstract

This work, submitted to satisfy the requirement for a thesis in creative writing at the State University of New York, Brockport, contains short works of fiction and of memoir. “The Smoothness of the Grain” is a study of one’s interiority as it manifests without being understood. “Breakfast with Mom in Summer” is a fictionalized recollection of a young boy’s pleasant morning. “Old Lady Gordon” is a loving remembrance informed by many boyhood experiences.

“In Northern Wood” is a poetic recollection of a hunting experience. “Endless Winter” is a retelling of that experience that expresses angst about the author’s world that was passed over in the earlier more reverent “In Northern Wood.” “The Fox” is a recollection of a hunting experience that waxes philosophically existential. “The Oswegatchie” is a fictional short story in which the author’s brooding interiority is on display while at the same time being a further celebration of friendship set in the outdoors. “The Sand Woman” is fiction inspired by Kobo Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes* depicting the awkwardness of strangers (who are forced to coexist) as it transforms into understanding and perhaps something more. Finally, “How I Got Here” is a memoir of the author’s pursuit of a life that is purposeful.

Foreword

Stories. I want to write stories that are unforgettable like Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, or Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," or especially, "Big Two-Hearted River." In fact, Hemingway, Jack London, and a less well-known writer (except in the world of humorists) named Patrick McManus are my main influences. I have read their works extensively.

Completion of one's thesis is an important milestone in any student's life. However, I think for me it is especially so because reaching this point was terribly unlikely. For that reason I must embrace both fiction that is based on my experiences, and memoir, in this work. Please understand that the fiction is not far removed from the truth, and the memoir is as close to the truth as I could get it.

My favorite writers have always been the outdoor type. As a young boy, I was fascinated by the writing in the pages of *Outdoor Life* magazine. Adventure stories of dangerous confrontations with the elements or vicious beasts. It was that kind of story telling that informed my writing of "The Fox." However, the influence of London is there too as the story takes a philosophical turn. It is the true story of a long afternoon that I spent alone hunting white-tailed deer in Upstate New York.

As an adolescent, and while reading *Outdoor Life*, I encountered a writer who would become influential for me: Patrick McManus. McManus, a humorist, began doing a regular column for the magazine (called "The Last Laugh") in the early 1970's. It is side splitting humor, but it is also a fond recollection of his childhood (and adulthood). McManus is the anti-Hemingway outdoorsman. Whereas

Hemingway might make some admirable shot across the African plain to kill an exotic gazelle, or charging lion, McManus will miss a deer because he is a poor marksman, forgot to load the rifle, or was in a temporary panic after getting lost in the woods. Hemingway is a dashing romantic, a man's man. McManus is the guy next door. He does not even have a passport. He is no cosmopolitan and certainly not worldly like Hemingway's Harry of Kilimanjaro fame. I find Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" to be a haunting story, particularly its ending, but I am no less moved by McManus's tale entitled "The Big Trip." This is the story of a teenage camping trip with a high school buddy that becomes an arduous struggle for survival. It remains humorous even as they are struck by lightning and flee down the mountain in the pouring rain in their underwear.

I identify with McManus. He had no father in the home. I had an ineffectual father. He grew up with a strong female role model in his mother, and especially his grandmother (who lived with them). My mother, who raised us essentially alone, was a loving, funny, friendly woman, but as tough as nails. Pat loved the outdoors and longed for someone to act as guide and mentor as did I. Also, the young McManus found a friend in a grizzled old woodsman named Rancid Crabtree. His humor is largely memoir, and Crabtree is an amalgamation of the older men that Pat sought out and depended on in his back country Idaho home. Many of McManus's best stories are about his associations with those men who taught him things that he felt were essential: how to trap a rabbit in a snare, how to start a fire in the snow, or how to get a bear out from under a brush pile. Of course, the results would be hilarious, but at the

same time, the writer's voice is tinged with real feeling. McManus expresses the vulnerability he feels as a young person in a scary world and his need for, and appreciation of, those who fill in for his absent father. I also sought teachers and mentors, as a kid in the form of friends who were older, and then in more experienced men who shared my interests.

The character Nate, in my story "The Oswegatchie," is based on a very close friend of mine who is an outdoorsman under whose tutelage I found an entrance into the outdoor experiences I had longed for while growing up. He is a funny man with a self-deprecating sense of humor who is not above playing the fool for amusement; even though he is, at his core, as sincere as the day is long. So, while McManus influences my writing, he cannot deliver something like Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River," a short story in which you are allowed to look over Nick Adams' shoulder as he fishes, exists, and observes the wild back country. The wonderful careful descriptions fascinate me.

Finally, Jack London. In fact, it was while reading London's *The Sea Wolf* that I began a process of change in my life that would lead me out of an unhappy marriage, a stagnating career accidentally entered, and the malaise that accompanies having lost one's way in the world. That process culminated in my surprising departure from a long held career to embark on a degree program that would include English Literature, Education, and culminate in an MA in English Creative Writing. As I near completion, I feel that my accomplishment is much the same as that of London's protagonist, Humphrey Van Weyden. Van Weyden is a writer. He is an

educated professional, but he lacks any experience in the rough violent world that Captain Larsen lords over on board ship, or for that matter, the harsh Darwinian environments into which London the man had placed himself during his journeys as a young man.

Van Weyden finds himself alone in the ocean after a boating accident. He is literally up to his neck in a sea of troubles when he is spotted by Wolf Larsen, the captain of a passing sailing vessel setting out to hunt seals. Larsen rescues Van Weyden. However, rather than putting him ashore, Larsen forces Van Weyden into a kind of indentured servitude aboard ship. It becomes clear that Captain Larsen (who espouses the most fundamental of Darwinian philosophies) is setting Van Weyden up in a kind of human experiment as he watches how, or whether, Van Weyden, untested and unprepared for the harsh on-board world he finds himself in, will survive. London's protagonist does survive by embracing the wildness of the difficult and violent world he is in. As a result, he is inexorably changed. He faces his crisis, meets the challenges and trials of his captivity, and emerges a stronger more complete man. Looking back across the decisions I made that have brought me to this point, I see similarities between Van Weyden and myself, but I also see one major difference: Van Weyden found himself in the water accidentally – I jumped overboard.

The Smoothness of the Grain

As sleep gave way to waking, he was aware of having been asleep and of a vague aching emptiness. His sleep had been troubled by dreams. The dreams had not waked him; that was some distant sound. Above him was another bed supported by narrow pine boards, one directly above his eyes. From above, the reflection of this board might have been seen in the still large black circles in his gazing eyes.

On the pine board was the box spring of the second bed. This structure of wooden frame and steel springs had a thin, nearly transparent, white cotton material stretched across its bottom. Sunlight was beaming through the window to his right. His shoulder nearly touched the sill of the window. Light penetrated the cotton covering and became diffused. The system of supports and springs within could be seen in outline.

Now perceiving form, he saw the pine board. He saw its structure in its grains. Interlocking grains flow out of one another and each allows the next to flow forth. As he observed the flowing structure of the wood grains in the pine board, he saw that a knot interrupted the smooth flow of the grain. The wood grain flowed gracefully like swells on a quiet lake. Golden amber honey pouring slowly out of a jar. The knot was a sudden upheaval. The knot in the pine was distinctly dark and violent in its tight swirling structure. There were no grains in the knot. It was an intrusive chaos amidst the order of the flowing grain.

He wondered at its origin. He thought that the smoothness of the lighter grain was like peaceful sleep without dreams. He had felt that smoothness, the

smoothness of the grain. He closed his eyes to imitate how he thought he must look while sleeping. He lay still and felt his body on the bed. Now he felt his head's weight on the pillow. At first the pillow had felt soft, but now the weight of his head pressing down made the pillow seem hard. It neither gave way nor lifted. Now he felt his legs and buttocks pressing down and how his elbows bore the weight of his arms while the meaty sides of his hands lay like weights on the sheets like he was turning to stone. Focusing again on the knot he saw that it was terrible, and illogical, and that it could not be soothed. It would never be part of the smooth grain. There was neither reason nor resolution. It held its place amidst the flowing grains. It simply was. He blinked.

To his right, a half-open window allowed a dappled interplay of light and shadow to fall across his face and chest. It was the rising sun shining through the trees in front of the house. The ebb and flow of the wind in the leaves sang a lonely song of hope and mourning. He felt both thrill and sadness as the wind rushed through the branches rising to crescendo and subsiding to whisper. He looked out the window at the birch trees. Leaves of glossy green. White bark that was flat and chalky. Branches sprung from dark intensely brown joints as smooth bony white appendages. While at rest, these branches arched lazily toward the ground, but with every new gust of wind they became disfigured arms lifting to the sky begging a savior for healing. The green glossy leaves pointed skyward exposing their light silvery backs. They fluttered violently. He wondered how the wind could creep along the ground and then rush all at once up through the trees.

As the wind mellowed, the trees slumped toward the ground once more and the sound he heard while waking again came to his ear. The sun, having risen higher, now shone more brightly. As the branches swayed in the quieting wind, the sun's blinding light struck his eyes and made him squint and turn away. Again he heard the sound. Turning his head still further, he saw the nearly closed wooden door. The sound, almost metallic, was that of dishes being stacked downstairs. Emptiness had lightened his sleep. The striking and sliding of porcelain on porcelain now caused him to look at the dark unpainted wooden door. He was awake.

Breakfast with Mom in Summer

One morning when I was a little kid, mom called me for breakfast. Entering the kitchen, I passed our stove, which had a large griddle in the center. I felt its heat, and turned to stand on tippy toes to watch in fascination as the drops of water she dashed across its surface hissed, sputtered, and skipped. "Perfect," she said.

She spooned on a dollop of Crisco and pushed it back and forth until the griddle was glossy. Yawning and groggy, I sat down in my favorite wooden chair, the one my grandfather made. I watched as she picked up the mixing bowl and carefully poured batter that spread slowly into white bubbly spheres. Edges upturned as they browned. She stirred syrup in a small copper-bottom pot that was warming over a low blue flame.

Gently setting down her wooden spoon, she took the steel spatula and slid it under each of four pancakes accurately flipping them back where they had been. They hissed as they slapped the grill and rose slowly. As I continued to watch, I thought that they rose almost like tulips open after a cold night on a warming sun-filled morning – slowly, hypnotically, so that it seems there is no motion at all even as you sense the change.

"Jonnie!" Mom said. I looked up abruptly. Our eyes locked.

"Honey, I said *are you hungry?*" On her face was an approving smile. I felt myself blush as I realized that she had been watching me and that in my fascination with the pancake's gentle expansion I had not heard her, or been aware that she was remaining still. She broadened her earnest smile, and when she again reached for the

spatula I looked back at the pancakes. They were thick now. Walnut brown on top. Whispers of steam rose from their centers.

"This is how you know they're done," she said. "Do you see that the steam is almost gone? That means they're done."

The sides of the cakes were a contrast in shades of white. Nearly bright white at the center, but gracefully darkening to vanilla at top and bottom then brown at the curling edge. They bulged like a fat man's belly, and I knew that they were soft and moist. She stacked three of them, each centered perfectly on the next, on my favorite little plate – the one that had the picture of Baloo and Mowgli dancing in the jungle. I loved that plate because I loved the book but it always puzzled me a little because I never missed an episode of "Wild Kingdom" on TV, and I thought I could identify every living creature on Earth and probably tell you where it lived. And there was one thing I knew, there were no bears living in the jungle that looked, as Baloo did, so suspiciously like a Grizzly bear. I asked about that once.

"Oh Honey," Mom had said, "that's just a story." *Too bad*, I thought, *because if there was one thing I wanted to have, it was a huge ferocious friend who loved me with all his savage energy like Baloo loved Mowgli.*

"How did you sleep?" she asked.

"Okay, but I can't wait to go outside!"

She had poured the warm syrup into a small brown pitcher with the relief of a log cabin on it. Now, she angled it over the plate she had placed before me. As she tilted it a little more, thick syrup began to pour from its spout. At first it seemed to

cling as if it would run down the side of the pitcher, but then all at once it fell into a translucent ruddy-brown stream that reached the cakes and piled up a little before spreading over the top, just as the pancake batter had piled up a little and then spread over the griddle. The color of the syrup was a splendid contrast with the darker brown cakes, and when she placed a small square of soft butter on top, the pancakes, syrup, and butter created a harmony of delicious aromas.

As the butter softened further, and the spreading syrup pulled at its edges, it became a small shining sun and smiled up at me invitingly. But all the while it shrank little by little as the syrup that flowed away from it, in ever narrowing branches, grew more yellow before rolling down the bulging sides of the cakes.

Using the side of the fork I cut out a small bite-size wedge. The pancakes were light and sweet, and as I ate them I felt their comforting warmth and softness. I glanced up at Mom. While of modest height, her confident manner and strong solid constitution made her an imposing woman. She knew herself well, and had long ago made peace with her morals and philosophies. Therefore, she was not reluctant to share her advice, or in the case of us children, her firm directives. She was also friendly and intelligent, and always ready to appreciate a good joke or insightful comment. But woe to those who pushed the boundaries of her good sense, or tried to trespass the limits of her moral realm. Her friendship was genuine, her anger real, her forgiveness dependable.

She stood near me, drying her hands on her apron and straightening items on the table. I knew she was keeping one eye on me enjoying her cooking. She stood by me, and I enjoyed the delicious cakes all the more for her tender attention.

I grinned a satisfied grin that widened still further as she patted my head. I returned my attention to the plate. With the last piece gone, I used the tines of the fork in sideways scrapes to gather up and savor the morsels that were scattered in little pools of syrup and butter. Mom had turned to the sink and was running water into the empty bowl.

"I'm goin' out, Mom," I said as the old wooden chair scraped back against the linoleum. I was standing now, she bent down, and I reached up and wrapped my arms around her neck and squeezed hard. I felt her arm around my back and her gentle love pats on my shoulder. Straightening again she asked, "Where you goin'?"

"Oh, front steps."

"Don't leave the yard."

"Okay," I said over my shoulder as I crossed the threshold of the kitchen doorway. With two steps I passed through the dining room, and turning left, crossed the living room to the front door. I pushed the screen door and felt the mild resistance of the rusty old spring as it creaked open. That old spring always sounded like somebody making a noisy yawn, then the door would snap shut with a loud bang and it would bounce, and bang again, only softer. I stepped down to the wooden landing and let the door slip past my hand; "bang! *bang*," it went behind me.

Sitting down on the hard cold wooden step, I felt the last of morning's coolness and saw dew sparkling like diamonds hidden in the grass. The hard wind had stopped, and the sun's light streamed and flickered as it passed through the trees waving in June's breezes. I rested my elbows on my thighs, and with my chin in my upturned palms pressed the knuckles of my curled fingers against my lips and cheeks. Warm weather had finally come, and I sat on the steps gazing across the yard - my mind full of everything I saw and nothing more. It was the first day of my eighth summer.

Old Lady Gordon

I still remember Old Lady Gordon. Back in the late 60's all of us kids called Mrs. Gordon "Old Lady Gordon." Sometimes my Mother would correct me, "*Mrs.* Gordon!"

"Mrs. Gordon," I'd repeat dutifully, looking at my feet.

You see, kids naturally like to use nicknames that refer to some characteristic, habit, or behavior. For example, if someone referred to you as Old Soggy Sheets, it's a safe bet they'd seen your Mom hanging that particular laundry item on the line a little too often. Of course, that was back when Moms hung stuff on lines. Today there are phone lines and computer lines, but almost no laundry lines.

So we didn't call Mrs. Gordon Old Lady Gordon out of disrespect, it's just that she was the oldest lady on the street and her name was Gordon. We were also familiar with her. Familiarity, that's another important part of the nicknaming process. It takes a while to get to know someone and find a good nickname, especially a nice nickname. Usually if you get a nickname right away, it's not going to be very nice. Like for example Mean Old Mr. Casper. I had only met him once. Really, it was more like straining every muscle fiber in my little eight-year-old body not to meet him. You see, when you're a kid and you're out throwing stones through the windows of the farmer's old greenhouse and the farmer shows up, you don't want to meet him, especially if he shows up going about as fast as he can carrying a wooden handled farm tool. I think that in the instance in question Mean Old Mr. Casper was carrying a steel rake. As I sprinted for the safety of home I imagined a

multitude of ways in which that rake could bring to a horrible end the life I was just beginning.

In a way, it was probably worse getting chased than actually getting caught. I had to turn my back and run and I didn't know just how fast Mr. Casper could move. It was more a matter of listening for footsteps and judging whether the yelling was getting louder, or fading away. For sure he was moving rather well when, my arm cocked back to lob a nice smooth stone, he bolted around that bush at the corner of the barn. That much I knew, that and he could reach a good five feet with that rake.

Now home was safe, even from Mr. Casper, because Mom was there. The old farmer was tough, but Mom was tougher. In fact it was important to stop running and act relaxed before you got in the kitchen (the natural habitat of the Mom), otherwise she'd start asking *why you were running*. See, one of Mom's ways of instilling torturous things like morals and character in us was to make us apologize for wrongdoings. Right to the person we'd done them to! Imagine the stress of running pell-mell for your very life from Mean Old Mr. Casper, only to have Mom march you right back to his door, which she would have! She was even known to suggest things like you *pay* for the thing you broke! I would not have been a bit surprised if she had volunteered me to work on his farm to make up for it. He'd have probably boiled me alive as soon as she was gone. A kid had to tread a fine line, I'll tell you. Lucky for me Mr. Casper only chased me a little way.

Anyway, we kids all thought we knew Mrs. Gordon really well. Our knowledge of her came from waving innocently as we passed her house where she'd

be sweeping her sidewalk or tending flowers. My brother and two sisters and I would wave from the crowded back seat of the old Plymouth. Or else we would shout “Hello Mrs. Gordon” while whizzing past her on our bikes as she climbed the concrete steps to her door.

Another way we got to know her was by listening to her phone calls. We had party lines back then. Party lines were an efficient little plan whereby two or more households shared a phone line and ours was with Mrs. Gordon. The idea was that neighbors wouldn’t eavesdrop, and wouldn’t talk too long. If we did need to make a call we’d pick up the phone and if Mrs. Gordon was on there, we’d just politely ask if she might be done soon. She never stayed on too long. She was a nice lady, and patient too. I know she was patient because I cannot remember her ever yelling at me.

Now, I was prone to test patience, just to see if it was genuine, mind you, and whereas yelling meant failure she always passed with high marks. In fact, only once when I had very gingerly and quietly picked up the phone and was listening to Mrs. Gordon’s conversation did she raise her voice. While telling her friend that her arthritic knee hurt again that spring, she heard me breathing. She shouted, “You kids get off that phone!” Well, she wasn’t yelling at me, she was yelling at “us kids,” so my brother and two sisters got blamed too. I liked that. I hung up immediately.

Sometimes I’d even go visit Mrs. Gordon. Say for instance I was a little bored and not quite sure how to spend the summer day which I found dawning all around me. I might just wander up the street into Old Lady Gordon’s large two-car garage. Back in those days hardly anybody locked doors. Mrs. Gordon still had a lot of stuff

from back before things like motorized lawn mowers replaced the fascinating tools of her day. Her garage was a wonderland of exotic and dangerous things, a great place for a kid to spend a morning. For example, today we have motor driven weed whackers. Old Lady Gordon had this thing I later learned was called a sickle. It was more of a decapitator than any gentle little *whacker*. Just imagine a grizzled old man in worn-out blue jeans and a cotton shirt finishing his breakfast. His furrowed brow browned from toiling under the summer sun. His bushy grey eyebrows brought together in a thoughtful manner, he ponders his last sip of black coffee. Considering another mug, he decides against it. Rising from his chair, he hooks one thumb under a fallen suspender and slides it back into place on his broad shoulder, announcing: "I'll be out back with the sickle!" You may rest assured his muscles operate this tool. But that's enough about Mr. Casper.

So there I am in Old Lady Gordon's garage rooting around like I own the place, lost in the wonders of the past, when she appears at the door. Startled, I drop the sickle that I've been holding like a jousting spear, imagining the black knights or wild Indians it might slay. With a thud it falls against the old workbench. Two cans full of rusty little screws and small odd shaped parts for contraptions, some of which inhabit the corners of the garage, fall to the floor like so much shrapnel from a surprise attack. These were things that Mr. Gordon had carefully saved before he died. They had still been where he'd left them. Her husband had died years before, and I later learned she had children and grandchildren, but I didn't know about that then.

“What are you doing?” she asked. She spoke slowly and had a habit of agreeing or expressing pleasure with a slow “eh-ya, eh-ya.”

“Oh, hi Mrs. Gordon., Umm, nothing,” I replied, my eyes wide with surprise.

She said, “Eh-ya, well, let me help you clean this up.” She picked up some jars and other containers and began to scoop the odd screws and little parts back into them. I went to the far corner and grabbed a broom. An old car with a blanket over the hood and a tarp over the roof crowded up close to the work bench, making it hard for me, because of my size, to sweep up the parts with that long broom handle sticking out behind me. I pushed the broom and caught it under the tire. It got stuck and I lowered the handle to pull it out, which I did, but when I did I got off balance and knocked all the jars Mrs. Gordon had lined up on the bench back onto the floor. This time, some of them broke. I froze.

Mrs. Gordon straightened up from reaching down to the floor and turned and looked at the new mess. I stared at her in horror and embarrassment.

“Sorry, Mrs. Gordon,” I said slowly.

“Jonnie Kerner,” she said thoughtfully, “would you like a little sandwich?”

“What kind?” I said. She looked at me and smiled patiently. “Sure,” I said, “but what about all this?”

“Oh, I’ll take care of this later.”

See, that’s what I mean about Mrs. Gordon. She was patient. Sometimes she’d even invite me in just for stopping by. She’d usually give me a cookie from a batch she kept in a large ceramic cookie jar she had on the counter by the kitchen door. The

cookie jar had a farm scene with a barn and a cow jumping over the moon. I loved it almost as much as I loved what was in it. Her house was quiet. My house was rarely quiet due to four kids and usually a dog or two, but Mrs. Gordon's house was quiet and tidy. There were few things, only necessary things, and each in its place. I found this unusual because my house was nothing like this, and I always found myself treading a little lighter and speaking a little softer in her house. It was a quiet peaceful place. When I was in it, I could be quiet and peaceful too.

The chair I liked best was an old overstuffed wingback. It had long before gone soft from use and I could tuck myself back into its corners with my shins folded under my thighs. From there I could watch Mrs. Gordon moving about in the kitchen or turn and see the clock over the fireplace. She went about her business in the kitchen. I'd be alone, sitting, keeping absolutely silent. Only the occasional sliding of a drawer or tinkling of a glass betrayed her presence. On her mantle, the clock's hands counted the seconds and minutes with a soothing *tock-tock-tock* sound. I liked to stay long enough to hear the clock ring a single majestic note at the half-hour, or, if I was really lucky, strike the hour. The grand prize was to get there just before lunch. I might get a little sandwich and hear the twelve beautiful notes ringing through the silence.

Getting there for a cookie and hearing the bells was tough. I couldn't pull it off too often. My ability to plan consisted mostly of having an idea and acting on it immediately. It was just lucky if I thought to go to Mrs. Gordon's for a visit at

lunchtime. My method was ingenious. I simply knocked on her door. When she opened it, I'd say, "Can I come in?"

"Eh-ya, eh-ya," she'd usually say with a chuckle, "come on in. You look hungry."

This was always a terrific way to get a cookie and even some milk at Old Lady Gordon's, regardless of the time of day. Old Lady Gordon. Maybe her nickname should have been *Nice Old Mrs. Gordon*. I still remember her.

In Northern Wood

In northern wood, 'neath graying skies, I stood in winter's air;
I'd wandered to a lonely glen while I'd been hunting there.

Companions never quiet, whose shouts and laughter heard, were silenced
now by distance, from this temporal world.

A movement rare, periphery, I turned naught but my head,
and saw like fleeting phantom a hare to warren fled.

Looking down, the curled brown leaves collected crystals white
that fell from heavy darkening clouds who hastened forth the night.

My gaze then fell on barren trees of black and shades of brown:
monoliths with outstretched arms and roots in frozen ground.

Piling gently on those arms the gathering soft snow
reverently transformed the place, lent sanctifying glow.

As day's first snow, like woodland sprites, dense around me fell
the fairest of soft sounds rose up to cast enchanting spell.

I bowed my head, and closed my eyes, and in amazement heard
a sound like children's voices murmuring small words.

The gentle flakes' angelic strain awe and reverence bade;
and opening my eyes I saw the brown beneath white fade.

I stood below those graying skies, my world in white aglow;
and in that hallowed northern wood snow's song I came to know.

Endless Winter

As I stood in a silent glen, the world fell away where the ridges met the sky. Suddenly, I was careening through space in that earthly bowl, on that errant piece, standing among the trees. They seemed unchanged, yet the mass on which they grew that held me now did loosely so and I felt the soil grind lightly beneath my shifting weight. My familiar path was left behind; my friends were left behind; the sun lost her position atop the trees and now seemed to be moving along the horizon instead of toward it, and faded into a tinier orb as I sped away.

The larger of Earth's clouds pursued me as if jealous of my release. They fired pellets of snow that stung my skin. The snow showered and bounced on the springy leaves as if the gods themselves had ordered my capture. I had nowhere to run. In my fear I became like a pillar, still as stone. Trapped, I streaked through frozen space.

I cried out, "Help me!" even though I knew I was alone. Then, a murmur of words seemed to rise from the din of the snow bouncing off the leaves. "*Help me,*" I repeated, more to myself than to anyone who might hear. Suddenly, in strong voice, the trees broke their silence and chorused around me. "We have stood these many years, our race, against this onslaught from above." Then I knew that it was life itself that the clouds pursued and harassed, and that they were jealous of the blessings of earth not found within their sky prison.

"But how shall I survive?" I asked of my companions the trees, "for I am flesh and the snow will cover me, the clouds will call up a great wind and stop my warming blood in its channels."

“Join us,” they entreated, “raise your arms, plant firmly your feet, and gaze to the horizon.” This I did, and I felt their strength come to me from below, and I have stood these many years, harboring with them the nesting birds and furry creatures against an endless winter.

The Fox

I sat in a lifeless tree, just feet above the ground. It had fallen years ago. All around me were the silent woods. Life was in them, but survival requires stealth. I did not move because the deer of the forest hear danger upon the wind and their eyes do not fail them. Only my eyes dared stray, first left then slowly right. Even blinking felt like betrayal. As the afternoon wore on, I found myself in a trance, lulled by the whispering breeze. Suddenly, like the tiny pinpoint of light through the darkening shade, a flicker of movement penetrated the ether of my mind.

Startled, the muscles of my neck tightened and erectness which near-slumber had stolen returned to my spine. Slowly, my head turned in the direction of that twinkling of color. That which is slow in the mind of man, that which seems natural and unstartling, is to the beast a flare.

Looking at the spot I saw a second of time, and compressed into it all the gifts of God by which the creatures of the forest survive. As if fluid, the red fox had slipped over a log and, cat-like, set a foreleg to the ground. At the turning of my head, the fox became a phantom.

Lowering himself, and as if on wheels, his head now found itself where his flowing tail had been. There was a fluttering of his delicate legs, and his mother the forest took him back in to her bosom from whence he came. He was gone, and I again found myself alone.

So brief was the visit, so dull my mind that I pondered whether shadow or flesh had been my visitor. Gazing to the horizon I saw the silent forms of settling

crows outlined against a gray sky coming to rest in the branches of skeleton trees. The failing light allowed the first flickering of the brightest stars as a warning of the coming of night. And on that horizon I saw the endlessness of time and the futility of man in the vast expanse of the Heavens.

The Oswegatchie

Jack slowed the old black and tan Suburban to a stop amidst the crunching and popping of tires on gravel. The massive chrome bumper extended just past the log that lay as a barrier between the gravel of the dirt road and the grass of the small park-like area near the river. The grass had been cut that summer but a thin hedge-like strip had been allowed to grow to knee high along the front of the silvery sun-bleached surface of the log. Tall and willowy, the grass had gone to seed and the bumper that rested against it caused it to arch gently forward.

The parking area was big enough for several of the small campers or pick-ups common in the wilderness areas. It was an intended jumping off point for day fisherman or outdoorsmen going on the river. The river is a good way to get deep into the big woods. Primitive campsites dotted the banks every couple of miles and trails led deep into lonely wilderness. The lot was empty save for a rusty old black pick-up truck that was jammed into a corner made dark by the overhanging branches of a dying tree whose branches arched like a spider poised to seize its kill.

“You better close that window a second, Nate,” Jack said as he peered into his rearview mirror. The cloud of dust that had boiled up off the dirt road was now rolling toward them like a storm cloud. Nate turned and stared back at the road over his left shoulder while Jack, remembering that he had all the window and lock controls on his door panel, held forward on two switches: one for the back seat window that was half-way down, and the other for Nate’s. He turned his attention back to Nate, whose eyes had widened at the approaching dust cloud. Their eyes met

as Nate laughed through a mock grimace that made him puff and pop the air over his lips. He quickly turned his attention to his door handle and started scrambling his fingers over the two switches that operated his window and lock. His door lock began clicking up and down.

“What? No, that’s not it!” Nate said, not realizing that his window was already going up. He clicked the lock up and down again before he realized it. “Oh, oh you did that!” he said as he saw the window close. He broke into a laugh as he again looked into Jack’s eyes. Jack chuckled and barely suppressed a grin. “Well,” Nate drawled slowly, “I was going for the window but the door started clicking up and down. Jee-udas!” he exclaimed as he laughed again.

“I know,” Jack said, “I was watching you. It was worth the price of admission just to see you fumbling with those switches!” The two men sat laughing in the truck as the cloud rolled over them.

“Yeah,” Nate said, regaining himself and using the word he often said that really just meant he was thinking, taking things in. “The woods must be dry, too, look at that dust.” The cloud floated across the weedy grass that filled the thirty or so feet between the parking lot and the river.

“That’s just like life,” Jack said. “You can run down the road, but the dust you kick up is always right behind you.” He shot a look at his friend. Aware of Jack’s gaze, Nate continued looking forward but flexed a jaw muscle thoughtfully. “Ah-yeah” he murmured, and with a slightly raised eyebrow looked at Jack to see if this needed further discussion. It didn’t. Jack nodded. He pulled forward the shift and put

the truck in park, turning his head to gaze at the river. The engine rumbled its low throaty growl and Jack turned the key without looking down. All was silent save the dull roar of the river that lay beyond. The two men sat for a moment sharing a silent unspoken reverence. This was a trip they had looked forward to, and one of many they had taken over the years.

On the other side of the fast-moving water were the dense woods of evergreen and tamarack, birch and oak. Birch trees had sprung up along this part of the river in clumps of three and four. They had glowing white bark and the fading green of their leaves was a sign that fall would all too soon paint their leaves a golden yellow. They would become brilliant islands of yellow and white in the dimming fall. After that, only their white trunks, like bleached bones, would remain in a sea of evergreen. The Oak's leaves would go from green to dark red before turning brown, though they would hang on well into winter. Their rustling, in even a soft breeze, would be among the rare sounds heard when snow covered these woods. Only winter's severe winds would take them off. They wouldn't have to wait long.

As the two men sat silently, a cardinal, blood red, darted past the truck from behind and dove into the woods on the far side of the river, breaking the spell.

"I'll tell you what's catching up to me," said Nate, "I gotta tap a kidney!" Nate pulled his door handle and bumped his shoulder against the door. "Oh-oh-oh," he said as he bumped against it. He looked back to the door's switches to decide which one would unlock it, but the lock popped up with a loud click.

"Is that what you're trying to do?" Jack asked.

“Oh!” said Nate, “you’re messin’ with me.” He looked at Jack with a grin.

“No, Nate,” said Jack, “I wouldn’t.”

Nate reached for the latch and pulled it again, bumping his shoulder into the door harder than he first had as the lock clicked back down. Jack laughed out loud as Nate snorted his reaction.

“You’re messin’ with me!” The door clicked unlocked again, and both men laughed.

“No, Natey,” Jack tried to say, but his laughter made his words unintelligible. “You better get to it before you piss yourself!” exclaimed Jack as Nate swung easily out of the truck leaving his door open in his haste. Jack listened as Nate’s old brown leather boots made crunching sounds in the loose gravel. He leaned forward on the steering wheel and watched as Nate took quick hopping steps toward the edge of thick growth that was on the far side of the parking area. He chuckled to himself while watching his friend who’d gotten stiff from sitting in the truck, but couldn’t wait to, as he called it, *tap a kidney*. He was older than Jack by thirteen years and every once in a while his 55 years began to show. He stopped to relieve himself, his back to Jack, among the weeds.

“Goddamn coffee, runs right through a guy,” Nate said over his shoulder, his breath made visible by the cold morning air.

“Well, yeah” Jack shouted back, “but I wouldn’t mind another cup.” Nate had finished and turned left to go to the river to wash his hands. His gait was natural and effortless now and he covered the 30 or so feet quickly.

“Well Jonnie,” Nate said, using the nickname he’d given Jack years before, “when we get camp set up we’ll make a pot.” He squatted at the river’s edge and, turning to look at his fishing partner over his left shoulder, dipped his hands in the cold, fast running water of the river. He gave Jack a grin.

“Like hell,” Jack said, slipping out of the truck and talking to his friend through the space between the door and windshield. “I’m having a beer then. We’ve got that portage after three miles of paddling, and then another two miles to camp; I think we’ll be ready. You know, they’ve been on ice since breakfast.” Nate was standing now and bent his knees slightly to wipe his hands on his thighs, causing dark patches to appear above the worn-white knees of his jeans. Straightening, he paused for a moment to look down river. He was the real thing: an outdoorsman who looked the part because he had grown up in the North Country, and had spent his time on the rivers or in the woods as a matter of course. Jack looked at Nate standing by the rushing river in his leather hiking boots, blue jeans with red suspenders, and plaid shirt of black and red. Some dark brown was still visible in his graying hair, and he had a sharply pointed nose and large eyes that twinkled when he smiled, which was most of the time. *He belongs on the river or hiking the trails that lead deep in to rolling forests,* Jack thought, *and me along with him.*

“A beer, yes,” Nate said slowly, looking thoughtfully to the side as if this decision required a grave ponderance. With a wry grin he met Jack’s eyes with his own and cupped his right hand, slapping his right thigh to make the loud popping sound that was his trademark. “Yes!” he said, “by the Jesus, that doesn’t sound bad!”

Jack laughed at his friend's clowning, and Nate chuckled too. "I think so!" Nate said, as he approached the truck. Jack shook his arms at his sides and hopped a little to loosen his own stiff muscles. As he did, Nate made his way to the back and began to untie the ropes that held the cedar-strip canoe. Jack moved around behind him and paused at arm's length to look into the trees.

"Nate, that's enough driving for a while," Jack said quietly into the cool mountain air. Nate laughed as he replied, "I would'a pissed my pants if we hadn't gotten here when we did."

"That's not a bad idea," Jack said.

"You're going to piss your pants?" Nate said over his shoulder, laughing, never taking his eyes off the knots in the rope that fastened the canoe to the back bumper of the old truck.

"If I don't hurry up!" replied Jack.

Jack relieved himself in the weeds. Then he went to the river as Nate had and dipped his hands in the water. It was tea colored because of the pine needles composting on the surrounding hills. The deeper water seemed almost black, and visibility into it was lost.

"The level's high so we should be able to get across the beaver dams pretty easy," Jack said. "The current's strong, though, and it'll be tough to paddle against."

Jack found himself raising his voice over the sound of the river's dull roar as he shook the water from his hands. The powerful current was carrying the run-off that flowed to the river in small streams coursing through the many craggy ravines along

the miles the river covered before ending in Cranberry Lake. Some streams would be little more than a trickle, others would be large enough for a canoe to back into and disappear behind the tall grass at a bend. These streams each had their origin at some high place below windswept peaks where there was no real evidence of a stream – only an area of low wet ground that received the run-off from higher points where shelves of snow and ice amassed during winter’s brutal storms. Those places were low areas where water accumulated and started its journey to the river. Along those streams the deep v-shaped groove of deer’s hooves could be found, as could the round impression of a bear’s leathery pad with four sharply pointed impressions of claws that could tear open a stump or instantly kill an unsuspecting fawn.

Jack, standing along the rushing torrent that was the accumulation of these mountain streams, knew that a man could expect to have his legs swept out from under him if he went in much deeper than just below the knee. Casting was best done from the canoe, shore, or shallow water.

“What?” Nate said. “Tough paddling? oh, probly.” He glanced at Jack while he loosened the last of the canoe tie-downs. The sound of his friend’s voice brought Jack back from staring vacantly into the tea-colored water. He had been fascinated watching the water surge and curl around the boulders in the deeper water ten feet and more out. This was a place where the fast moving water masqueraded as slow. Currents seemed to rise from below creating flattened plumes that became twisted eddies as they slid past the stony protrusions like a tiny ocean around a breaking whale. He had wondered how big those giants were. Some of them protruded at a low

angle so that they formed a kind of stone island on which a person could easily sit and stay dry, and Jack wondered if those tops were sitting on four or five feet of stone, or if any might be the highest plateau of a truly huge boulder that was larger than a truck and submerged in twenty feet of water, or more.

Jack looked upstream. Somehow, whenever Jack approached a river he always wanted to go upstream. He yearned for it. It occurred to Jack that going down with the current would offer the same opportunities to camp and fish, but he never wanted to do that. Going up was climbing. Going up was the beginning of moving toward the lonely peaks. Found among those peaks were the quiet places where the notion of eternity resided without argument. Jack had been in those high places and had felt a strange comfort as he looked out over adjoining valleys and mountains. Looking along the oncoming current, Jack thought of disappearing around bend after bend of the snake-like waterway with Nate. He looked down at the smaller rocks just away from the bank where he stood. They were green with a furry slime and water rushed noisily over them. Even in that shallow water the river's pull was obvious. An irresistible force if you went too deep. He looked up at his friend.

“What?” he said.

“You think the current is strong?” Nate said.

“Oh, yeah,” Said Jack, “don't you think it will be hard to paddle up?”

“Oh, probly,” chuckled Nate.

After setting the canoe next to the water with the bow just in, Nate and Jack loaded their gear. As Nate steadied the back, Jack carefully stepped into the front with

one foot and held the gunnels. He used the other foot to push the bow into the river until it began to float. He stepped in and sat and Nate gave it a shove and stepped in. The bow began to arc in the current.

“You set?”

“Yeah mister,” Nate replied. Jack reached right and plunged the paddle in with the blade perpendicular to the boat. He pulled in toward him and twisted it slightly when it neared the side, giving a powerful pull back. Nate set his paddle to rudder and he angled it away. The boat swung directly into the current. “Okay, mister!” said Nate, “here we go!” For a while, the two men paddled in silence with Jack only speaking to call out warnings for boulders and logs.

“Take’er right, Nate. There you go. Straight for a while.” Each man looked along the banks of the river and into the pines and hardwoods of the sides that sometimes were steep covered with fallen trees that were tangled amongst the new growth that sprung up in the new found sunlight that their demise had allowed. About an hour had passed when they rounded a bend to see a nearly flat bank that would allow a canoe to be easily pulled ashore. There, a hundred feet distant across a small meadow, Jack and Nate saw a man just pulling a canoe into the woods as if to hide it. Jack gave a pull on his paddle and it made a loud thud as it bumped the side of the boat. The man stood up, and turned. He stared at Jack and Nate. Jack raised his paddle from the water.

“Hello!” said Jack. The man stared without expression. He seemed about in his mid-thirties. He had blonde hair that was scraggly and stuck out from under a

baseball cap. His jeans were shoved into rubber boots that stopped just below the knee and his brown Carhartt was open over a tattered corduroy shirt.

“Well,” said Nate quietly to Jack, “not talkin’, hmmm.”

“I guess not,” Jack replied. Their strokes carried them smoothly past the stranger and he faded from sight as they rounded the next bend.

The river was high, which allowed them to slide over waterlogged trees and submerged beaver dams, but it was moving fast and they had to paddle incessantly. Too long a break from paddling would allow the boat to slow and begin to reverse its direction. Finally, they reached their favorite spot, camp was made, and the two men rested by their fire. The sunset that night had been orange, yellow, and red and Jack and Nate had sat talking of old trips and the difficult paddle upstream. “What did you think of how that guy acted back there this afternoon?” Jack said.

“Yes,” said Nate, “kind of funny, almost like he was mad that we came along.”

“That’s what I thought. I think we surprised him when we came around that bend.”

“Right. Didn’t seem too happy to see us and I’ve heard of guys coming up in these remote areas to grow illegal gardens. You’ve seen it in the paper. Anymore, a meth lab is even possible – but probly not by canoe.”

“Ever seen such a beat up ugly canoe?”

“No, Jack, I haven’t. Had it camouflage painted, too. He’s up to sump’ m.”

The darkness that had seemed to hang high, allowing the horizon to cling to the last of the day's light, was pervasive now having descended like a weight upon the land. The air that rolled down from the peaks chilled the men even as the fire made their thighs and chests hot. Their exposed necks and ears were cold and Nate and then Jack turned up their collars. The fire leaped and crackled, popping the occasional spark into the dirt at their feet. This was a robust, mature fire. The early work of building it was such that the sticks were set ablaze from the tinder below as flames climbed the pile, like a man might climb over a blown down tree. However, now the fire was a red-hot pile of odd shaped glowing coals that were the remnants of the sticks and small logs that had been consumed by the eager flames. Everything thrown on now would be eagerly consumed.

Jack was fascinated by it. He saw the flames climbing and reaching into the broken branches he had just stacked on top and remembered a story he had heard of a man who had fallen into the river and was swept away by the powerful spring runoff. No one had seen him again, though they'd looked for most of the spring. Convinced that he was lost, the search had been reluctantly called off.

It had been a high rushing river, like this one was, and the searchers finally came to believe that he wasn't going to be found. He might have been lodged deep between the boulders that were strewn up and down the river, or swept under a tangle of branches far enough below level so that the brown water hid him. There were plenty of trees that had fallen into the water. Many of their branches would have penetrated the river bed and were supporting the trees as they lay in angularity to the

current. This caused no appreciable effect on the flow, but would act as a kind of giant sieve that would trap the partly waterlogged driftwood that hung low in the water as it bounced downstream. Even if there was enough space for a man they snagged clothing. They were the greatest danger the river posed, worse than a rapids that you might pass through uninjured if you allowed yourself to relax and bounce lightly.

But if you went under among those branches, then no man, no matter how strong, would be able to fight the constant relentless push on every square inch of him from the coursing river for long. Swept under the tangle of branches but unable to make it through, he would reach back against the current for a branch while trying to pull his legs forward in hopes of finding a foothold to push against. But, the arm would move forward too slowly, and the leg, with the large thigh finding an even greater resistance, might not move at all. The surface of the branches would be slippery. Time would run out. The man's face would be a hideous grimace, his skin rippling against the water that was in an endless rush to the lakes below. Praying pathetically for help that would never come, his eyes shut tight against the wash of water and dirt and every floating thing that fell or eroded into the river, he finally would give up. His oxygen and strength gone, his last involuntary act would be to attempt a breath, only to fill his burning lungs with water. Now drowned, his relaxing body would pulse gracefully in the current. His clothing caught and hooked in the web of protruding branches, the man would be pressed against the massive tangle that

was his watery grave. Hideously crucified, suspended above the river's bed, he would hang there like a vulture riding the air.

Nate took another pull on his beer and looked for a third time at Jack's unblinking eyes. He saw the dancing fire reflected in them and the line the river made as it reflected there too. He shrank back from speaking, unwilling to break the eerie silence that had settled over them as night fell. Without warning, Jack shot a look into Nate's eyes, and Nate felt a chill go deep into him. Jack blinked.

"Nate, you gonna drink *all* the goddamn beer?" he asked, managing a smile.

"I was just now wondering if you wanted one." He hesitated, but reached over to open the cooler when Jack relaxed and leaned back in his folding chair. He lifted his hand and caressed his forehead, closing his eyes.

"Yea, Natey. Thanks."

The next morning, Jack had awakened early and started a fire. He'd headed upstream and caught several trout that would be a delicious breakfast and was pulling the canoe quietly into the weeds on shore when he stooped to pick up the stringer of fish and his tackle. He looked up and there hidden under a low bush was the stranger's canoe of the day before. Momentarily stunned, Jack was startled by the sound of a loud *whack* and a sharp cry of pain. A strange voice was coming from the direction of his and Nate's camp.

"Where the hell is he?" the voice demanded.

Jack let go the fish and rod and ran down the short trail that lead to camp. He quieted his steps and stopped to peer through branches at its periphery. There, lying

on the ground holding his left shin was Nate. The unhappy stranger they had seen the day before stood over him gripping the barrel of a shotgun over his head like a club.

“Next it’s the arm! Where did he go?”

Nate rolled to the right and he saw Jack through the branches.

“Stop, okay! He went . . .”

“Went where?”

Jack cocked back a fist sized rock, and hurled it.

“He went to hell, so why don’t you?” said Nate. The rock caught the stranger behind his left ear and sent him sprawling across Nate. The gun flew into the weeds. The stranger’s weight sent a shock of pain through Nate’s broken leg and he howled as he braced his arms against the ground. Jack pulled the stranger off, but he came around with a right cross that sent Jack reeling back, tripping and falling on firewood. The stranger broke toward the river at a dead run. Jack caught himself as he fell against his backpack that he’d leaned against a tree. He grabbed his small caliber pistol from a pocket and bolted after the stranger. When Jack reached the river the stranger had his right foot in the canoe that he had hidden. With his left he was splashing noisily in the deepening current among the slippery rocks. His hands on both gunnels, he was pitching and lurching forward to escape downstream to his right into the powerful current.

“Stop, goddamn it!” yelled Jack.

Instinctively, Jack pocketed the pistol and reached for the bow of the stranger’s boat, but he slipped on a smooth stone and sprawled face first into cold

shallow water, his legs banging hard against the boat and rocking it violently to the right. The stranger kept his balance at first, but then couldn't. Jack looked up, blinking water from his eyes, and watched helplessly as the stranger, lurching forward, lost his grip on the slippery gunnel and crumpled headfirst toward the water. His head banged hard against the metal edge and he splashed facedown into the coursing deep middle of the river with its powerful tea-brown swirls. The boat, now freed from the shore, slowly glided and gently twisted as it began to accelerate downstream like a dog following its master.

Jack was up and took quick steps into the water. He felt the rush of the current against his legs as it rose nearly above his knees. His feet began to slip on the rocks. Cautiously, he stepped back toward the shallows. Peering downriver, he thought he saw the stranger fleetingly amongst the turbulence just ahead of the canoe that was pitching and tilting as it thumped and banged against the massive boulders. Jack waded out and hurried back to camp. Nate had pulled himself to the fire Jack had started that morning and was cupping heat with his right hand while still gripping his shin with his left.

He grabbed a blanket from the tent and spread it on the ground behind Nate. "Roll onto this, Nate. We gotta get you warm." Nate rolled in and Jack covered him.

"Where is that son-of-a-bitch, Jack?"

"Last I saw, he's in the river headin' north with his canoe taggin' along behind him. I tried to stop him Nate. All I wanted to do was hog-tie him here so the cops could come up and get him later. What did he say before I got here?"

“He snuck up on me, Jack. The bastard came into camp and cracked me on the leg from behind. I think he broke it. Christ it hurts! He wanted to know why we were here, and where you went. I told him it was none of his damn business in either case. I’ll tell you something else; I don’t think he brought that shotgun in here to swing it. It’s a good thing you weren’t here. He might have gotten the drop on us both. You were right. He’s up to something, or was, and I don’t think he intended to have any witnesses.”

“Proably right, Nate. We’ll call the Conservation Cops while we’re getting you an ambulance. You gonna be able to get in our canoe so I can get you downstream?”

“Maybe you should go for help. It would be faster.”

“I’m not leaving you here. He might come back, but I doubt it. I don’t think he’s gonna bother anyone else.”

“What happened?”

“He tried to get in his canoe and I tried to stop him. I slipped when I grabbed his boat, and he fell head first. He bounced his head off the gunnel when he went in and the current took him. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” Nate looked at Jack who had fallen silent. His eyes were downcast.

“Well, Jack,” said Nate, “you weren’t trying to drown’im. And who knows, he may drag himself out.” Jack looked into Nate’s eyes. “I mean, you couldn’t just let him walk away so he could come for us again, and how would you feel now if you had shot him?”

“I know Nate. You’re right. He was right in front of me. I could’a shot him, but no way would I want that on my conscience. The dumbass, too bad he didn’t realize that we’re just a couple guys looking for brook trout.”

“That’s right,” said Nate, “and that’s his fault, not yours. Let’s just get downstream. If we see him and can help him we will. Otherwise, we just have to tell it to the Conservation boys just the way it happened. I can’t see them finding any fault in anything we did.”

“All right, Nate. Let’s go. Let me help you up.” Nate was able to paddle a bit from the front, and Jack sat in the rudder seat that was usually Nate’s. With the current behind their canoe they were soon back to the parking area. Jack paddled quick powerful strokes and brought the nose of the canoe onto the gravel bank. Nate had lain back against their packs to rest, but now he propped himself on his elbow. Jack wedged his paddle into the gravel on the downstream side, keeping the canoe still. The two men sat silently. The water lapping under the canoe made a soothing sound. They were back, mostly in one piece, and that old Suburban never looked so good.

“Sweet Jumpin’ Jesus, Jack” said Nate, “I never thought I’d be so happy to be coming *back* from a fishing trip!”

“That’s the damn truth, Nate. You hang on and I’ll get her up steady and help you out. How’s that leg feel?” Jack slid the paddle in along the side of his friend, careful to stay away from the leg. Jack straddled the bow of the canoe. “Sit steady Nate, and I’ll pull’er up.” Nate gripped the gunnels and Jack lifted the bow and gently

pulled the canoe forward until it was steady. The canoe now stable, he walked back to help his friend from the seat. Bending, he lifted slowly as the older man struggled to rise, gingerly favoring the broken limb.

“I was a goner, Jack. When he cracked my leg with the barrel of that twelve gauge, I thought I was a goner.”

“Yeah, Nate, well, there you go thinking again.” Nate was a couple inches taller and Jack’s shoulder easily found a position under his friend’s arm, and he felt his weight on him. “Let’s just get you in that truck and we’ll get to the Ranger station.”

“Okay,” he chuckled, and with his free arm he slapped his cupped hand against the unbroken leg. Before they could take a step Nate said, “Hey, Jack.”

“Yea, Nate?”

“You want me to drive?”

“Drive? As I recall you couldn’t event operate the goddamn windows and locks!”

“Well, no, not with you bumpin’em on your side!” Nate began to laugh and Jack joined him.

“Well, that might’a had something to do with it,” said jack, chuckling out loud. Earlier he had feared for their lives, but here they were, just a little worse for wear, sharing a joke as usual. “Tell you what, Nate, you just heal up and figure out where we’re going next. I still haven’t seen all these mountains.” As the two friends

made their way slowly toward the truck, Jack turned and looked once more up the river.

The Sand Woman

The rancid smoke of the stranger's cigarette drifted to the woman, signaling a change in the direction of the wind. She knew this would bring even more sand inside. She was tired – weary from shouldering the burdens her husband had always helped her with in the small home they shared before he died. He had been gone for three years when this season of storms came. The sandstorms were hardest of all. She wished for the help her willing husband had provided. The smell of the wafting smoke reminded her of how he had hated those cigarettes that this stranger was smoking now. “They taste greasy,” her husband had complained, but they were all he could afford.

When he died she could not bear to throw them away, taking comfort from seeing them in their usual place in the dish on the mantle. She stole a quick glance at the stranger and saw by the look on his face that he liked them no better. He had not asked for one. He had just taken it. She found that she didn't mind. She was getting used to him. There was a measure of comfort in his company. He was exhaling the putrid smoke looking at the lit cigarette in his hand with puzzlement and disgust as if it was not a thing to be enjoyed but rather a bitter pill he felt compelled to swallow.

She said, “I must begin right away to getting the sand down from the shelves.” “Getting the sand down? Oh, well, that's all right with me,” he replied in that strange way that made her uneasy. He was saying kind words but he said them in an unkind way. This confused her. To her he seemed angry all the time, and she thought, *Who could blame him?* He'd been taken prisoner hundreds of miles from where he now

found himself. He'd been forced to live in this strange place with nothing but the clothes on his back, the food she gave him, and the stale cigarettes the desert had long ago robbed of any flavor. She saw that he was fretful and nervous. They had made it clear that he was being watched, and he acted as if the door did not exist. She pretended not to notice the fear this cautious habit betrayed, thinking she might allow him some measure of dignity.

Ever since the militants had brought him, she had tried to maintain her distance in the house. She wasn't afraid of him, and he didn't seem to blame her, but she wanted to show him that she understood and to offer him some measure of personal freedom and privacy. She was ashamed for helping in his imprisonment. No one would travel here now, and everyone who could leave had. The Germans, with their fat white legs and loud voices, had stopped coming, as had the Americans long before them. It was the Americans she missed most. They were friendly and spent their money. She had done well selling her blankets to them. Now there were no tourists chatting up and down the dusty street, pointing excitedly, and posing in front of the mosque for pictures. There were no hungry travelers offering money for a meal, just the bread and some coins from the militants for this man's keep, and silence, and wind, and sand. When the radicals came they made everyone an enemy. He was given to her. She felt guilty being part of imprisoning him but she was desperate for the money they gave. He could not escape. The desert was too vast.

Now, the wind was carrying sand through the cracks in the shutters and door. Removing it was a relentless effort. Still, he stood peering out the crack in the shutter.

She could see him from the small kitchen at the back. He looked at her and she pointed at the loaf of bread she'd taken out of a soft linen wrap, but he only looked at her and narrowed his eyes. He ate very little and she did not know if he would eat now. Striking a match he lit another cigarette and spit pieces of tobacco on the floor.

“Shit!” he said, the smoke spewing from his grimacing mouth.

“Shit!” she repeated slowly, trying to imitate the new word.

He looked at her in smiling astonishment. In her surprised look he saw that she had thought out loud, not meaning to be heard, and that she was embarrassed by his attention. Her unguarded outburst made him laugh for the first time since his capture and relieved, if only momentarily, the anxiety that followed him throughout the house.

They chuckled quietly together for a moment. They stood, laughing louder as the seconds passed. Their eyes locked together in understanding. Finally she looked away, not used to looking at a man, a strange man, for more than an instant.

Demurely, she glanced back and he was still beaming at her, his first smile since he had been thrust through her door to sprawl against the stone floor. It was a warming smile that erased her concern for the rules of her culture. She wondered if he understood the sympathy she had for him. Thinking again of the gathering sand she turned obliquely toward him and hesitantly held forth a small broom. She glanced at the sand at his feet and lifted her eyes to meet his and smiled once more.

How I Got Here

Part I: Dream

Maybe you'd like to be a writer or some other equally silly thing. Maybe it's not silly to you but you're sure it's silly to others. They might even have said so. Well, who are you going to have to blame when it's too late and you regret not doing it? If you can identify with that question then you know how I felt in 2002. I was happily remarried, but my wife lived (in order to be with her children) four hours away. I was lonely as a result, and feeling a bit disillusioned. My three kids were off on their own (mostly). Sitting at a job I no longer loved, for a company that no longer loved me, doing work I was no longer interested in, the company failing, constantly threatening layoffs, I was contemplating having to go to a new company and start over doing the same thing I already didn't like doing where I was. I knew that I didn't really have a good reason for my chosen career. It was accidental mostly. Regret and blame were weighing heavy on me then.

I remember wondering just who the hell I was. I wanted to find old high school friends and ask them what they thought of me, what they thought I should have done, who they thought I was back when they knew me. After all, your friends can tell right away if somebody you're dating is really wrong for you even though you can't until it's too late so why couldn't they tell me other stuff about me? I was getting a little desperate. I was starting to worry about things like it being too late. This is the story of how I dealt with it.

Part II: The Question

“If I could do it all over again, what would I do?” I asked myself. That was it. Not very original, I know, but powerful. My answer? *Go to college for something I am interested in, and choose a career based on that.* Problem was, I worked rotating shift work and it would take me ten years or more to graduate doing part time. I was so unhappy I thought I’d just quit. My wife, Ella, talked me down. After all, I was making good money and I was way too young to retire. I felt stuck. I was taking English courses part-time (pursuing Creative Writing non-matriculated), like a hobby, but I felt stuck. A few months went by and fate intervened. Kodak offered pretty good buyout packages (meaning a cash bonus and dollars toward education or training) based on years of service; but only to employees with at least ten years and fifty five years old. I had twenty-six years. I was forty-four. There was a meeting. The key part was when they said, “We’re offering a package and age doesn’t matter. Raise your hand if you’re interested.” I raised my hand.

Ella and I talked it over. It was going to be a financial strain, but I was able to get an entire year’s which I could split that in half for two years. It was going to be tight. Then Ella said something that explains a lot about her, “Well, you only live once and you should do what will make you happy.”

It wasn’t all just about flights of fancy and a wonderful world of dream fulfillment and the great American novel. I had seen plenty of people at Kodak advance because they had a college degree. Often, the degree was not even in the field they worked in. It didn’t matter. You had to have the golden ticket. My theory

was that I could kill two birds with one stone. Satisfy my desire to pursue writing and English and prepare myself for a new career that would not include the inability to advance that I had been saddled with. The year was 2004. Employment was excellent. I heard some guy on the radio saying that “they are screaming for people with college degrees.” How was I to know that the banks were loaning money to people who could never pay it back or that Wall Street was pretty much running amok; or, that George W. Bush, elected in 2001, was just getting warmed up for one of the most economically damaging foreign policy blunders in modern history? Actually, being in college then was good timing. Nobody was hiring anyway.

When I matriculated, I changed majors because Terry Lehr, my advisor, wisely said that a literature degree would better my chances for hiring as a teacher. A year later, I would be accepted into the Education program. Along the way, I proved something my daughter said when I asked her if she thought I could still do college. She said, “Dad, every class I was in had older people in it and we all hated them because they would sit up front, and always did their homework, and were always asking questions. You’ll do great.” *Thanks*, I thought, *I think*. I hope the students didn’t hate me too much. But here’s an interesting thing. Three years, full-time, forty four years old, and I was almost never the oldest person in the class. The times, they were a-changing.

Part III: The Backstory

I always easily did well writing and reading but by the time high school rolled around I was angry about my home life. My father had problems. Of course, as a teen

I was not very understanding about it. He had a nervous breakdown, a couple, before I even started school. His aunt and uncle, Christian Scientists whose beliefs forbade medicine and doctors, raised him. The world of the 1950's already stigmatized mental illness. They went a step further to believing it didn't exist. When he had a nervous breakdown it was more like a disgrace for him than a medical problem. All I knew was that he was a bully who would back my mother into a corner with verbal threats that bordered on physical attacks. He sometimes crossed the border.

It was ugly, and frightening. I saw this many times growing up. My sister, Debbie, when she got to be a teenager, would step in front of him to protect my mother. She was fearless. I don't mean she wasn't scared. He never could hold a job of any value at a time when employment and making money by working at Kodak (among many others) was a given. He did work there, but he got fired because he got violent with someone. Two guys had to hold him back. It was illness, not anything else. He wouldn't take the medicine for it. To him, nothing was wrong with him, and what's more, his religious training wouldn't let him. When we were kids and stayed home sick from school he'd usually be home. Not doing anything really. He'd encourage us to get dressed and go outside. My mother would be at work. She would come home and give him hell because we had fevers. You see, the Christian Scientists taught that illness is an illusion. You aren't sick unless you agree that you are sick or some outlandish crap like that. I am getting angry just writing about it.

Anyway, for some reason he was a son-of-a-bitch to my brother. There were four kids, my courageous sister, then my brother, then my other sister, then me. He

would get angry at my brother for some normal kid thing but he'd get worked up, and repeat himself, and get red in the face. And he'd hit my brother with his open hand on the side of his head. Slap him like that above his ear. He didn't do that to me nearly as much because he favored me for some reason. That made seeing him do that to my brother worse.

My parents were members of a local Baptist church. My mother's father, who had died and with whom my mother had been so close, had raised her and her seven siblings in a Baptist church. I know that she had a faith of her own, but I also know that she went to church and would never consider not going because it honored the memory of my grandfather. That's understandable. Once, my mother went to see the pastor because my father was abusing her, and my brothers and sister. This was before I was born. She was exhausting herself providing for the family and doing all the housework with little or no help from my father. She told the pastor that she wanted to divorce my father. The pastor replied, "We don't get divorced in this church." Thanks. Thanks a lot Your Worship. I bet nobody was slapping the sides of your head when they drank too much beer. Thanks. It was Religion two, Kerner's zero.

Of course, I now understand that my father was driven by forces outside his control. His father raised him because his mother ran out on them. His father died when he was a little kid. He was lying in bed and his father was in the kitchen and died. Nobody else was home. His crazy aunt and uncle the Christian Scientists raised him. The world was wrong in the attitude that it took toward mental illness at a time

when he needed help the most. None of that was his fault. He never had a chance, if you think about it.

The other side of the coin is that he was a handsome courageous young aviator serving as a bombardier in WWII in Australia. Once, a Japanese plane was running toward his big B-52 style bomber. The Zero could maneuver the pants off the bomber; but, the bomber had gunners, and there was a gunner in position to shoot down the Zero. My dad was sitting in his position and he looked at that young kid, the gunner, and he could see he was terrified. Frozen. Not shooting. The Zero was coming hard and firing. Slugs were tearing through the plane. My father, Warren, gave the kid a shoulder block and knocked him out of the way. Then he shot down the Zero with the turret mounted machine gun. He received a big medal for that, and he received other medals for other things. He was a war hero. He was in the Rochester paper quite a lot during the war. So, that's the way I'll remember him. That's the man my mother married. It just wasn't the man she got.

Part IV: High School

Anyway, my attitude at high school was predictably *inappropriate*. I was not dedicated to doing my homework. Au contraire. In fact, it was a nice little passive-aggressive move on my part not to. I was mad at the world. Therefore, having English teachers telling me or my parents that I “had so much potential, could do so much more” became encouragement not to do it. But, deep down, I liked reading and writing and those teachers. I'd never read the books, but I did help other kids with their writing. It was not a bad way to meet girls. One thing I did was just go to class

and listen to the comments that all the other kids made and then I'd raise my hand and reach the obvious conclusions. I wasn't fooling anyone. I remember once a female teacher of mine, a nice lady whose name I can't recall, asked me to stay after class. She leveled with me. She said that I "had so much intelligence, and seemed so genuinely interested in the novels, that she hoped I'd someday really investigate them myself." I am not so sure about the intelligence part, but she was sincere and I respected her and I have never forgotten her. Even though I never saw her again after that year, it would not be the last time I'd hear her voice.

I graduated from high school in 1977. My brother was living in Texas, the west side, just below that big square part, the Midland area, and came home for my graduation. I went back with him and met a woman thirteen years older than me who had a daughter. I was more than happy to take responsibility for her. I needed something, or someone, to be responsible for. I needed to do for someone what had not been done for me. I'm sure the psychologists have a name for it, but I think I was trying to erase my own experience by creating a new one, albeit for someone else. I could rescue both mother and daughter. The relationship didn't work out and I came back home.

Part V: What Next?

In 1978 there was nothing wrong with working in factories like Kodak (or Xerox, or Rochester Products etc.) instead of going to college. I hadn't liked high school all that much anyway. There was good pay, benefits, retirement, and opportunities to transfer and be promoted and do different things. I applied and got

hired. After all, it was just what you did unless you were doing something else. I wasn't doing anything else. But once I actually worked at Kodak, I realized college might be a good idea. Then fate intervened again. One sunny afternoon I found myself standing alone with a college application in one hand, and the lab work saying my girlfriend was pregnant in the other. I decided to throw away the college application. I'd been raised by a mother whose ideas on responsibility had great clarity and she passed those ideas on to me. For example, since your children are plainly your responsibility, you don't leave a bird in the hand to pursue two in the bush thus possibly risking their well being. Nobody needed to explain it to me any further. And since all that high school goofing off had not led to a big basket of dreams and plans, Kodak didn't seem so bad. But here's what happened before I met the girlfriend.

I'd been hired at Kodak at eighteen years old. My first assignment was as a cleaner on straight graveyard shift, eleven to seven – five on, two off. Here's an example of what cleaning was like.

I'm standing next to this fifty-year-old guy who was training me, and we are literally inside this huge 175 gallon stainless steel kettle whose rim came up to our chest, with our feet soaking in the warm soapy water we were using to wash it. It was miserably hot and steamy, I was dead tired, and we're both dressed in these hot silky white uniforms with hot silky white hats called silks. To add to the general misery, the silks also clung to our sweaty selves, like wet t-shirts do. They looked like ill-fitting pajamas at best.

So, we're standing in this nearly clean kettle in which emulsions are mixed for testing, with our white pajama suits clinging to our sweaty, water-soaked legs and chests, and the kettle is nearly clean, but the guy training me is pointing to a thumbprint sized blue stain. He takes the hose and sponge out of my hand, and with an obvious air of authority and pride – a kind of *let me show you my expertise* air – he says, “See, as you scrub it you need to keep hitting it with water so that as the emulsion mollycules [his pronunciation of *molecules*] are loosened, the water mollycules will replace them.”

Where he heard the word “molecule,” in any form, I'll never know. But believe me: he didn't know a molecule from his assecule. As I stood there, I could feel my heretofore dismissive stance toward education softening. I thought, *maybe I will go to college*. Also, all the while that I was a cleaner, all the other cleaners said, “If they ask you to go to the Melting department don't go because it's miserable.” Well, they asked but I did go. I thought, *what's worse than cleaning all night?* Well, turns out melting was.

Part VI: Melting

Shortly after starting in melting, I met my girlfriend – shortly after that, I met my daughter. So, I worked in melting for a year and I literally cried when I thought of working there for the rest of my life because we worked in the dark, in those pajamas, and I never met a bigger bunch of knuckleheads who only played euchre, farted, insulted each other, and prognosticated ridiculous opinions in my life. Not before then and not since.

I remember once one of those guys told me a riddle. He said, “Ok kid, a prisoner has a visitor and the warden asks who the visitor was. The prisoner, a wise ass, says, ‘Brothers and sisters have I none, but that man’s father is my father’s son.’ Ok kid,” he says to me, “who was the visitor?”

So I thought it over and I said proudly (since I could tell he didn’t think I’d get it) “it’s the prisoner’s son, because you are your father’s son, and since he said, *that man’s father is my father’s son*, then the prisoner is the visitor’s father!”

“No,” he said, laughing, “Dumb kid,” he went on, “there’s no answer to that riddle; it’s one of them trick riddles!” And the simpleton laughed at me for days, along with his farting, euchre-playing, pajama-wearing, ridiculous-opinion-prognosticating simpleton friends. Every time I tried to explain it, they just laughed harder. I knew then that I was in hell.

It felt like I was serving a sentence because the sins of the father are visited on the children, or maybe martyrdom. I was evening the score for team Kerner. I was clear on that intention. I was not so clear on how I might feel about a lifetime of proving it. But how’s this for clarity? Two months after I turned twenty, my daughter was born. I was there. They cleaned her up, and put her in the little new-baby warm-up box, with a little new baby warm-up light, right there in the delivery room. She wiggled and looked around. Never cried. She reached her hands into the air. It seemed to me that the room was unnaturally silent. I was transfixed. I touched her palm with my finger. She wrapped her fingers around it and trained her eyes in my direction. Let me tell you, the epiphany of that moment was that your children are not

a responsibility you must discharge, and they are certainly not a tool with which you prove your manhood. What they are is a privilege to take responsibility for, and a treasure to be cherished. In case you are not sure what to do with your life, have that experience. All the priorities line right up after that. I was lucky. I got to do that three times. I might have rushed into fatherhood for the wrong reason, and a job just for the money, but now I was in it for those kids.

Part VII: Construction and Crazy Ernie

Okay, so I couldn't take melting anymore. So, I request a transfer from melting to construction and I start with the painters. I was qualified because I painted houses in high school. I did well, so they placed me in a program where you worked with different trades for four months each. My first was with the masons, carpenters and laborers group. Here I had the opportunity to haul blocks, bricks, and various heavy loads in large two-wheeled wheel barrows. I also mixed mortar and generally did the back-breaking new-kid grunt work, such as run the jack-hammer. I was good at all of it.

I remember a sinewy old mason named Ernie. Ernie was from Italy and learning English was not a high priority. He knew enough. Everybody called him crazy Ernie unless he was there. He wasn't but five and a half feet tall but his skin was leather and not a scrap of fat on him. He'd work hard till lunch lifting and cementing heavy blocks into place. He'd stop for lunch and eat two huge sandwiches full of cold cuts then he would go back to work. Once he sent me to get a load of mud. Blocks they're given, and bricks they're given, but mud the masons create.

Ernie had trained me. When they mixed it they were like chefs in the kitchen, painters on the easel, they competed over it. It was the Holy Ghost in their paganistic construction ritual. A load of mud was a wheel-barrow (the large heavy duty steel kind) of mixed cement. One part mortar, the right amount of sand per Ernie's instructions, and water. If it was too dry, it made the mason's job harder. If it was too soupy you couldn't use it. Either way, these masons were tough little guys and you didn't want them mad at you. So off I went.

I mixed up my best load, almost a half a garbage can full. I wheeled it the quarter mile or so with the barrow see-sawing up and down on the axel over every bump. To spill meant a big mess and making Ernie wait in the cold with nothing to do. You didn't want to make Ernie wait. I got back to where Ernie was up on a scaffold (the sand and mortar were in large piles by our Quonset huts) where he was fixing a brick wall. It was windy and Ernie had an extra sweat shirt over his usual work shirt, all scarred from bricks and sharp trowels, and stained with cement spots. He saw me coming.

“Jon-a,” he said in his thick accent, “a-you-gotta de mud?”

“Yeah Ernie!”

“Well, a-ca-mon! I'm a-cold!” I shoveled a five gallon bucket full and began hoisting the rope that would take it up to Ernie a story up. Ernie had great respect for all things concerning his trade. His work was excellent, even if *he* was a little rough around the edges. I actually really liked the guy. I awaited his verdict on the mud. He

sliced his trowel in and turned it over a few times like a baker with bread dough. He paused and looked fiercely at me down below.

“A-Jon,” he shouted over the wind, “you mix-a this mud?”

“Yeah, Ernie isn’t it all right?” He troweled it over a couple more times and laid a slab like frosting a cake along the bottom of a red brick. He looked at it, and then at me. His whole demeanor changed. He seemed reverent and adoring toward me.

“A-Jon,” he said in the now still air, “this-a the best mud I ever seen! You mix-a this mud?” I nodded and smiled. A few days later, Ernie was working in a hole about eight by ten feet and six feet deep fixing drain tile. I peeked in and asked him if he needed help. He looked up with a hardened face and narrow eyes.

“What, you tink I’m-a crazy too?” he shouted waving his arms. He took his large pointy trowel and hurled it. It stuck into the hard dirt eight feet from him. “Ha? You tink I’m-a crazy?” He was shouting and spitting.

“No, Ernie,” I replied backing away, “just checking.” I made myself scarce. The other guys told me he was having one of his *Crazy Ernie* days and to just leave him alone. He was okay a day later. He even apologized. Those guys were tough men, hard workers, and they showed up every day and did what needed to be done. I liked them, and I matched them day for day, step for step, and I learned from them.

Part VIII: Construction and Henry Gatson

I didn’t mind. In fact, I worked like a horse. I had been athletic in high school and every day I figured I got a good workout. I sometimes worked with a guy named

Henry Gatson Jr. Everybody called him Junior. Junior was a black guy from somewhere down south. Junior was also a man like I thought a man should be. He took care of his family, came to work every day, was friendly, funny, patient, and physically gentle, but brutally strong. Even though he was fifty or so he looked a lot younger, and with his shirt off he looked like an Olympian. He used to take a full size jack hammer and use it holding it sideways on walls we had to demolish together. I worked with him when I could and he and I did a lot of physical labor together, but he never took a coffee break with me. I didn't know why.

One day, I came back from a break early and he was doing pushups. He told me he always did that. I knew he used to go running at lunch time, but I didn't know about the calisthenics. Just the running was remarkable enough because a few years before I met him he had been working as the hand shovel man on a backhoe dig. The guy running the bucket had over-shot and taken off the big toe on Junior's left foot. Doctors said he might have trouble walking. Junior, who had a kind of southern drawl, was humorous about it. "Thass why I run, Jonnie," he said, and laughed a little "hoot-hoot" laugh. "Doctor say I cain't walk!" Then he'd laugh some more – a big laugh, a big deep "huh-huh!" from down in his barrel chest. It was a favorite story of his. He'd sometimes retell it and I'd laugh every time as if I never heard it before because I couldn't risk hurting his feelings, and I couldn't help but laugh along with his sincere joy.

Henry was a grandfather to some kids he was raising, and when I told him how I'd been twenty years old when we had our first of three, and how I felt about

being a good father, Junior would smile. “Yo a good man, Jon” he’d drawl, “they ain’t nuttin’ mo impo’nt than loving yo family and raisin’ them kids right. No sir!” He’d punctuate those proclamations with a chuckle. He told me many times about his “little grain-dota.” He loved her. Talked about her every day.

Junior also told me that he’d been in the hospital one time and he passed out. When he woke up, the doctor said he had died but been revived. Junior told me that what really happened was that he met God. He told me that he was in a beautiful peaceful place and that he *talked* to God and that even though he was in a beautiful happy place he said to God that his kids, and grandkids, still needed him. He asked if he could go back. God said he could. I always liked that about Junior. He was the kind of guy I wanted to be.

Now, did Junior meet God? I don’t know. Does it matter? The point is that Henry Gatson Jr. thought he did. And the more I got to know Henry, the more I was sure that he would make that kind of trade. That’s the kind of guy he was. And I hope it did happen, because I’d like to think that if God is there, then he’d do that because the world can use more, not fewer, guys like Junior who it was my good fortune to know.

After I worked with Junior I was working with an electrician because I wanted to become one, and it was part of that cross-skill training program. The Group Leader came by one day.

“How’s the kid doing?” he asked.

The electrician said, “He works so hard, even when I’m not there, that I think there’s something wrong with him.” He was right in a way. Nobody worked harder than I did. Of course, nobody else was trying to prove something. Compared to the high school me of just three years earlier, having children had profoundly changed me.

Part VIII: College and Kids

They told me that I could choose any apprenticeship program they offered, and they offered all the good ones. I chose electrician. All I had to do was take three math classes at Rochester Institute of Technology and then pass the written test at work. I did, and I did. And so, in 1981 I completed college courses for the first time. Three semesters at night. I loved it. I wanted to keep it up. I tried to while working full-time. The homework required too much of what I knew would be my kids’ time with me. Even at twenty-two I knew you only got one shot at raising them. I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my daughter in our first apartment. She was in a little walker-on-wheels contraption, bumping into my chair and smiling up at me. I put down the pencil and picked her up. Right then and there I decided to forego taking classes. I will never regret the decision to stop taking classes then. I had a ball with my kids.

One time we went hiking in the woods. I was hoping to see some deer with them. They were about six, eight, and ten or so. I stopped, picked something up off the ground and showed it to them.

“Look,” I said.

“What is it, Dad?” They stared in wonder. I rolled it around and squished it between my fingers, and looked at it very thoughtfully.

“It’s still warm,” I said, in my most serious tone. “Must be fresh.”

“What is it?” they asked again as it squished between my fingers like escaping worms.

“Deer poop.”

“Eeewww, gross!” they chorused. “Deer poop! Oh, Dad!” Kids love that kind of stuff. As soon as we got home they told their mother. “Guess what dad did!”

Another time, we stopped for lunch at a burger joint down by Lake Ontario in Charlotte. We ordered the usual. Fries, milkshakes, burgers, and so forth. I ordered myself breaded deep-fried mushrooms. We sat down. The kids saw the mushrooms and said, “Chicken McNuggets!” So, as soon as they cooled off they popped one in their mouths. Just as quick, they spit them right back out.

“Dad,” they said, “You said these were Chicken McNuggets!”

“No,” I said, “you said they were – and you need to learn that just because a thing looks like something, it doesn’t mean that it is that thing. You need to be careful.” This kind of thing made them groan and roll their eyes. “Oh Dad,” the oldest would say. “You’re always teaching us stuff!”

So you can see I made the right choice where to spend my time, and I mostly stopped taking classes, but I had been to the mountain and I would make pilgrimages back. For example, two years later I took, and loved, Basic College Writing. I was a rough and tumble, tobacco chewing, construction tough guy by day, and a poetry and

prose writing, reading, and literature interpreting student by night. I think the word is *juxtaposition*. But even then, I did that because I was in some silly degree program that made no sense for me, electrical engineering I think it was. I wasn't interested in that. I only took the English class and a couple others. I worked for seven years in construction, but it got boring, and another department was offering me a good opportunity repairing and maintaining production necessary equipment. Ironically, this was in the Emulsion Coating Department, the department supplied with emulsion by my old friend the Melting Department.

Part X: Back in Pajamas

I was back in the building where you wore the pajamas and worked with the knuckleheads. But things had changed for me and now I wasn't one of them. I still had to wear the clothing, but now I had the authority to make decisions about equipment utilization issues, and there was real money at stake. Sales of film were so good that it was certain that a running coating machine was generating tens of thousands of dollars per minute in profits. These were huge machines. The film running through one in one continuous sheet was fifty five inches wide and thousands of feet long. The web, as the film being coated was called, would travel at hundreds of feet per minute over long rollers called spindles. In order to save space, the intestine theory was used. The web almost never went in a straight line for more than a few feet. It would wrap under a roll, go up eight feet, wrap over the next, drop back down, and wrap under the next, and so forth. There were clever ways to get it to turn corners, and even ways to allow one part of the machine to slow down or stop, called

take-ups, while the rest of the machine kept going, even though the entire web was one continuous piece. All of this was being coated with expensive chemicals infused with silver. Real money was at stake. If the machine stopped in an unplanned way, all the film in it would be ruined and you were losing profitable run time.

A simple two hour delay (which was average because of all the steps involved in stopping, and putting away light sensitive materials, coordinating the re-start with melting for the availability of emulsion) could easily cost in the millions. Therefore, it might not surprise you to find that it was important to produce a written report on what had been done so that our Department Head could account for our actions and expenses to his superiors. Also, we needed these reports for meetings in which we worked with engineering so that steps could be taken to prevent future problems. Some problems resulted in temporary repairs and our reports allowed others to follow up and make them permanent.

Part XI: The Writer in Me

We had to write these reports. Not a big deal to me, but it turned out that other people struggled with this. They didn't take the time to write and then re-write so that others could understand. I did, and my Department Head made it clear that he was pleasantly surprised and grateful. I was astounded. I stopped taking the ability to write for granted. I saw it in a new light. And then I heard those English teachers' voices again.

About this time, we were in another of the seemingly endless cycle of layoffs that had removed any joy I had once found in my work. I did not want to be there

anymore, and it began to feel like I was whoring my life and talents (which I no longer despised) for the almighty dollar. And I remember sitting at work one night thinking, now that my kids were on their own, *if I could do it all again, what would I choose to do? And, just who the hell am I?* I realized that I had been so quick to go and be who I thought I should be, that I had not given any thought to who I was, or could be, based on my natural inclinations.

Next, I began asking myself what I might have done if things had been different in 1978. What would I have done if I had thought about my preferences, inspirations, and things that excited me intellectually? What if I had followed the traditional route of going to college? About then Kodak offered a lump sum buy-out program in my department. I left Kodak and went to college full-time.

After such a long career in a company it is hard to conceive of leaving, especially if you come of age, as I and so many of my co-workers had, under the old paradigm of *one career at one company and retire in comfort*. We all expected to retire from Kodak. And for me to strike out on such a surprising course, surprising because of its total disconnect from my work there (except the writing part), shocked my friends. Many people had left to do the same work elsewhere. That no longer surprised anyone. But I was leaving to re-tool and become an English teacher. Not exactly a related field. My children were equally surprised. This was a side of me they had never seen, and they challenged me on it a little bit. Finally, however, they supported and encouraged me. So far so good, but here's the spooky part.

Part XII: Legacy

About two years into it, my sister and I were talking and she said that our mother, who had died of Leukemia years before, had retired early because she wanted to finally go to college and study English. I was surprised. She thought I knew that, but I didn't know that. The coincidence was too exact and it made me wonder and think about dreams and the love a parent has for a child. Was this her gift to me from beyond? Was this some kind of cosmic evening of the score? Was this owed to her for her years of suffering and sacrifice, and had she, being taken by Leukemia, been given her reward posthumously by my actions like in some Greek myth? I could recall that when we were kids my mother sometimes talked about how much she did want to go to college after high school. I had no idea she had kept thinking about it for all those years; but clearly, she had. That's got to be more than coincidence, don't you think? I do.

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