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This Close To Done
Kristinne Seibel

Four years ago I began to pursue a college degree. I can scarcely believe I am at the other end of the experience already. As I reflect on this, it is a beautiful autumn evening, a warm one after a week of cold rain. A gift. The windows are open, the ceiling fans are whirring out a breeze just above my head. I am home alone. Another gift. A mountain of work clamors for my attention. In addition to all the school related stuff and the kid related stuff, leaves are falling quickly now and will have to be raked and hauled back to the compost heap. The supper dishes are only half done. I loaded the dishwasher but the dishes that didn’t fit remain stacked in the sink. They’ll wait. The evening is perfect for reflection and this quiet is too delicious to pass up. I am almost done. I am almost done and I will take time to write about the finish.

At the beginning of this experience I received an assignment to write about a “First” in my life. I wrote:

I have had many wonderful firsts in my life but the most recent significant one would be my first day of college. Had this come in a normal sequence of events I am sure it wouldn’t have been such a big deal, but on January 4, 1995 I put my foot through a classroom door as a student for the first time in seventeen years. I was prepared for this. I had a major. I had a loving note from my husband tucked into the front pocket of my new backpack and I-love-you-Mommy drawings from my kids in the front of my new three-ring binder. I had role models. My aunt had just completed her second degree at OU. She made sure I knew not to embarrass myself, as she had, by wearing my backpack the “old” way, using both straps. Heeding her advice, mine was appropriately slung over one shoulder. Cool. My mom went to college when she was thirty-eight and had given me the ole if-I-can-do-it-you-can-do-it speech. (BUT, I thought, she had me to help with the three younger kids. I had three kids, but didn’t have anybody like me!) I had received pep talks from the admissions officer and my academic advisor, both of them telling me I would do well based on my ACT scores. (BUT, I thought, how could
those twenty year old sores prove anything, considering the nature of memory and the fact that brain cells die!) Financial Aid forms were in order. My closets were cleaned, my cupboards were stocked, menus were planned and my calendar was posted. I was prepared for this.

That first evening, I arrived early to buy books. Not too early. Didn’t want to appear anxious. I went into the book store. This was no Waldens. This was a crowded, little, itty bitty space crammed to the rafters with stacks of books, pens, paper, computer discs and other mysterious miscellany related to academia. And people. Lots of People. People way younger than me. Making my way through this labyrinth, I realized that no one told me The Code! My schedule said Art History 216. The tag on the shelf said, HISTORY OFAFRICANART216N Almendinger—What? What’s the N for? My official schedule said Art History—you know, Goya, Rousseau, Rubens, Picasso—African Art?—can’t be. I was also signed up for American History. That should be easier. HISTORYH151 Steffel, HISTORY566 Steigerwald, HISTORY151N Hogan. Forget it. I decided it would be cooler to just go to class without books. The next challenge would be to get to the right room without becoming hopelessly lost.

I got there. The room was huge and it was almost as packed as the bookstore. I found an empty seat right up front—the last place I wanted to be. It WAS History of African Art. I thought, this is obviously my advisor’s idea of a joke. I can identify Africa on the map, but African Art? With trepidation, I listened to the instructor. Her name was Almendinger (that explained part of The Code). She distributed and went over the “syllabus” (a strange word, sounded like something that had come up in a conversation with the pediatrician, related to ear infections, I think). I recall a few snippets of this introduction. For midterm exams (they’re not tests in college) we would identify pieces of art that would be shown on slides. We would identify the function and the group of people that created each piece. We would present a play (not in this lifetime, I thought), we would be having an African meal where we would also present our projects that we would be working on throughout the quarter. Any questions? Yes, can I just leave, now, before I waste any more time? or throw up?
I didn’t leave (I was too self-conscious to get up out of my front row seat and walk to the door). I went back for the next class, and the next, and so on. I took my first college midterm in this class and got 100%. Things turned out much better than I expected. I forgave my advisor. Oh, and I did eventually crack The Code and figure out how to buy books.

Figuring out how to buy books proved to be one lesson among many. I also learned the difference between “its” and “it’s” and the way its misuse weighs in with “educated persons” when it’s noticed. I learned that “a lot” is two words. Always. No exceptions. Ever. I learned to squeeze my brain, that I love logic, and that the world is rarely logical. I realized culture is a slippery topic even when discussed by people who are the same color and of similar background. I was given my first description of “How to sit with a shattered soul” and, as a result, caught a glimpse into my own vocation. I learned that the notion of “Peace” is alive and well and did not die with the Hippie movement. I learned shades of gray. I learned a foreign language. I learned to write clearly and concisely. I heard the word “pragmatic” used to describe ME and I was approved to tutor Math (you have to know me to comprehend the enormity of this one).

As the finish draws near, I am realizing that the value of it all goes way beyond the piece of paper that will be framed and hung, which I thought of as the goal in the beginning. There is something more, a transforming kind of knowledge of my Self, bearing meanings too personal (and, truth be told, too boring) to go into. The point being, I am facing the completion of my undergraduate degree with a perspective that is very different from the one that brought me to the decision to begin to earn one. It’s not a particularly practical degree, not even the degree I set out to earn, but for reasons not related to employability, it is intensely satisfying. This surprises me a little since I am so very practical most of the time. But, things have happened to me, changing me in unexpected ways. I have had to evaluate and declare, if only to myself, some new definitions of “wholeness”—of being wholly and fully who I am. At my age, this a big deal. I found that there are pieces of me I am not willing to sacrifice to circum-
stance. I doubt that I would have had the courage to accept these new components of identity four years ago. And I know I didn’t possess the necessary skills to manage the emotional backlash of their integration.

As much as I have acquired, I do have regrets about some of what I missed. I never took a poetry class and poetry is right up there on my list of the finest things life has to offer. I never mustered the guts to sign up for any Physics classes. I would have liked a whole quarter of Logic. A year studying in Mexico or South America would have been great—study abroad programs usually don’t include accommodations for your three kids. I also had to turn down the offer from my friend at the UN for an internship application (the kid thing again). And I have a favorite professor with whom I simply could never get enough classes.

In looking across this plane of time and all that has occurred in the last four years I am reminded of something I read once, a saying about the way some people pass through your life and are gone, but others leave footprints on your heart. Well, my heart must look like the cast of River Dance has been there. I am almost done but I didn’t get here by myself. In many ways, I perceive a completeness that reaches well beyond the degree. At the same time, I am more aware than ever of the incompleteness that will be with me for my lifetime, and it feels like a good thing. This close to done, there is still so much to do. The part that feels most complete is my deep appreciation for the shades of meaning I have found embedded in the lessons shared here. It is my plan to carry them with me and to pass them on. I will strive to do so with a level of sincerity and commitment that matches that with which they were given to me.

Illustration by
Tim Mathews
I stood motionless on the hill overlooking the driving range. The cool October air was no match for the sun’s penetrating rays coupled with the warm glow of satisfaction that was emanating from my heart. My closed eyes stared at the sun, as if to look with gratitude upon the face of the unseen, omnipotent force that lured me on this turbulent journey, some ten years before.

The club in my hand and the golf balls at my feet were, at first, toys for pleasure. But one day, "The Voice" whispered to me, and the toys became the tools of an obsession. For over a decade, I had been in the grip of a conviction that I could master these tools, and on this morning it suddenly dawned on me that I had reached my goal. By simply visualizing the desired shape of a shot, I could step up to the ball, execute the required swing, and produce the envisioned shot without conscious effort.

It had been a long, slow, agonizing process, and at times I wanted to give up, walk away, take up bowling, do anything to escape the torment. But "The Voice" kept whispering, "don’t quit, don’t give up the fight. You might win your battle with the very next blow!" So off I’d go, despite my doubts, to try again.

Finally, after countless rounds of golf and well over a million balls hit from the practice tee, I had achieved a level of proficiency which, for years, had been but a dream. As I pridefully lingered there, I began to fantasize about how I would use my hard-won skills to heap fame and glory upon myself. I imagined holding trophies overhead as admiring fans applauded my tournament victories. After all, why else would "The Voice" have encouraged me to develop such talents?

No sooner had my ego blurted out this question than did "The Voice" begin to answer it. In one instant I was contentedly full of myself, and in the next I was overwhelmed by an empty, hollow feeling, as "The Voice" whispered, "This journey is over, Bob. You have gone as far as your self-centered, self-willed methods will allow."
At first I scolded myself. Why would my brain seek to sabotage this joyous moment with such negative thoughts? But this message wasn’t coming from my head. It came through my heart. It was a mysterious, irrepressible knowingness foreshadowing some life-altering event about to occur in my life.

In a deflated daze, I staggered to my car and collapsed onto the seat. I didn’t know what to think, how to feel. Was this the last time I would ever see the familiar faces milling around the range outside my car? Was I going away? Was I dying?

I drove to work. The little sports memorabilia business I ran which supported my golf addiction was already busy with customers. Tony, my faithful employee, sensed my mood and kept asking me what was wrong. All I could say was that I felt like something terrible was going to happen. The feeling of dread was so intense that I simply couldn’t concentrate on my work. After struggling through a few items of business, Tony said he could take it from there, so I decided to leave. Perhaps an afternoon off would change my perspective.

The last thing I remember before the speeding car slammed into my door was calmly letting go of the steering wheel and surrendering to the moment.

Illustration by
Julie Brown-Cooper

Like most people, the sound of sirens usually sends chills down my spine. This particular afternoon, however, I was just annoyed by them because they woke me up from a sound sleep. I opened my eyes and wondered why I was sleeping on the floor of my car under the dashboard. I heard people shouting and rushing around, and then, I started to remember.
I immediately panicked. I tried to get up but I couldn’t feel my left arm or leg. The other leg felt like it was on fire. I started hollering and flailing around with my right arm, but some guy reached in and grabbed me. He said, “Oh no, you don’t. Just stay real still. Let the paramedics take you out of there. You’re gonna be alright.”

I knew he was lying. I knew I was in trouble. I passed out again. My next clear memory is of being in a hospital bed at the Ohio State University in Columbus. I had always dreamed of receiving an education from that institution, but I never thought it would start out in such a manner.

I’m writing this essay four years to the day since that car accident. If I had known then what it would take to live to see this day, I surely would have killed myself. In fact, I made a sincere effort to do just that. I had lost all will to live. I didn’t want to feel the pain anymore. I didn’t want to live life with a handicap. I didn’t want to live life if I couldn’t play golf. I didn’t want to live if I couldn’t play by my rules, period, and my rules only allowed for perfection.

Up until this point, I operated under the delusion that I was in control of my little world, but now things were happening that were out of my control, and I didn’t think life was worth living like that.

You see, I had the world by the tail and was ready to conquer it, but suddenly all I had was a broken neck and broken dreams, and I wasn’t going to stand for any of that.

It’s over! I’m outta here! But while poised with scissors in hand, prepared to slit my own throat, (it’s not easy finding a way to kill yourself while in traction), “The Voice” whispered, “Hold on. You’ll make it. Have faith.”

Have faith? In what? “The Voice”? “It” is what tricked me into trading my work boots in for golf shoes. Have faith in myself? I’m the fool that listened to “The Voice” in the first place. Then it occurred to me that if I used poor judgment then, maybe killing myself wasn’t a good idea now. By this point, what little courage I possessed had stuck its head in the sand. I dropped my weapon and just sobbed. I had nothing to believe in. I was a broken, worthless blob of flesh whose heart didn’t have enough sense to quit beating. Fear and self-pity had become my masters. For months I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.
The doctors' first two attempts at surgically stabilizing my broken neck were not successful. Consequently, I spent a great deal of time during the first several months after the accident, strapped to a hospital bed with one end of a cable secured to my head by steel pins embedded in my skull, and the other end attached to weights hanging from a pulley. This kept my spinal column stretched out to relieve pressure on the spinal cord while the doctors struggled with what to do. For a time, no matter what they tried, things continued to get worse.

The darkest moments came following the second surgery when I developed an infection because of a perforated esophagus, which allowed food to escape into my chest cavity. In less than 24 hours the infection raged out of control and my chest and neck bloated up like a croaking frog. The doctors insisted that without emergency surgery I would be dead in a matter of hours, but I refused to sign the release form. The important point here is that because I had been rendered powerless in my own life, my ego was deriving great pleasure in exercising control over this situation. My ego was willing to go to any length, including death of the body, just to regain that control. The doctor appealed to my sister and she finally convinced me to sign the papers, but to me, this episode represents most clearly the insanity of my thinking back then, and the futility of a life lived for purely selfish reasons.

My esophagus was stitched up, and while it healed and while they fought the infection with antibiotics, I enjoyed an exclusive diet of vanilla flavored protein drink, administered by tube through my nose and down into my stomach. The infection proved to be very persistent and came closer to killing me than the car accident did, but after five weeks I was back on solid food, and a week later they decided to try one more time to stabilize the broken vertebrae in my neck.

Quite a large team of professionals had become involved in the task of piecing me together again. After developing a new surgical strategy, they went in and undid all of their prior work. Then, by using copious amounts of bone from my hips, and enough metal plates, screws, and wire to repair a totaled Accord, (I tend to avoid powerful magnets), they fused four of the seven vertebrae in my neck together and hoped for the best.
When I finally awoke from surgery, the first thing I noticed was that the traction hardware had been replaced by a halo. I’m not talking about the angelic type, but a steel one, which kept my head immobilized. Any movement in my neck region would spell disaster, so this thing was screwed to my head and cinched around my torso rather tightly. They actually set the tension in the screws going into my skull with a torque wrench. I felt like the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz. If I only had a heart.

My hobby of staring at the ceiling and feeling sorry for myself continued, only now my self-pitying thoughts had a new flavor to them. Early indications were that the surgery had succeeded in bolting things together so that spinal cord function was unimpeded. Except for whatever bruising or damage to the nerves that had already occurred, and normally doesn’t heal, the stage was set for recovery to begin. So apparently I was going to live, in some form or fashion, and in spite of what I wanted. My thinking became centered around one question: What am I going to do now?

At some point in my life, I came to believe that no matter how long, or what it might take, I was going to be a professional golfer. I didn’t just want to be; I believed I was going to be. On the very day that I became satisfied that I had honed the skills necessary to move up to that level, the rug was jerked out from under me. To my mind, this was the cruelest thing that could be done to me. I believed golf was the reason I was on the face of this earth. Anyone who truly knows me, regardless of whether they shared my belief, understood this about me. So, what possible reason did I have for being here, if my life purpose had been eliminated?

As I pondered this grim question, doctors would come in each day and stick me with pins. The smiles they flashed each time they detected improved sensation in some region of my body seemed to have a sadistic edge.

This punishment, whether real or imagined, was nonetheless deserved because even while my body made better than expected progress, my foul attitude stayed the same and made me difficult to be around.
Occupational and Physical therapists began to converge upon me like ants to honey. They seemed delighted that the success of the difficult surgery had opened the door for them to apply their trade and positively impact somebody’s life. Their optimism and enthusiasm, however, was met with little or no cooperation and this only succeeded in bringing visits from psychologists and clergymen. It didn’t matter who came. If I don’t want something, you’ll have a hard time giving it to me. Nothing anyone could say would give me what I thought I had to have. Even though everyone else was excited about my prospects for regaining a reasonable level of functionality in light of what could have been, I couldn’t be restored to my previous state of health and anything less than that was unacceptable to me. I had plans for my life and now they were gone. I couldn’t force myself to feel hopeful that I would ever find purpose and pleasure in a life lived with disability. I wanted to believe that this was happening for some good purpose, but I just couldn’t. All I could do was cry, and be fearful, and wallow in self-pity.

Looking back now, it amazes me how many people were working hard to try and help me. Not just the people at the hospital, but family and friends as well. People I barely knew, or didn’t know at all, but had just heard about the accident, were taking time out of their lives to come and try to make a difference in mine. In the long run, these selfless gestures have had a profound impact on me as a person, and I am deeply grateful. Back then, though, the truth is that I was irritated by all of the attention. I just wanted to be left alone. I didn’t like people seeing me in that condition. I felt like a freak in a sideshow. I tried to control my anger, but many times I leveled verbal assaults on people which inflicted a great deal of pain on them. After they would leave, sometimes in tears, my guilty conscience would go to work on me. I began to see how my behavior was affecting everyone. I felt like a pernicious nuisance that wouldn’t go away. I didn’t know if I believed in God, but I started to pray for death. I just wanted the nightmare to end.

Suddenly, “The Voice” spoke up, with all of that “don’t quit” and “be patient, hang on” garble.
My temper hit the roof. I shouted out loud, "What is this, some kind of cruel joke? If you want me to hang on, then give my life some meaningful purpose that gives me the will to move forward!"

I barely had the words out of my mouth when "The Voice" answered back, "Then get on your feet."

It was only five words, but they spoke volumes to me. I instantly knew what was meant. If I wanted my life to move forward again, then I had to do the legwork. I had to quit feeling sorry for myself. I had to start accepting the help that was being offered. I had to quit longing to be perfect and start accepting my imperfections as blessings which equip me for making my own unique contributions to life. In that moment, I saw that instead of my life being over, I could choose to make this a new beginning.

Now, I didn't just jump up and break into a song and dance routine, but I did finally have some hope. It was a start. It wasn't an instant transformation. My self-pity, fear, and anger didn't just evaporate, and I harbored resentment over the fact that I was going to have to start from scratch, to learn to walk before I could run, figuratively and literally. But the seed had been planted that if I would just quit asking why, and just do my best each step of the way, no matter how imperfect that was, then order would emerge from the chaos and one day I would understand. One day, the sun's rays would again penetrate the cold, and caress my face. A new journey had begun.

"Caregiver" seems to be the most adequate term for describing the people who went about the business of rebuilding my life. They care, and they give. Just as my golf swing had become an unconscious act, their passion for helping others is so complete that it, too, is done without conscious effort. It's purely a labor of love. The amazing thing I began to notice about this process was that in their giving, they receive. They receive tremendous satisfaction. Receiving isn't their goal; they just give selflessly, out of love, and as a result they experience joy and a sense of purpose which makes their lives worth living. They get, by giving. This isn't a concept that the rational mind can comprehend, but it is an observable reality.
In reevaluating my own life, I realized that my philosophy had been that success (satisfaction, purposefulness, sense of self worth) came through conquest – getting by taking. In order for me to feel like I was worth something, I thought I had to prove that I was better than somebody else. This was a very vicious cycle.

For example, even if I had success in a golf match one day, the next day I was back in a rut because there is always an endless sea of challengers to threaten that title, which in turn threatened my self worth. Success and satisfaction were always hollow and short-lived because my priorities were all mixed up. I’m not belittling the game of golf. Probably no true golf champion is out there on the course waging this war against himself. I’m only speaking about my own personal battle and the mysterious help I’ve intuitively received for surviving it.

While I made these humbling observations about my behavior, my physical health made rapid improvements. The caregivers were all pleased and relieved that my mood had begun to change. I was not happy. I just had some hope that someday I might be. The therapists worked me hard, both physically and mentally. I continued to be fascinated by the degree to which they willingly invested so much time and emotion into their work. Many times they shed tears right along with me. They believed in me when I couldn’t believe in myself. Their faith inspired me. They saved my life.

The wheelchair policy was momentarily overlooked, and I walked unaided out of the hospital into the cool spring air. I still wore the halo and my gait was a little rough, but I was headed home.

I was also scared to death. My mind started reeling with the scenes of all the hurdles still ahead. Just before I thought I would pass out from fear and anxiety, “The Voice” whispered, “You’re in good hands. Don’t worry.” I decided to believe it.

The road to where I’m sitting as I write this was anything but smooth. There were hills between the valleys, but some of the valleys were very deep. There has been so much temptation to give up, but “The Voice” continues to urge me on.

I don’t know the nature of “The Voice.” You can call it God, or The Great Mystery, or “The Voice” of a higher consciousness, whatever. What I do know is that it has never lied to me and it exists apart
from me. I know this because it has forewarned me about events to come, which my human senses couldn’t perceive. It also knows how to lead me to the experiences which teach me the lessons I need to learn for my life to continue to have a meaningful purpose.

Lessons like:
Selfish, self-serving attitudes won’t produce success,
Sometimes I have to rely on other people for help,
Nothing succeeds like persistence,
To get what I want, I have to give it away.

There are more. I could throw something in there about perfection not being all it’s cracked up to be, but the point is, on my own, my best solution for handling this problem was to kill myself. “The Voice” had a better idea.

Last month I leisurely strolled down the sidewalk from Morrill Hall toward the impressive Library Center at the Ohio State University, Marion. I had just finished the freshman enrollment process and decided I would take myself on a tour of the campus. As I came upon the jewel of a lake, which is the centerpiece of the beautifully landscaped grounds, a flock of geese floated by and glided onto the water. I stood motionless as my chest heaved with gratitude for the opportunity I had just been granted. I turned my face towards the sun and its penetrating rays were met by the warm glow that emanated from my heart.

The joy still remains.

Illustration by
Cherie L. Inskeep
A Season to Remember
Carolyn England

"Ballplayers!? I don't have ballplayers. I've got girls. Girls are what you sleep with after the game, not what you coach during it." I think about this quote by Jimmy Dugan, the Tom Hanks character in A League of Their Own whenever I think about my last season as a baseball player.

It was a warm day for the middle of March. It was about sixty degrees and mostly sunny. I arrived at the park in plenty of time to warm up for the Little League try-outs. The green grass in the outfield was freshly cut and the infield was immaculate, being recently raked after a winter of neglect. There were very few girls trying out for the team. We all looked different, but most of the boys looked the same—same height, same weight, same size.

As the try-outs progressed, I thought I was doing very well. I fielded a ball down the third base line and threw the runner out at first. When it was my turn to bat, I knocked the first three pitches to the fence. I thought for sure I would make it. The Minor League coaches who were observing thought I should make it. Everyone thought I would be a Nevada Royal that year for sure, everyone but the one man that mattered—the coach. When the try-outs were over, we gathered on the bleachers. As the names of the team members were called, they were to get back on the field. The coach began: "Darin, Mike, Doug." I was sure the coach would call my name soon. "Adam, Andy, Troy." There weren't many spots left. Still, I had a chance, didn't I? "Joel." Joel?! I was better than Joel. I should definitely get chosen. "Matt, Brian, Rodney." Two more left. Please let it be me. "Chad and Jesse. The rest of you, see you next year." Next year!? I would be too old the next year. I would be thirteen, old enough for Pony League, but you couldn't go from Minor League to Pony League without Little League in between.

At home, I discussed the try-outs with my dad. He knew of my abilities, having coached my Minor League team for two years. I was a Minor League All-Star. Definitely the next step would be Little League. Dad explained that I had three strikes against me from the start.
Strike one—I was a girl. The coach of the Royals thought girls were flaky and would quit if they got boyfriends.

Strike two—My last name was “England.” The Royals had to wear the same uniforms two years in a row. At the baseball association meeting the past September, my father had argued that since the Minor League players raised most of the fundraiser money, they deserved to at least have jerseys provided instead of paying for t-shirts every year. Ever since that meeting, the Little League coach had been mad at my dad. Dad was convinced that the coach held a grudge because he was the one to suggest uniforms for the Nevada Blues, Nevada Whites, and Nevada Reds, which were our Minor League teams, instead of new uniforms for the Nevada Royals Little League team for the fifth year in a row.

Strike three—I was overweight. The coach didn’t like to fuss with figuring out uniform sizes. You wore a medium or you didn’t play.

After our talk, my dad called the other two Minor League coaches and formulated a plan—a plan to get even with the coach for being unfair, not only to me, but to all the girls that tried out. Every year the Minor League teams created a team of All-Stars. The All-Stars went against other All-Star Minor League teams and some Little League teams in the area. That year, not only did they form a regular All-Star Minor League team, but they also formed a special All-Star team composed of girls and only girls. This special All-Star team was comprised of the few girls that had tried out for little league and not made it, some girls who should have tried out and didn’t, and a few with only a couple of seasons of experience behind them.

In July, the All-Star team was formed. There were girls ranging in age from nine to twelve. We were tall, short, fat, skinny, average, left-handed, and right-handed; but most of all, we were baseball players.

We played our first game against the “superior” Royals on July thirteenth. They were superior for many reasons. First, they were boys and we were only girls. Then there was the fact that they were in Little League and we were only in Minor League. Minor League was for six to twelve year olds who weren’t good enough for Little League and needed to work on the fundamentals of baseball. Little League was for
eight to twelve year olds who knew the fundamentals of baseball and could hit a variety of pitches. At that point in the season, they had won ten games and lost only two.

On that day, I was chosen to be the starting pitcher. Because children between the ages of eight and twelve are still developing, there was a league rule limiting the number of pitches a pitcher could throw in a game. The limit for Little League was sixty pitches, not counting the warm-up pitches at the beginning of each inning. Since our All-Star team was made up of Minor League players, the All-Star coaches set a limit of fifty pitches per pitcher. I ended up pitching three full innings and most of the fourth inning. I threw forty-two pitches and was able to pitch until after we got the second out. Since they didn’t want me to throw more than fifty pitches, I switched to shortstop so Trina could pitch. At the beginning of the sixth inning, Trina went back to shortstop, I went to second base, and Traci went to the pitcher’s mound. She ended up leaving the game because she was line-driven in her pitching arm and it swelled like a purple balloon under the sleeve of her jersey. The batter was safe at first and we sent Stacey, our right fielder, in to pitch. She had only learned to pitch the week before, and she wasn’t even confident in her ability to throw strikes. But when it is the last inning and you only have one person left on the bench that is eligible to play, and she has never pitched before, you have to give the person with the most experience the ball and put the other one in the outfield. Kelly went to the outfield and Stacey got to pitch.

The count was three balls and two strikes with two outs in the inning. The clouds that had been blocking out the sun started to clear. The pitcher threw the ball—it was a pitch that was headed straight to the center of the strike zone. The batter swung and made contact. The ball went up and up. It was headed for right field. The fielder ran back toward the fence, trying to keep the ball in sight. Then she lost it in the sun. She didn’t see it hit the ground and the run scored before the batter was thrown out sliding into third base. The game was over. In six innings, we slaughtered them 14 to 1.

We shook hands with the Royals, saying, “Good game, good game.” The coach pulled my dad and the assistant coaches aside and demanded a rematch, saying that we had an unfair advantage. The
The Royals had had a game the previous day and their best picture was not eligible to pitch because of league rules limiting the number of innings a pitcher could pitch in a week. Although this was an unusual request, we agreed to play another game the next week. For us, it was a matter of pride. We didn’t want them to have any reason to discount our win as a fluke.

We beat the Little League team in that rematch and the next one their coach demanded. He always seemed to have an “explanation” for their losses. What it boiled down to was that if they lost, it wasn’t because we were better. We were just girls so there must have been another reason. There was no pleasing that man (at least if his team lost).

In looking back on this time, I am actually thankful that the Royals’ coach didn’t let me on the team. If he had, I wouldn’t have developed the strength I often call upon to deal with problems I face in my daily life. That one man saying that I was not good enough made me realize that I don’t care what strangers think about me. As a child, it hurt my feelings when people called me names. After that season, all the name-calling in the world wouldn’t affect me because whatever I set my mind to, I knew I could accomplish.

Illustration by Chad Simpson
First Impressions
Willie Woken

He came in at four p.m., showered, shaved, white shirt, tie and cologne. I knew he wanted something but he made it look like the big dude had stopped in for an on-the-job visit.

"What are you doing—working nights?"

"Nah, we quit early today, boss had a meeting. Hey, could we take a little break?"

On the way to the coffee shop he asked me to call him “Vinny.”

"Still up to the same old crap, huh?"

"Hey, it works."

Vinny was from Texas—he used an alias everywhere he went. I don’t know why—he never seemed to be in any trouble. He just liked lying about things. I would say he lied all the time but he didn’t. He was married so sometimes he had to tell the truth. Like to the police.

I’d known him quite a while. He told me he was a high school football star and went off to college with high hopes. It wasn’t long until training was set aside for cheerleaders and beer. He soon found himself working as a phone installer—on the road with a crew he met in a bar one night.

We worked together in an engineering department. Neither of us could stand the boredom. I started out on my own. He worked for me a while then to a phone company. He was more a salesman than technician. An incurable “people person” he moved through a crowd like a politician—introducing himself—smiling—he was a “nice guy.” People liked him. Slapping backs with one hand, cigarette in the other—he blew smoke—eyes wandering—seeking perhaps his, “soul mate” or something to tide him over until she came along.

At the coffee shop they called him, Vinny. He scanned the customers then got right down to business.

“I’ve been out of town a couple of months. Could we do dinner at TJ’s? Give me a chance to make a couple of moves.”

Despite his talents in getting around he lacked the ability to ingratiate himself where he wanted most to be. When he went out by
himself his motives seemed to become transparent and he usually ended the evening at the bar talking sports to overweight salesmen.

"I’ll pass on the dinner, go home for a nap, shower and go to work. It’s going to be a long night."

"C’mon, give me a break. You’ve got to eat somewhere. Spend an hour there, that’s all I ask."

There were more people in my life than I could handle. I didn’t need any of this. Every night but Wednesday was taken up. I needed more time for myself—not less.

"Hey, I’m not asking much here. Come out for an hour, tell one of your war stories or something and I’ll take it from there."

"OK, but we go by the old rules. When I start talking, you stay out of it. And if some dummy doesn’t want to listen and starts babbling you shut them up. Understand?"

"Got it. Oh yeah, ask for Vince. They call me Vince. And, aah hey, how about using some other name. This Willie thing—well, maybe after they get to know you, sure, but for openers you need—a—uh—a power name. Something impressive. And maybe some other kind of work that—well, you know women—the first two questions are "What’s your name and where do you work?"

"Tell me, do I look like an urban guerilla? Think that’d work?"

"Maybe not. Right now, I’m a golf pro. It’s summer—lots of travel—gone weekends. It’s just about perfect."

"Vince the golf pro. I’ll try to come up with something—but at ten I’m out of there. None of this, ‘Let’s the four of us get together’ stuff."

"Okay, okay. See you at nine."

At nine o’clock, I ordered dinner from the sandwich menu. The bulb in the table lamp was burned out and Edie, my friend and hostess, brought a new one. The place was cozy booths around the dance floor—bar off to the side, good food—music starts at eight-thirty. I saw Vince across the floor sitting with an older couple. He picked up his drink and came over. I stood up and shook his hand.

"Faldur Binkwall here."

"That’s good. Very good. I like it."

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While he was talking he turned full circle—like any good hunting dog—sat down, talked, gestured and smiled as his eyes swept the room. He stopped in mid-sentence and walked across the floor.

When the music stopped he brought a college-age girl over.

"Grace, I’d like you to meet Faldur Brinkwall."

"Hi, Grace."

I stood up—she put her hand out and said, “Hello, Faldur.” I had never heard anyone say the name before. It sounded ridiculous.

“She has a friend with her. Would it be OK if they joined us?”

“Oh yes, of course, certainly. What are you drinking? I’ll order—"

“I’d better ask Nancy first."

“Yeah, yeah, sure, you should ask.”

The second time someone called me Faldur it didn’t have as much impact. Nancy was tall and thin. Not bad—a healthy look—not vivacious — maybe even a little suspicious. Nancy sat down. I sat beside her. I had my captive audience.

“So Nancy, what have you been doing all day?”

“Golfing—nine holes after classes. I love golf. And what do you do, Vince?”

“I don’t have your ordinary job, as such, I uh—hey anybody ready for a drink?”

“No, we’re fine.”

“Like I said—I don’t have your run-of-the-mill—a regular job, I uh—well, it’s a winter job mostly—I’m down here on business. I’m at a resort in New York. Yeah, been over at Mansfield to the ski resort over there. I’m a ski instructor. Yeah, been over at Mansfield—designing a new slope—I could easily sit around all summer but, uh well, I’m one of those type-A people. You know, heart attacks and all that, so in the summer I do a little engineering—that’s why I stopped in to see uh uh Faldur here.”

“So what do you do, Faldur?”

“No, no, Grace, you go first. I do dull work—same old thing day after day pretty much.”

“I work in a dentist’s office.”

I told her I knew a couple of dentist stories—she could tell her
boss— but she said her boss was some old guy— about forty— with no sense of humor. He just wouldn’t be interested.

“I usually tell dirty stories because I think they are funny. I don’t give a damn about your boss. I don’t care if the son-of-a-bitch is ninety.”

Vince looked at the ceiling then scowled. Grace stared—but Nancy laughed—I laughed—then Vince. Grace’s mouth was hanging open. She told me to go ahead and tell my story.

“That was it—that was my dentist story. Don’t you get it?”

Grace looked at Vince. He was laughing—so was Nancy. When she said she must have missed something everyone laughed again. Nancy, trying to change the subject, said she wanted to know what I did for a living but Grace insisted on having “the joke” explained to her.

“Tell me. Tell me. Vince, please.”

“No—later—you’ll want to hear this.”

“Well Nancy, I told you it was boring. Actually, I’m a SCUBA diver.”

Vince was beside himself with glee and jumped right in.

“Yeah, and one of the best too. He’s on the road all the time. I hardly ever see him. Everyone in the business knows him—yup, he’s the greatest. Been in it for years.”

Nancy wanted to know if I carried my own equipment with me or if I shipped it “or what?” I told her I had my own self-contained trailer—all my equipment, wet suits, tanks, you know—and it’s even equipped with a water supply—discharge tank—the works. Actually, I could live in there but I don’t. I want to get away from the—you know, “atmosphere.” It’s a nice little unit. Light enough so I can pull it around with my little ’65 Mustang.

Next she wanted to know what kind of work I did around Wooster.

“Who would need a scuba diver around here?”

“Oh, I don’t do much work in town. It’s almost all done out in the country.”

“But what do you do? Where do you dive in the—country?”
“Oh, people always have problems. I’m busy all the time.”

“So you go out into the country. What do you do there? Do you plant fish in farm ponds—or what?”

“No, no, no—you don’t understand. I do septic tanks.”

“SEPTIC TANKS!!”

Nancy turned and simultaneously slid away. Grace’s eyes popped out and Vince mumbled—”Oh Jesus.”

Vince asked Grace to dance but she refused. Said she wanted to hear this. Vince went to the bar to order another drink. When he walked away he turned and gave me a dirty look and shook his head in disgust.

I went on with my story—explaining that septic tanks are underground—like basements—if they leak they can’t be jacked up and repaired. Someone has to go down there and patch it up. With septic tanks there are two options: call for a backhoe; dig up the whole yard; fix some dinky problem; cover it back up; re-sod the whole area and it looks like hell for a year and only costs twenty to thirty times what I charge. OR—they can call Binkwall Scuba & Bilge Systems.

“Tell you what. I’m so busy I switched over to an unlisted telephone. My business card says ‘by reference only.’”

I dug around in my pocket for a card but said I left them in my other jacket.

Vince came back with three drinks. He said Edie would be over in a minute with a fresh pot of coffee. “Oh yeah, she’s got a couple of jobs lined up for you, too.”

“Great. Coffee is the drink of choice in this business. Hangovers and septic tanks don’t mix.”

Grace was the most turned-off, yet it was apparent she didn’t know how a septic tank worked. I told her it was a small sewage system that is buried in the ground.

“First thing they do is dig down a foot or two, pull the cover off and there’s the tank. It has a divider in the middle that comes all the way to the top but the bottom is open so liquids pass underneath it. The side where the sewage comes in has the ‘solids’ in it. They being lighter than water float on top. When the bacteria breaks down the
solids they combine with liquids, go under the divider and out into the drain tile or the leach bed."

Grace said she had heard enough and she didn’t want to think about it. She said the whole thing was “repulsive” but Nancy wanted to know about the diving part of it.

“First thing I do is put on my tanks, wet suit—try to get my body fully covered. I dive into the output side first. I learned that early on. It has the black water in it so I take down my waterproof, high-end, infrared beam light with the 590 lumens bulb to find the trouble. It’s usually the drain tile—so it’s out with my 16-horse rooter. Grind out the tile or patch something up with my hydraulic cement and I’m out of there. Sometimes I do three or four a night. And—I work days, too. Usually forty-eight hours straight because cleaning up is like a three hour job.”

By the look on her face it was clear that Grace was beginning to understand. Nancy wanted to know what the “worst part of the job” was.

“One of the bad things is the odor. When the bacteria breaks the sewage down it gives off methane gas. The odor kinda clings—it’s bad enough to make perfectly healthy people gag and choke. Sometimes they actually start spittin-up if they get too close. So I keep to myself—pack up a few lunches—just to keep me alive—nuthin’ tastes good—not even water. And the other bad part is getting cleaned up. That black water is made up of microscopic particles that enter right into the pores of the skin. Any exposed parts outside the wetsuit especially get all black and it won’t hardly come out so I keep working ’till I’m exhausted. Then it’s Lava soap and chlorine bleach, check into a motel, take a few showers and go to bed. By the time I get up I’m pretty much odor free. But—the best thing I can do is go to some bar and soak up the tobacco smoke and cheap whiskey so I smell like a reg’lar guy. Sure the job has its faults—they all do, but I am out there in the front lines of innovation. A scuba pioneer.

Grace and Nancy—scrunched into their own corners of the booth, excused themselves to the bathroom. Vince sat there looking down into his drink. I thought he was going to cry.
"Well, it looks like you did it to me again. I might as well leave town tonight. I sure as hell ain’t going to make out around here."

When the girls came back from the john I asked if the plumbing was working OK. Vince asked Grace to dance. I stood up and said I had to leave, put my hand out and told Grace I was pleased to have met her. She turned and said, “Good night, Faldur” and walked off. I stared at my own hand hanging out there—got a hurt look on my face and sat down by Nancy.

“Grace is absolutely disgusted with you. She thinks you are a filthy creep.”

“Actually, I prefer that. Even though I value her highly, I have no room in my life for people who are heavily drawn to me. I’m just too busy. I live in a world of faulty plumbing, not one of unrequited love.”

“Are you married?”

“Everyone is married to something.”

She reached over by the napkin holder, picked up the wrapper from the light bulb I had replaced for Edie, pointed at the place that said “590 Lumens—”

“This is a 60 Watt light bulb—a ‘pink’ 60 Watt light bulb! I believed you up until that point. Listen, I have a girl friend—I’d like you to meet her. Give me a phone number—she’ll want to meet you—you’re just alike.”

“What I said was true—I don’t have a lot of time. Of course there’s always Wednesday—payday. I usually eat out—you know, Lava soap and bleach.”

“Wednesday is fine. Her name is Ann. We’ll be here at eight.”

I gave her my “unlisted” phone number and said goodnight. She reached over and grabbed my hand and said, “Goodnight Faldur Binkwall.” It still sounded a little weird but I was not about to venture into telling the truth at that time of night.

Vince waved limply from the dance floor but Grace didn’t even turn her head.

Two hours later Vince walked in. He said Grace clung to him like glue. He had a great time. I told him I had a call from Nancy and she was going to be at TJ’s on Wednesday at eight. She’s bringing a
bunch of friends and maybe Vince or Vinny or Von or Van might want to be there.

“Well Faldur, I don’t know how—but this seemed to work out. If we’d get together and refine this—like—leave out the septic tanks—hey, it might really be a winner.”

“Be my guest—do whatever you wish. I never use the same story twice—just don’t go using the name Faldur Binkwall—Faldur’s kin o’mine.”

“Maybe you could try ‘Willis.’”

“Naw—too sneaky. I’m thinking maybe Aaron Aardvark—with four A’s—first name in the phone book. I could build on that. Tell ’em about your sister who’s listed in the yellow pages under “H—.”

“Leave my family out of this.”
The crickets ceased their nightly festivities as the first pink rays of the sun debuted on the freshly cut grass. Loud honking alerted me to the daily assault the country geese woke me with at the crack of dawn. Rushing to the small window, I yanked the blinds open, nearly ripping them from the brackets. As I pulled the window open, I caught the first glimpse of the flock, necks arched and wings erect, soaring over our yard and the endless cornfields. The majestic birds realigned, relieving the burden of the leader. The next fowl in line formed the tip of the "V" to break the wind for all. Unsure if I would see them again before next spring, I watched until they vanished beyond the gilded maple trees. Heading southward the geese began their yearly migration...

"...Migration," I mumbled. Releasing the thin cord the blinds collided into the window sill. Flipping on a light I pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Dread slowed my movements making it impossible to untangle my fingers from the laces of the worn Nikes. In two hours our sixth grade teacher would ask each student from where their ancestors had immigrated. Swallowing my pride I'd reiterate what I'd been told the night before and say, "...

"...Definitely Ireland," Dad affirmed, polishing off the last of his spaghetti.

A long string of pasta halted its descent, slithering between my mouth and esophagus. Choking, I knocked over my glass sending a surge of water across the table. Jumping from their chairs, my dad and brother made chaotic sweeps at the table attempting to salvage plates and garlic bread from the high tide. Stunned by the cruel truth of my heritage, I sat in silence and stared at the drowning table as Mom hurriedly ripped a sheet from the cardboard roll. Like the paper towel, my hopes were saturated by Dad's river of truth leaving behind nothing more than the soggy ruin of reality.

It was impossible! I couldn’t be Irish. I always believed myself to be a descendant of Greece, the land of dedicated theologists and muscular contenders of the glorious Olympic Games. Maybe I was Italian, my ancestors living within the sweeping realm of the Renaissance
period, speaking and learning the ideas of a new age. Did I dare believe I was directly descended from a fierce seafarer, honor-bound to fight bloodthirsty pirates and discover and claim the New World for England, France, or Spain? No! I was from a land of potato soup, bread, bagpipes, ugly plaid, and ridiculously dressed leprechauns with four leaf clovers. My ancestors didn’t have faces or grand accomplishments to place before the world. For the first time I understood the reason my surname, “Leathem,” was nearly impossible to pronounce or spell by the majority of the people I encountered. Like myself, it was unwillingly and irrevocably Irish. Swallowing hurt and disappointment I pretended I didn’t care and vowed never to think of myself as a Celtic descendant.

Ten years later, upon the death of my grandmother and permanent hospitalization of my severely ill grandfather, Mom and I were assigned the dreaded chore of collecting my grandparents’ things to be put away. I’ll never forget the first time I revisited the old farm since their absence. The ravage of the elements carved its initials into the faded red of the barn, declaring an unmerciful sojourn. One hundred yards to the north the large house stood, a wounded soldier amidst the battlefield of time, its white uniform severely yellowed by the cruel sun. The wrap-around wooden porch sagged like the stripes of a scarred tiger knowing it will die as the pack, unable to carry the burden, leaves it behind to defend itself from hungry predators.

The slightly blackened porch moaned beneath my feet, pulling me into the drafty kitchen. Sadly smiling, I could almost smell the pungent tea Grandfather, a taller and slimmer version of Burgess Meredith, made for breakfast every morning. Waving his special “tea-spoon” in the air and nearly dumping the instant tea on the floor, he defended himself to the disbelieving eye. “The stronger, the better!” Then he’d pour himself a bowl of Frosted Mini-Wheats and cocoon himself within the previous evening’s newspaper.

The scene disappeared as Mom and I wandered through the bedroom and into the living room. Opening the large chest we looked through old family pictures, remembering the good times along with the bad. After removing all of the albums my hand brushed over a paper sack in the back of the chest. Curious, I opened the dusty paper as
two heavy frames fell into my hand. I was holding two miniature silver plated photographs. Where had these come from? The thought of how old they were made my hands tremble. One boasted a well dressed and distinguished looking middle aged man. Who was it? Spotting the ears that turned out, I named my mystery man. He was a Leathem. The other smartly dressed man didn't escape my scrutiny. His hat, pulled low over his high forehead, didn't cover his ears peeping from under the brim. Smiling, I opened a large cardboard holder. An old man and woman, puzzling over whether to smile or look serious, stood hesitantly in front of a small two-story house bordered by a picket fence. Other old photographs were of elderly men and women, children in their Sunday best, and brides in flowing gowns.

Nervous, as my grandparents never allowed me upstairs, I clung to the rail and plodded up the steep incline. Reaching the landing, I realized why I was never permitted to play here. It was a museum littered with odds and ends. The place could claim its own special on the PBS Antiques Roadshow. A closet in the master bedroom hid a large framed picture of three angels. The wedding certificate of my great-grandparents, Luther and Leah Leathem, in the year of 1895 was placed in the center of the cherubs. Two huge portraits were found in a small bedroom. The first was Luther as a small child while the second was of a man in a suit who could put any Vulcan's ears to shame. It was Henry, my great-great-grandfather.

Behind numerous boxes Mom uncovered two old wooden trunks. My heart leaped in anticipation as she opened the first, blackened with age. Unfortunately, the contents were missing. Hiding our disappointment, we opened the larger trunk. The smell of dust and dirt sprang into the air like a ghost elated to break the chains of confinement. Underneath an armload of musty papers was an old Bible owned by Henry. A cross embellishing the lid of an ornate wooden jewelry box contained another silver plated photograph. In a small case, the picture was overlain in bronze and bordered in a red velvet with a small unsmiling women garbed in a flounced dress and large hat.

Extensive searching uncovered many small treasures, each with a small story or sentiment. As Mom trudged down the stairs, I remained behind thinking of the day I spent sifting through the unknown
corridors of my ancestors’ world. Fingering the rough wood of the trunk, I felt myself transported back to the spaghetti supper I ruined as a small child. “Ireland!” my dad exclaimed. Relating the story as best he could, Dad tried to impress upon me the importance of our heritage. The bitter feeling didn’t allow me to experience the pride Dad felt every day as he strolled alongside the woods or as he planted the crops in the spring and harvested them in the autumn.

Now I searched my mind to remember the story I callously forgot. William and Mary Leathem, my great-great-great grandparents left Ireland in 1794 with several brothers and sisters and their families. Rumor of a ship leaving from England to sail toward a land of hope and freedom spread among the hills of the west coast of Ireland. Jumping at the chance, they hurriedly packed the two trunks I now rested my hands upon. Boarding a small boat to England, they left behind the rotten fields of desolation. However, the hand of fate was to be cruel. The fare for the ship in England was steep, meaning a majority of the family had to be left behind. Tearfully, William and Mary were chosen to embark the sea alone, never to see loved ones again. Arriving in America, they journeyed west to the wild Ohio valley. Deciding on 162 acres, William and his sons cleared every tree from the land, leaving a small two-acre woods on the north side. William’s son, Henry, inherited, raising the profits of the farm to make them a respectable upper middle class family. Luther, inheriting from Henry, passed the farm to his son who was my grandfather Wilton Salo Leathem.

Scanning the depths of the glass in an antique dresser mirror, I beheld my twin. Glaring at me accusingly, she dared me to look within the heart of an ungrateful person. The “Irish” in me was apparent as I studied the pale complexion and mane of thick brown hair streaked an unmistakable coppery blond. The recently acquired passion for Gaelic music and the excitement I felt upon watching the famous Irish folk dancer, Michael Flatley, emerged from the looking glass, opening my eyes to the self-denial of my Celtic background.

Unearthing the once “stupid Irish story” coerced me to take pride in the Leathem family. Unlike the past, my ancestors now had faces and personalities to complement the story Dad told me. As an adult I understood and appreciated the hardships my ancestors under-
went to attain a home in a foreign land. Comparable to other families before and after us, we left behind all ties of the old country and obtained the right to be called American. Rising, I pressed my face against the cool glass of the small window. To the north I recognized Henry’s old house in the tall grass as the picture I found earlier. To the northwest I barely discerned the well where William and Mary once lived. On the left the setting sun burnished its evening rays upon our house, the house with the freshly cut grass and crickets. Marveling, I remembered the geese of the autumn so long ago. Like those noble birds, the Leatham homes of over two hundred years formed a perfect “V.” Part of the new generation, it was my duty to relieve the burden from the old, tired leaders, learning from their guidance and determination to steer us toward the future.
Some Early Memories

“Towel. Towel. Towel.” Said over and over. CON-STAB-U-LARY” (not knowing what it meant but liking the sound, that is to say, literally, the sound my mouth made as it rounded the corner of the consonants of that word—con-StaB-u-LaRy). “PU-GET Sound” (liking how the name of that Sound, well, sounds). This said as I (four? five? years old) walked/slid about the house in those cool flannel pajamas with the padded feet attached. These are just a few early memories of rubbing the sound of a word in my mouth the way a cricket rubs its legs and sings.

Some Later Early Memories

A) “What a wonderful poem! Who wrote this? Stuart? Really! MY, how LOVELY!” I’ve never thought of a ship in dry dock as…..

This said by Mrs. Rumbo or was it Mrs. McCabe, yes McCabe (It certainly wasn’t Mrs. Canon. Even then I caught the double entendre of her name, the Freddie Kruger of first grade teachers who would, when you looked up at her when you didn’t know a word during reading time, shout at you, “WELL, DO YOU SEE THE WORD WRITTEN ON ME! Certainly not her) in Grade B1 (that is, first semester of first grade), at Kester Ave. Elementary (one of those overloaded-with-bungalow schools in the suburbs with hardly any grass, but lots of black top on the playground with weeds growing through the cracks), in Los Angeles (dim past). I don’t remember what I compared the poor dying ship to, but I DO remember the early lesson: **People respond to images.**

B) Loving to do synonyms, antonyms and, what are those things when two words sound the same but mean different things, like “knight”/
“night” or “sense”/“cents”? Well, I liked to do those, too, and I only saw later how fiendishly clever it was for Mrs. Stoker (I was now in B4, or was it Mrs. Vechiccio in B3?) to ask us which of those tasks we liked best when it came time to do “language skills” in class—my enthusiasm for these exercises made me feel the bad guy during recess (luckily I was good at dodge ball). Another early lesson: Duck when Kevin Winger throws the ball.

And Still Later

A) In high school: Mr. Frisius—fat belly, capped teeth, stringy white hair that wouldn’t stay combed, shirt that couldn’t stay tucked. Frisius, hated by my college-bound friends (like Gary Kurtzman who wanted to go to Stanford and become a medical doctor and anything that deflected from that goal was unimportant). Frisius was too weird for them, or, rather, as I now see through the prism of middle age, too unpredictably passionate in his love for language. Mr. Frisius, who called us peasants (As in “peasant in the blue shirt, would you close the door, please?”) and who’d give one a quarter if one happened to answer a question in what he considered a particularly eloquent way (I only received one, for an answer related to Richard III, I believe, something about Lady Anne and love). Mr. Frisius, who told us of the unpublished novels he’d written; of depression so deep he had tried to commit suicide; of his wife, twenty years his senior who was now in her seventies and confined to a wheelchair. Mr. Frisius, fat slob. Mr. Frisius, whom we didn’t know how to pigeon hole. Mr. Frisius, who read poetry out loud like I had never heard it read before, so that its rhythms poured into us. Mr. Frisius, who read us poets I’d barely heard of: John Keats, T.S. Eliot, John Milton (I’ve only recently come to see that Mr. Frisius was a traditional-cannon kind of guy, only dead white males on his reading lists, but still...). When Mr. Frisius read Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi,” I felt that I wanted to write this stuff called poetry more than anything else in the world (my mother still hasn’t forgiven him). Mr. Frisius, teacher. Mr. Frisius, angel. Another
lesson: Pursue what you love. Be passionate about something. Not that it was always a bed of roses. Consider

B) Poor Mr. Asman, asthmatic track coach of Van Nuys High School. The teams he coached in the 1970s were so bad that another coach would call him on the phone the night before a meet and taunt him, say things like, “Just wanted to let you know, Bob, that our boys will get a nice little workout tomorrow.” Poor Mr. Asman, ever cursed. He finally got some great runners on his squad, not one, but three: Geraldo Conchola (Geraldo was such a great distance runner with such great lung capacity that his lungs seemed to pop out of his chest, he complained during workouts), Joel Rothman (another medical doctor-to-be who would lecture us on the wonders of peristaltic movement when we would puke our lunches up during track practice), and yours truly. Finally, a worthy squad. No more taunting calls the nights before a meet for Mr. Asman now. Well, Geraldo moved to, you guessed it, the school district where the taunting coach lived. He went on to do great things. Joel, a GREAT 440 yard runner, developed a mental block that made him run into a mental brick wall whenever he came to the 330 yard mark in a meet (He was still a GREAT 330 runner, but, unfortunately, that was not an event in our league). But Mr. Asman still had yours truly to run the middle distance events for him, yes? No mental blocks there.

Nope, just a mental case. Unfortunately, I had discovered poetry, Beat poetry at that, and, as any cool cat will tell you, so I thought, good beat poets like Kenneth Rexroth and Allen Ginsberg didn’t run track (Actually, I found out later, the quintessential Beat, Jack Kerouac, was a great athlete in high school). Beat poets were too busy being cool. Beat poets were too busy “riffing” out lines and “jiving” on the edge and “be-bopping” hard and doing all sorts of verbs I didn’t know the meaning of. And so I was too busy to go to track practice. “Please, don’t insult me,” I sniffed to my father when the issue came up (Ah, poor dad, known as Bronco Lishan in
his youth, on account of his agility and toughness as a halfback, who had given birth to a skinny son who couldn’t throw a football in a spiral to save his life). I was still a good enough runner that I was allowed to run without working out with the team (Not something I’d recommend if you want to win a league title), but, for all intents and purposes, the jig was up for Mr. Asman’s hopes. Last place in the standings as our home, once again. And thus, Mr. Asman, as the late night taunting calls resumed, had a moment of clarity that spring of 197_, as Geraldo, wearing another school’s uniform, his pumped-up lungs poking through his chest, bounded past our mile runners to yet another victory; and Joel ran into another mental brick wall; and yours truly stood on the sidelines reading “Howl”; Mr. Asman had a vision of his tombstone, and it read, “Poor Mr. Asman, asthmatic track coach, ever cursed.”

And so the poet grew up. He grew smarter in some things, dumber in others. Some days, when the good words seemed hard to come by and nothing seemed to go right, he thought of Mr. Asman. Other days, when he felt inspired with a grace of eloquence, he thought of Mr. Frisius. And he learned to laugh a bit more at himself (Maybe Mrs. Canon’s behavior taught him something about not taking himself too seriously). Through it all, the sound of words, the power of language, the love of that elusive thing called poetry remained.
I’m skimming through our anthology looking for a poem, any poem, just one poem to jump out at me and say, “Hey, I’m right here! You know that self-analyzing poem you’ve been looking for,” but no such luck. Instead, Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy” is staring right back at me, mocking me, daring me to tear it apart.

The street is quiet, the wind kicks up a dust devil and a tumbleweed tumbles down the street. A cloud of dust appears on the horizon, rapidly growing larger, heading for town. The townsfolk are all hunkered down. Only the occasional pair of eyes can be spotted staring out from between the slits of the buildings’ shutters. Just as the hoof beats are the loudest a cry is heard, “Say, horse of mine/If you hear the cry of whoa/will you not find/That it means stop not go?”

It was worse than Jeff could have imagined; he had hoped to get off easy. Maybe it would be Prose and his bunch of wordy scoundrels. Essays. Letters. Hell, even if Journals had joined up with the bunch Jeff could have taken them. No, it was worse—much worse. It was Poetry—he had no rhyme or reason, and he had brought along the roughest of his crew; on Poetry’s left was Sonnet—fourteen lines of pure hell. To the left was Jingle—once you heard him you couldn’t get him outta you’re head. Behind them all was the meanest and nastiest of them all, Limerick—his only purpose was to shock by rhyming words with (bleep).

Jeff, strapping on his large pink eraser and number two pencil, knew he had no choice but to face them. As Poetry slid from the saddle, like a ripple from a canoe paddle, Jeff caught the gleam from the stanza mounted on his left hip. Jeff relaxed a bit. A stanza, he might be able to take a stanza. His ease was short lived, for as Poetry straightened himself up, Jeff saw the dull black shape that didn’t shine or gleam from its place on Poetry’s right hip, but rather absorbed any and all light—symbolism. Jeff’s chin bounced off his chest. He was certainly doomed now. How was an amateur scrutinizer supposed to tackle symbolism?
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