

Hometown: Four Memories

The Snow

It rarely snows in El Paso, but that winter morning brought the invasion of a cosmic white force that lured me to my front window. There, I stared at the billions of snowflakes floating to earth like mysterious white-gowned aliens falling from outer space.

I was in a white trance. The yellow grass, the sidewalk, the asphalt street, my consciousness—all vanished beneath the icy winter surface.

My winter trance, like a time machine, spun me back to about a year earlier, to a certain place, a certain moment in the history of my life. I recalled exactly what sat on the front row of my brain that particular instance, the top student of my thought.

I was thinking: Life is good riding in a high-off-the-snowy-ground red Chevy truck down an upstate New York farm road on a late December afternoon, the passenger of the tall, blue-eyed woman I love, with dark hair streaming from her forehead to her tail bone, and how fine it felt running my hands through it that very morning.

I remember: We stopped at a convenience store for a six pack of beer. She insisted on buying, climbed down from the truck, and as she plodded through the snow in her blue galoshes, she grasped her hair from behind her neck and pulled it like a long sheet of black fabric over the front of one shoulder. I stared at her suddenly exposed back side, covered by a pink sweater. I thought of the long white spine beneath, admired the sway of her hips, thought of the texture of the flesh and muscles in her thighs and the skin which enclosed them. My legs felt weak. She disappeared into the store.

I waited: I reminisced about the first time I'd seen her at an August afternoon party in an El Paso friend's backyard. She stood alone when I first spotted her, holding a glass of white wine and looking out at the gathering of people. She stood in knee-high boots, faded jeans, a Buffalo Bills T-shirt, her hair arranged in a circle of braids atop her head. Then, she stood looking straight at me, and that moment, as if the ground had been turned sideways, I fell forward in a walk toward her blue eyes, fell into her midst, into a conversation, into a kiss under that willow, into love beneath the August moonlight.

I watched: She carried the green Molson beer carton in one hand, gripped her hair, still hanging over her shoulder, in the other. Her smile moved toward me. She opened the door, put the beer on my lap. She leaned over, kissed my mouth. My eyes focused on her lips—warm, wet and supple—like separate creatures unsupported by her winter-cold cheeks and chin. They moved delicately, whispered, “Let’s go home.” I touched her hair, still blanketing her shoulder, pressed it against her neck as she drove us onward.

My trance returned me to the desert draped in rare whiteness. I tried to imagine riding with her in that red truck through this snow, across this far West Texas winter landscape. But it was a blurry hope spurred by a memory of a white ground, years ago, hundreds of miles away.

I snapped from my longing. I turned from the window. I left her out there in the snow.

The Dump

When I was a kid, a real treat—actually, a thrill—was going to the city dump. My father took me there fairly often in the 1960s. Located on the edge of El Paso, we didn’t go the dump to get rid of something or to scavenge for and salvage some mistakenly discarded item of value.

My dad went to the dump for dirt, and there was plenty of good dirt there, a rich soil he sought to throw atop our yard for planting bushes and flowers that wouldn’t grow in the dense red clay beneath and around our small home. Perhaps he might have been breaking some law by taking dirt from the dump, but being that he scraped by paycheck to paycheck, buying planting soil at a nursery would have been too much of a luxury.

Dad would put several empty buckets in the trunk of his old Buick, and we’d head out early on a Saturday or Sunday morning for that promised land—for him to shovel and for me to roam, inspecting what others had left behind: car parts, broken furniture, electrical equipment, discarded building materials, and other fascinating junk. Once, I came upon a dead deer, its antlers lopped off, the buck’s brain exposed. Today, my seven year-old mind’s vision of that animal’s gray matter still pokes at my psyche.

As soon as my dad had filled the buckets, he’d call for me to return from my traipsing through the wonderful outdoor museum of debris. As we drove home, the weight of all the

dirt he'd loaded into the trunk made our car a pretty cool early day low rider.

One time as we were leaving, he said something I never forgot: "Don't be poor. You don't have to be rich, but never be poor."

I didn't fully comprehend or appreciate those words at my young age, but I suspect they stuck in my mind because while I had just rambled in what was a bunch of seemingly useless garbage, some of it was stuff more unfortunate people could use—truly some men's treasures—like the increasing number of folks I saw as I grew older who built and lived in shantytown hovels on the outskirts of El Paso and especially across the Rio Grande in Juarez, Mexico.

I also would come to know that as a young man and a World War II refugee in Europe, my dad had himself been poverty stricken, so poor that he painted his toes black so the holes in his dark beggar's shoes wouldn't be so obvious. I realized, too, that once he was in America he didn't work a second job at night for years because he wanted to.

So, as we departed the dump that day, when my father told me, "Don't be poor," I suppose he was telling me that he wanted the dump to always be only for his boy's recreation. He didn't want his son to someday be embarrassed for wearing shabby shoes. He didn't ever want me to feel like dirt.

The Big Thing

My friend Mike, in his mid-forties, without his wife who'd left him for another man years before, had long taken up evenings with his new love, Smirnoff Vodka, at Kiki's in Central El Paso. That's where I met him and often sat beside him when I was single and in my twenties, and my stories about women I dated seemed to be fresh air in his dense, half-drunken loneliness. You could tell Mike had been a handsome man, his blond hair still thick, his blue eyes never totally bloody or dim, despite the booze. The drinking showed more in his shaky hands, the swollen fingers, and in his ears, which had also swelled and turned purple like those of an old boxing champ.

When he was 49, one of the waitresses moved in on Mike, took advantage of his kind, gentle nature and his loneliness. He told me he had fallen in love, and he drank less and less often.

The late author Barry Hannah wrote, “Truth is, the drunk has all the feeling for the miracle and not quite the substance of it. He is apt for the miracle. What you like about the one nice snap in the blood is the hope for the big thing.”

Mike enjoyed this “big thing” for about three months, but the miracle eventually left him for another guy and with much of Mike’s life savings. Returned to the bar, he got drunker, fatter, more swollen and sadder, and he didn’t care to hear my dating stories anymore. So we talked politics, and he occasionally reminisced about his younger days, when he worked as a crop duster. Memories of flying were now the only things that made him smile, and as he spoke his blue eyes became an open sky before me—I could see him in his plane, dipping down, gliding low over the ground, and then rising, high once more.

A year later, Mike’s liver gave out and he died one morning in the county hospital. I went to our old hangout that evening to honor him in thought. After I arrived, the Kiki’s night manager hung on the wall behind the bar an old photograph that Mike had signed and given to her before he went into the hospital, a picture of him in his plane a few yards above some crops he was dusting. His inscription read: “Thanks for the good times down there. Look forward to someday to seeing you up here.”

I drank a few beers, tilted each one toward the photograph, then toward the empty stool beside me. Once the nice snap in my blood convinced me in its miraculous way that Mike had finally found some better “big thing,” I walked home.

The Last Drive

When the funeral home called and said my mother’s ashes were ready to be picked up, my father asked me to get them. On the way, I thought about how I used to drive my mother places—she didn’t drive—to the grocery store, the shopping malls, the veterinarian with her dogs. And now it would be the last drive.

The box containing the urn was handed to me with a document that would be required if the ashes were to be taken across the state line. There’s never escape from bureaucracy.

I placed the box on the front seat and drove to my parents’ home, where my father joined me with his pick and shovel. It had been decided to bury her ashes on the east slope of the Franklin Mountains, a range rising above her city of El Paso,

mountains she loved so much. In the over thirty years my mother lived in El Paso, those mountains were always her friend, right outside her back door, what she loved most about El Paso, what kept her magnetized to the city since she arrived from Germany in 1953. With the Franklins always in her sight, she made a new life in this country; she grieved the death of a daughter; she welcomed the birth of a son; she made countless friends and witnessed the weddings of her two boys, all those seasons and thunderstorms and sunsets.

My father and I drove up the road that leads to the shut-down tramway and parked in its empty lot. From there, we climbed several hundred feet; I could hear my father crying behind me as I led the way. We found what we thought was an appropriate spot overlooking her neighborhood and the rest of El Paso to the east.

We picked and dug into the rocks and caliche until the hole was large enough for the urn to fit. We filled it in and put a couple of large rocks on top. My mother was now a part of the earth and space and time. And then, as I turned away and looked over the mountains, the desert, the city, the cloudy sky, it happened: It fell out of me and rolled like a large boulder down the mountainside...I felt so light I thought I could fly...it was the overwhelming heaviness of my grief, which had rested on my shoulders and in my chest in the five days since her death, that had tumbled away.

I looked at my father. I knew instantly, from the peaceful look on his face, that he, like me, felt some distorted kind of joy, a feeling we didn't really understand, except we both knew some good thing had happened. I knew that not all of his grief had tumbled away like mine, but he said, "I think she would have wanted it this way. She would have loved this spot. We did everything right."

As we walked down the ridge to the car, I stopped and turned around to look at the Franklins. What I saw was my mother. Her mountains had become her, and she had become her mountains. She was there, alive as ever, everything right, at peace for all time, bonded to my father and me and the universe for eternity.