

CHRISTOPHER M. BRINSON

1.

Imagine this is you will. In a faraway distant land and time called “The Eighties”, there were no such thing as iPhones, laptops or notebooks (well, we had something called a notebook, but it didn’t come with a screen attached to it). Imagine that. And when you can, you know that’s the land and time I am from. Sometimes I think about it, even though I know I’d never want to go back there again.

You see, in that distant land and time, you generally had to make eye contact with people. You had to move your mouth and vibrate your vocal cords. There was no text messages or emoji. There was however, one, slightly subversive mode of communication that we sometimes used to communicate with one another in that strange enigmatic land of teenage-hood. And that was via the old “passed note”. A passed note was a message written down on paper, often folded up, passed from the originator through many hands until it reached the target addressee.

And not unlike today’s world of device-to-device communication, most of these passed notes were mundane useless minutia lost to the currents of time and space. But every now and again, something said in a passed note could really cause shit to hit the fan and blow up in your face.

This story that I am about to tell is one such case. The note in question not only caused shit to hit the fan, but it caused a local tabloid controversial sensation, rattled the walls of our school, and irreversibly affected the lives that the sender and receiver. And I was the unknowing middle-man to this transaction. I was just a witness. I was the pair of the hands that passed the note from person “A” to person “B”.

I’m about to tell you the whole story. How it went down then, and the ramifications that are still being felt now, almost forty years later. It all happened in band class on a Friday afternoon. In band class, one Spring afternoon at Sam Houston Junior High School on the outskirts of a Houston, TX suburb.

2.

Stacy Murray sat to my right. Richard Butler sat on my left. I had known Richard forever. He was gangly, thin and awkward. He was very intelligent-sometimes too much so. He wasn't afraid of telling people what he thought about them or insulting someone's intelligence if he thought it necessary. Too often, he spoke before he thought. He was obsessed with rare tropical fish and everything about "Vietnam". He didn't have many friends, nor did he make them easily. Regardless of this, I considered him as such. He was one of my best friends. I couldn't remember a time in my life where he wasn't a daily part of it. We had lived next door to one another all our lives and even had the same birthday.

Stacy was relatively new to town. She had showed up at the beginning of 6th grade from somewhere out of town. She claimed she had lived in Florida next door to Disney World. She was several months younger than Richard and me. She was still thirteen years old. And even though she was only thirteen, she looked and acted like she was twenty-five. She dated high school boys already and I'm not talking just 9th graders here, I'm talking about 11th and 12th graders. She had even gone to homecoming dance two years in a row with a high school boy. She turned the head of every boy at Sam Houston Junior when she walked by. She had big dreams, wanted to be a model and move to Hollywood as soon as she could and make it big there. It was all she could talk about.

And then there was me, David Edwards, right in the middle of these two extremes. I was less interesting, had less of a back story. If you would have asked anyone about me at age fourteen, they would have said that I was quiet, studious and nerdy. I liked it that way. I tried to lay low and fly under the radar. I didn't talk to many people, but to those I did, I was a loyal, lifelong friend.

Together, the three of us motley individuals made of the trumpet section of the Sam Houston Intermediate Symphonic Eighth grade band.

And it was during band class on that Fateful Friday spring day as Mr. Poindexter (God as my witness, that was actually his name...Albert Poindexter.), was bitching and moaning at the trombone section about goofing off and not playing in time, that Stacy tapped me on my arm,

gave me the note and motioned for me to pass it over to Richard. I took the note, looked at it and gave her a questioning glare. She nodded. I tapped Richard on the shoulder and handed the note to him.

Richard was lost in his own little world at that moment and time. His mind was as far away from band as it could have been. He was leaning deeply into his music stand drawing cartoons in a spiral notebook. It was a cartoon of a character he had invented. He had created a whole narrative around this character. The character's name was "Fred Pepper". Fred was some kind of "society-spurned" underground solidier of fortune who righted the wrongs of society. It was all Richard talked about and I was the only person in the world who would put up with and listen to his endless ramblings about this cartoon character that he had invented.

He was so deeply entranced in his cartoon sketching world that I had to sock him on his shoulder with my fist to get him to come back to reality. Finally, when he looked up, I gave him the note.

He read the note. He looked at me. He looked at Stacy. Stacy smiled at him. Richard quickly scribbled something on the note, refolded it and handed it to me.

I shrugged my shoulders and handed it back to Stacy. She quickly read the note and scribbled her reply. I passed the note one more time.

Then suddenly, we heard Mr. Poindexter's ire directed toward us. "Trumpets, just what in the hell is going on back here? This is band, this ain't no church ice cream social."

I looked up and said, "Nothing, Mr. P. We are good."

"OK," he said, "Let's keep it that way." He looked at his watch. "OK, ladies and gentlemen. Two minutes left in class. Let's play the fight song and call it a week." He counted off, "And a one and a two and a three and a four."

We all played the fight song at maximum volume (because there's no other way to play a fight song, is there?)

Song ended. A second of silence. The bell rang.

Band class and another week of eighth grade was over.

3.

I woke up Saturday morning, got something out of the refrigerator for breakfast and went out to greet the day. I grabbed my basketball and the radio and started shooting some hoops.

At about nine, I saw Richard come out of his house with his dog, Topy, and start walking her down the road. I turned off the radio, ran from my back yard to the road and caught up with him. I dribbled the ball as we walked.

“So, what was all that stuff about in band yesterday?” I asked.

“What stuff are you talking about, man?” he replied.

“Oh, don’t bullshit me Richard. You know exactly what I am talking about. Don’t play coy with me.”

He smiled a devilish grin.

“You know, “I prodded. “All that crap with Stacy and the note she passed you.”

“She wanted me to call her and she gave me her phone number.”

“Call you?” I echoed. “And did you?”

“Yep, called her last night.”

I walked and kept dribbling my basketball. “And what did she have to say?”

“She told me she likes me. Said she likes me and has for a long time and has finally worked up the nerve to tell me.”

“Likes you. What in the hell is that supposed to mean? Girls like her don’t like guys like us!”

“Oh yeah?” he retorted. “She says she thinks I’m the cutest boy in eighth grade and that she wants me and thinks about me all the time.”

I threw back my head and laughed. I drop kicked the basketball into Old Man Sawburger’s yard and said, “She’s full of shit and you know it. You know it, Richard!”

“What the hell, dude!?” Richard asked me.

“She’s having you on, man. She is just playing a joke so her and her friends can laugh at you behind your back.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous to me, David.”

“Oh bullshit, “I said waving my hands in the air. “There’s nothing at all a girl like Stacy wants in us. Nothing at all.”

“Jealous!” he said again.

“Think whatever you want to think, man. But I say she’s yanking your chain and is setting you up for a fall.

“And what if she’s not” Richard asked.

“There’s no ‘if’ to it. She is setting you up. You’re playing with fire. This time next week I’ll be telling you I told you so.”

“You’ll see. I’ll show you.”

“I doubt it, I really doubt it. I think you need to get your shit together and get out of this situation while you still can. Like this weekend. Before Monday morning.”

We had walked around the block and were back in the front of our houses. We stopped. “What are you doing tonight?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll be home, “I said. “Knock on the window if it’s late. Parents are asleep by nine. Let’s play some video games or watch some movies.”

“O.K.” he nodded. “Might do that.

He went in his house. I ran back down the street and retrieved my basketball.

4.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were a repeat of Friday's note passing shenanigans. Stacy handed me the notes, I passed them to Richard. She giggled and laughed. I knew what game she was playing, and she knew that I saw right through her.

Poor Richard was blinded by the whole fog of her pseudo-affections. And he'd have nothing to do with my warnings. He was tight lipped as to the contents of the letters too. I went to his door every evening after school to talk to him, but each time he said he was too busy talking to Stacy on the phone.

And then Thursday came and neither Richard nor Stacy were in school. Friday rolled around and they were still absent. I went home at the end of that week with a very bad feeling about the whole situation. There was no movement or life to be seen next door at the Butler's house all weekend. I knocked on the door. I rang the doorbell. I looked through the windows in the cracks of their curtains but couldn't see a thing. I didn't know what to think. I almost didn't want to go back to school Monday morning.

5.

Instead of walking, I rode the bus to school Monday morning. When I arrived, I couldn't find Richard in the hallway. I frantically ran from building to building. I checked the cafeteria. I checked the band hall. I waited at his locker. I saw Stacy in the breezeway between the seventh and eighth grade hallways. So, I went up to her and confronted her.

"Hey Stacy, do you know where Richard is?" I asked.

She screwed her nose at me, squinted her eyes and gave me a look that was halfway between "goto hell" and "why in the hell should I care", turned around and walked away. I shrugged my shoulders and was about to head to Algebra when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around. It was the principal, Mr. Vaughn, standing there in front of me, about six foot eight inches tall wearing his customary patented Bear Bryant fedora hat.

"Mr. Edwards..." he said to me.

My heart skipped a beat. "Yes, sir?" I stuttered.

"You were the first person on my meet and greet list today."

"I am?"

"Yes, indeed. Now if I could get you to just turn around and go wait for me in my office instead of Algebra, this morning, I would really appreciate that. I'll be along shortly after the bell rings. Can I trust you to do that?"

"Yes, sir." I replied.

"That's a good man," he said as he patted me on the back.

I started walking towards his office. My heart was beating like a bass drum. All kinds of horrible thoughts and possibilities began racing through my mind. By the time I got to the front office, I was about to pass out from the adrenaline and dizziness that had overcome me.

I opened the door. Mrs. Nelson, the school secretary, looked up. "Ah, Mr. Edwards," she said, "Come right on through and have a seat."

GOODBYE RUBIK'S CUBE

I walked by her desk and down the hallway. I turned into Mr. Vaughn's office and sat down. I waited. I waited and wondered if my life was over.

6.

The bell rang and I was all alone with my thoughts only for a few more minutes when Mr. Vaughn stepped into his office, closed the door and sat down at his desk.

“Now David...” he began. “I have a delicate situation I need to talk to you about.” He stopped and stared at me as if waiting for me to say something.

I silently stared back at him.

He took a deep breath and started again, “Look, son. I’ve known your family all your life. Your father and I are old running buddies from back in our high school days. I know you’re a good kid from a good family. I know if I ask you some hard questions, you’re going to shoot straight with me and tell me the truth. Will you give me your word on that, son?”

I had no idea what in the hell was going on or what he had to ask me. I swallowed, took in a deep gulp of air and said, “Yes, sir. I’ll be honest.”

He leaned back in his chair a bit. “Now, David. Tell me what you know about this situation between Stacy Murray and Richard Butler.”

A light bulb went off in my mind. Something bad had happened to Richard. I didn’t know what, but I felt it was very bad whatever it was. I wasn’t sure what to tell Mr. Vaughn. He interrupted my hesitation.

“Now look. I usually don’t give a rats-ass about what kind of teenage romance drama is going on in these hallways. My job is to educate you kids and keep you safe while you are here. But some very serious things have happened, and accusations have been made and I’ve been thrown into the middle of this storm. I need your complete honesty here, son.”

He leaned in and said in a whisper, “Don’t bullshit me, David. Just make this easier on me and yourself and tell me everything you know.”

The hair on the back of my spine tingled. “Mr. Vaughn, all I know is that they’ve been passing notes back and forth through me in band class for a week. Richard won’t tell me anything except that he thinks that Stacy is in love with him. I told him she was just setting him up and playing a joke on him. And then he disappeared this week and nobody has been at his house. That is all I know, sir. I promise.”

“Are you sure that’s all you know, David?”

“Yes sir. Swear to God!”

He let out several breathes of air, looked back at me and said, “OK, son, I believe you. But we’re still in a bit of a pickle here, now aren’t we?”

“Pickle?” I questioned?

“You see, David...Richard did something very bad. So bad, we had to immediately expel him from the campus when these things came to light.”

He glared at me in silence again for almost a minute as if trying to extract information from me that I was withholding.

“Mr. Vaughn, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Hamm...” he pondered. “How shall I put this...” He twisted his face, he put his right hand over his mouth and rubbed it. He breathed in deeply and spoke, “It seems Richard took multiple Polaroid photos of his...uh...uh...private parts, brought them to school and presented them to Stacy as a , how shall I put this...as a gift, I suppose.”

Holy shit I was thought to myself. I winced back in my chair. Richard would have never done that unless Stacy had pulled him into a trap like that. But I wasn’t about to argue on Richard’s behalf to Principal Vaughn , though.

“David, I need your word that you nothing about this.”

“Nothing at all Mr. Vaughn. Nothing.”

“Even though Mr. Poindexter testified to me he saw you passing the notes and even though you and Richard live right next door to one another?”

“Nothing.” I firmly restated.

“Hmmm...” he said

He glared at me again. He looked at the ceiling. He looked back at me.

“To make all these matters worse, Stacy’s mother is raising a helluva big stink over these supposed photos. She works down at the Post Office. She’s telling the whole damned town. She

even has the photos down there and is showing them to all the town's mail carriers. It's a god-damned mess."

I was lost in thought. I didn't know where he was going with this.

"David...son. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, sir. Every word."

"You see where I am going with this?"

"No sir."

"Mrs. Murray is accusing you of being part of this whole god damned plot against her daughter."

"But I wasn't, Mr. Vaughn. I wasn't"

"And I believe you, son. I've known you too long. I know you wouldn't sit there across from my desk and lie to me eye to eye. I'm going to back you up on this. But you've admitted to passing those notes. Mr. P has told me all about that. You've got to admit that you are a small part of this entire tragedy. Don't you agree?"

I very meekly nodded in agreement.

"And I can't let that go unpunished, now, can I David?"

I nodded again.

He paused.

I knew what this meant. He was going to pull out "Old Betsy". "Old Betsy" was his paddle. It was a whittled down Louisville Slugger baseball bat with four holes drilled into it. The holes allowed for less wind resistance when he was swinging it, but it also made it hurt more when it hit your backside. I had never had the displeasure, but Old Betsy was legendary inside the hallways of Sam Houston Junior High School.

He walked over to his closet, pulled out the paddle out and quietly and half-heartedly said, "Stand up then and brace yourself, son."

I stood up and braced my arms onto his desk stiffly. I knew what about to come my way. Mr. Vaughn gave swats in groups of five depending on the severity of the offense. I could only hope for one set of five.

I tightened my body and then it came.

One...I felt my heart go through my throat into my mouth.

Two...I but my lip and it started to bleed.

Three...my legs and arms started to wobble.

Four...I began crying. I braced myself as good as I could again.

Five...my arms and legs collapsed. I fell on the floor sobbing.

Mr. Vaughn put his paddle back in the closet. He lifted me up to my legs. I leaned into him and cried. He sat me down in a chair. He sat back down on his side of the desk, passed me a towel and let me cry another few minutes until I had settled down.

“Now then, “he said. “Are you going to be OK?”

“Yes sir, “I said while nodding.

“OK then. You and I are square. Don’t you worry about Old Mrs. Murray. I will tell her that you and I have talked, and I’m satisfied with your answers. Furthermore, I will tell her that as far as you are concerned, the case is closed and to let it be.”

“Thank you, sir” I said.

“And this little matter we’ve discussed here today stays between you and me. Do you think you can help me with that?”

I nodded.

“Like I say, I don’t like getting involved with this kind of crap, but I had to nip this one in the bud before it got out of control,” he said ruminating to himself.

I handed the towel back to him.

“OK, David. This little meeting between you and Old Betsy stays here. I won’t record it in your transcript, and I won’t send a note home to your folks for verification.”

“Thanks Mr. Vaughn, “I replied. And I was indeed thankful, for I feared my parent’s wrath more so that I feared the power of Old Betsy.

He stood up, walked around his desk, mussed my hair and said, “You’re one of the good ones, David. Stay on course, son. You’re going to go far. Now get back to class.”

I nodded and began to leave.

As I was exiting, he said, “And no more passing notes in band, ya hear me son? Just stick to playing that trumpet.”

I smiled and nodded.

I wasn’t going to pass notes anymore, but I was sure as hell going to give Stacy Murray a piece of my mind. I didn’t know when or where, but it was going to happen all the same.

7.

Of course, come the following week, the story had spread like an out of control wildfire throughout the school. All the while, there was still no sign of Richard or his family next door. Stacy had withdrawn from band. I saw her in the hallway but refused to make eye contact with her.

The whole incident was all anybody could talk about. It was quite possibly the largest scandal ever to hit Sam Houston Junior High School. Everyone was laughing at Richard behind his back calling him “pervert”, “one-step” and “polaroid”. And to be honest, poor Stacy didn’t fare much better with all the caustic gossip the kids were throwing at her as well.

And I might have gotten off fairly free from this teenage cruelty considering my apparent “guilt by association”. I really didn’t give a shit if people talked about me behind my back and the worst that anybody gave me “to my face” was stuff like “Hey doesn’t old Dicky-Ricky live next to you. Did he give you some personal polaroids too?” “I just turned around and walked away if they hassled me like that.

Eventually though, as our attention shifted towards the excitement of completing eighth grade, all the gossip hysteria died down gradually. Mr. Poindexter had to bring up two seventh graders to fill out the trumpet section. I spent all my extra time and effort trying to bring them up to speed.

April quickly passed.

May came. We had our Spring band concert. We all signed up for high school classes.

And just like that, eighth grade was over.

Childhood was over.

The Butler’s house next door remained empty.

I continued not making eye contact with Stacy. Two days after the end of school, I ran into her at the “Welcome to Sam Houston High” party at the “Skate Machine”.

8.

It was an annual rite of passage-the “Welcome to Sam Houston High” party at The Skate Machine. It always occurred the weekend after school ended. All the eighth graders from the Junior High who were headed to the High School were invited to meet, talk and skate with some of the high schoolers to learn more about clubs , organizations and such that we could get involved with once we were in high school.

I hadn't planned on going at first. I was just content to stay at home, watch TV and eat junk food like any other Friday night but my mother hit me with statements like “It might be good for you to meet some new friends” and “I think you should go learn more about what clubs you can be in” I could tell she wasn't going to let go of the issue so I gave in and let her take me .

She dropped me off at The Skate Machine. I went in and got a pair of skates on. I very unenthusiastically began skating around the rink to the tune of “Jump” by Van Halen that was playing on the rink speakers.

After I had been there for about half an hour, I spotted Stacy at a table with her friends. I made my mind up that if I could get her alone, away from her entourage, that I'd confront her.

I watched her. I watched her and her friends skating. They ate snacks. They merged with other groups and talked with them. I waited and watched patiently. And finally, my opportunity arrived. I jumped off the snack bar riser and skated diagonally across the rink to the corner where it appeared that she had paused to adjust her skates.

She was kneeling over. She heard me arrive. She looked up at me and frowned. I stood my ground. She got up to face me. “Look David, “she said, “I'm taking too much shit already. I don't have time to take your shit too.”

I gave her a mean sneer and said “I just want one minute of your time, Stacy. One minute and I'll leave you alone forever after that.”

“OK, “she proclaimed, “One fucking minute. You got it. What's on your mind?”

“Stacy, “I began. “I can understand you playing a little joke on Richard, making him think you like him just to make fun of him later. Guys like Richard and me expect as much from girls like you.”

“So, what then?” she asked.

“So, what then?” I echoed, “So why the hell would you have gone and asked him to take those photos then give them to you?”

She crossed her arms and frowned, “How do you know I asked him to do that? Maybe the pervert just decided to do that all on his own?”

“Not a chance. I know Richard. Known him all my life. Known him years before you ever moved to town. He wouldn't have done that unless you tugged him along and asked.”

“You seem so damned sure of it.”

“Absolutely sure.” I replied.

She kicked my ankle with her skate and then she flung her right hand across the air and slapped me in the face. “So fucking shoot me!” She screamed, “I didn't think he'd actually do it! I was just playing with him!”

I nodded my head. “And now you've ruined his life. He's disappeared. His family has disappeared. Hope your little joke was worth all that, then.”

“What about me, David? My mom grabbed those photos and she's telling the whole god damned town down at the Post Office. I'm so fucking embarrassed and mortified.”

“Sorry about that, Stacy. Can't help you there. You got nobody to blame but yourself on that. I got no answers for you. I have no answers for Richard. The only thing I know is that you promised me a minute and my minute is up. Thank you very much for your time. I will bother you no more. Good luck with your life. Hope you make it in Hollywood one day.”

I turned around, skated off the rink, sat down and took my skates off. I turned them in at the counter, exited the door and walked home.

9.

The next morning, I heard clanging and commotion outside. I quickly got dressed and went out to see what was going on. There was a huge moving truck parked at The Butler's house. There were several workers moving couches, appliances and boxes from their house into the truck.

I couldn't see any signs of Richard or his family. I grabbed my basketball and very casually started shooting hoops while watching all that was going on next door.

After about an hour, the movers closed their truck gate, got into the cab and drove away. I watched the truck turn away. I watch the truck turn and disappear at the end of our road. And no sooner had it disappeared to the north that then, I saw the Butler's family station wagon turn around the corner from the south side.

As the Butler's approached their house, they slowed down but did not stop. I saw Richard's face appear in the back window of their station wagon. He looked sad. He gave a half-hearted wave. I waved back. He smiled slightly at me. I smiled back. The Butler's car disappeared down the road as well, not too far behind the moving truck.

I wouldn't see Richard Butler again for seventeen years.

10.

The eighties were long behind me. They were long behind all of us. I didn't find myself thinking about the past much. I seemed to be dwelling too much in the present as I turned thirty and then thirty-one. I am sure it was like that for much of the country too. I'm sure of that because four weeks earlier, on September 11, 2001, two jets had slammed into the World Trade Center, another had crashed into The Pentagon and a fourth one on a direct bee-line to the White House had been thwarted by passengers and had crashed into rural Pennsylvania.

It was a Wednesday night in early October. The sun had just set, and I was out on the porch holding my six-month-old daughter, Emma, in my arms. I was wondering to myself what in the hell kind of world I had just brought this marvelous beautiful baby girl into. There was lightning far out on the horizon that I was watching. I watched the lightning, hummed and rocked Emma back and forth.

At that moment, an old burnt orange rusty Subaru sedan pulled into my driveway. A tall thin man got out of the driver's seat. He had thick brown hair, long sideburns and a bushy moustache. He looked like a refuge off the Sergeant Pepper's Lonely-Hearts Club Band album cover. But I knew this person. I knew those sad eyes, that long awkward gait. I had known them since we were children. It was my long-lost buddy, Richard Butler.

I ran up to meet him in my yard. I held little Emma snugly in my right arm and reached out to hug Richard with my left. "Oh my God, man. If it ain't old Richard Butler come back from the dead. How the hell are you, son?"

He smiled, "Been better, been worse, David. But I'm gonna be OK. I'm getting there." He said in a low grizzled voice.

We stood back and looked at one another and thought about all the years between us. He smiled a warm amusing grin and said to me, "Looks like old David Edwards is a daddy now. Who in the hell did you find that would marry your ugly ass?"

"Well hell yeah," I replied. "I got lucky. This is Emma, my daughter. She's six months old now." I outstretched my arms towards David holding Emma motioning for him to hold her if he wanted to. He smiled and just patted her head a bit.

"How long you been married, you rascal?" he asked.

“Just about two years.” I replied. “Married a girl from New Zealand.”

“New Zealand?” he asked.

“Yeah, long interesting story there. Here, why don’t you come on in and meet her?”

“No, David. I can’t. Can’t stay that long. Just wanted to fly by and say hello to you as I passed through town. Say hello, then get back out on the road.”

“Wait, how did you find me anyway?”

“Went by your parents and talked to your Dad. He gave me your new address.” His voice trailed off and then he resumed talking, “Can’t believe my house isn’t there anymore. Hell, there’s not even the foundation left, just a bunch of bushes and trees.”

“Oh yeah, “I recalled. “It burned down years ago. Nobody ever moved into it after you left. And about three or four years after you left, one Christmas eve night the damn thing went down in flames,”

“I’ll be damned, “said Richard. “They ever figure out what caused it.

I shook my head, “Nope, never did.” I motioned for him to come sit down with me on the porch. He sat down. We watched the storm approaching on the Western horizon.

“David, “he said. “I know I fucked up. I fucked up and left you hanging there at the end of eighth grade.” He paused and looked at Emma still asleep in my arms. “Oh no, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to start popping off and swearing in front of the little one there.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. She’s fast asleep. And hell. Don’t worry about eighth grade either. That’s ancient history. Water under the bridge. Water that dried up years ago. Don’t worry about it at all just tell me where you been all these years!”

“I’ll give you the whole story in one long sentence and then I’ll tell you why I came here.”

“OK, then. I’m all ears, “I replied.

“Well, after we left town, we moved to Dallas. My parents checked me into a psychiatric hospital. They did all kinds of tests on me. The shrinky dinks asked me all kinds of stupid questions. They gave me dozens of blue, red and purple pills to swallow. After they discharged

me, my parents homeschooled me. I begged them to let me back into a public school, but they wouldn't. Parents got divorced. Mom died. Dad disappeared. Haven't seen him in 10 years. I've spent the last decade drifting from state to state and town to town. I've worked at Toys-R-Us, Waffle House, Wal-Mart just to name a few. I've dug ditches, hauled hay and worked on a deep-sea fishing boat. And here I am, seventeen years later. I finally realize I haven't done shit with my life.

"Richard, sorry about your parents. I always loved them. They were always so nice to me."

"Yeah and I just fucked their lives up too."

"You're being ay too hard on yourself."

"I don't think so, David. I've been doing a lot of thinking. Thinking its about time I turned my life around and do something with it. And I think I've figured out a way to do that. And what's I came here to tell you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I've joined the army." He said to me matter-of-factly.

"What in the hell?" I questioned.

"Yep. You heard me right. I report to Basic Training next week, Fort Benning, Georgia. I figure this whole situation with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is just about as fucked up as a situation can be. I want to stand up and be counted. I want to do my part to make it right for my country."

"But Richard, "I pleaded, "You're thirty-one years old, aren't you too old?"

"Cut off age is thirty-five.

"Thirty-five, "I repeated, "Well, I'll be damned. Army must be hard up for soldiers."

"Not too late for you, David. You can go down tomorrow and sign up too."

I gave him an expression of dismay.

"Calm down, David. I was just ribbing you. I wouldn't trade what you have for anything if I had it myself. You are right where you are supposed to be."

I smiled.

“And that’s why I wanted to see you. Wanted to see you one last time, David. I wanted to thank you for always being my friend all those years ago. I haven’t found a friend like you since. Wanted to apologize if my fucking stunt caused you any problems. Wanted to see you once last time just in case I never make it back from Afghanistan.”

I put my arm around his shoulders, “Well, I’m glad you came by Richard. Are you sure you won’t come in and meet Maggie?”

“No can do, David. Its time for me to go. I know you must have a lovely beautiful lady in there because your little one here looks nothing like your ugly mug. She must have gotten all the good DNA from your wife and none of your tainted genes.”

I smiled and nodded.

Richard stood up and said, “Now I got to get the hell out of this damned town before sunrise. Too many ghosts around here.” He put out his hand.

I stood up and shook his hand. “Good luck, Richard. I’m proud of you. Until we meet again, I’ll think about you. Hell, I’ve thought about you every day since eighth grade, son. We’ll meet again somewhere down the line. I know we will.”

He smiled at Emma. He nodded at my front door. “You’ve done really good for yourself here, boy. I’m damn proud of you too.”

He turned around, walked to his car, got in and drove away. I went inside and put my little sleeping Emma to bed.

11.

So, my old pal Richard Butler went off to war to try to make something of himself and to atone for what he felt was a life not well-lived. And I went back to the domestic and professional life in our hometown.

It was that very next week that I made a quick routine trip down to the grocery store to pick up milk, bread and apples that I saw Stacy Murray. I hadn't seen her since that night at the Skate Machine all those years ago at the end of eighth grade. I had heard rumors that her family had moved out to Los Angeles to nurture their desire for her to have an acting career. Apparently, she had even had some kind of minor, non-speaking, "bit-scene" in a network TV mini-series called "War and Remembrance" But regardless of all of that, I knew that it was Stacy over there browsing the bread aisle as I moved her way.

I stepped several feet short of and examined her. She had two small children with her. She was wearing flip flops and had dark "tanning salon" skin that was peppered with various tattoos. The beautiful natural blonde hair that she had possessed as a teenager had been replaced by multiple shades of sheeny, peroxidized yellow hair color. She looked fifteen years older than she actually was. I decided to try to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones.

I moved closer and said, "Hey Stacy, how are ya? Long time no see!"

She turned her attention away from the hot dog buns, looked at me and said, "Oh...you. I thought I might run into you in this shitty little shit-hole of a town."

"What brings you back to the neighborhood?" I said. "See you got some beautiful little ones there too." I added motioning to her little sons seated in the grocery cart.

She drew in her breathe. She screwed her nose at me and gave me that same goto hell look she had given me all those years ago in the hallway at Sam Houston Junior. She glared at me for half a minute and said, "Fuck off David. Your minute with me was up years ago." She violently grabbed two packages of hot dog buns, threw them in the cart and walked away without saying another word.

I took the hint and didn't pursue the matter further. I causally browsed the groceries until she checked out and left. When she was gone, I purchased what I came there for and drove home.

12.

Five minutes later, I pulled into my driveway and parked the car. I walked inside and put the groceries on the counter. I looked at my beautiful wife reading a book and our lovely little daughter asleep on the floor atop a “Winnie-The-Pooh” blanket. I looked and my mind thumbed through the last twenty years of my life. I thought about that damned note I passed from Stacy to Richard and how it had changed the course of too many lives. I thought about what would have happened had I just kept to myself and paid attention to playing my trumpet instead. I thought for the millionth time in my life, that I should have tried harder to thwart that cruel joke Stacy was playing on Richard that week so long ago.

And then my mind blipped and fast forwarded to the present. I thought about the horrible images of those jets that had just smashed into the World Trade Center. I thought about how both Richard and Stacy, after seventeen years of absence, had just randomly floated back over into my plane of existence in the last week. I wondered why. I wondered why now. I wonder why at all.

My mind was moving a hundred miles an hour and a hundred days per second. I was thinking about all these things in one super burst of random consciousness and then something inside of me snapped. Something inside of me snapped like a rubber band that could be twisted any longer. It snapped, and a burden was lifted from my soul.

I walked over to our living room and spoke to my wife, “Maggie, “I said.

She looked up from her book and yes, “Yes, David, what is it darling?”

“Maggie, “I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Well, where do you want to go?” She asked me.

“I don’t know, why don’t you tell me.”

“Well...” she contemplated. “We’ve already had dinner. Maybe a movie would be nice. We could call your sister. She could probably come over and watch Emma for us.”

“No, “I replied. “You’re not quite catching my drift here. I mean, let get out. Out, as in out of here. Out of the Houston suburbs. Out of Texas.”

“Oh, “she said with a look of realization on her face, “You mean a holiday. Hmmm...” she contemplated. “I’ve always wanted to see the Rocky Mountains. How about Colorado then? That would make a nice holiday. When do you want to plan on it? Thanksgiving week?”

“Maggie, “I said in a serious tone. As serious as I had ever been in my life. “You’re still not quite following me. What I mean is you-Maggie, me-David and little Emma there. Hello Colorado, goodbye Texas. Forever.”

She gave me a look of amazement and smiled at me.

“You go out to the grocery store for milk and bread then come back with a crazy idea like that?”

“Yeah, exactly like that.” I said. “Crazy, I know. But what do you say? Are you with me?”

“But what about your job, our house and your family?”

I waved my hands in the air in a silent abracadabra motion and said, “Just details, we’ll figure them all out.”

Maggie got up from the chair, put her hands on my shoulder and said, “Well then, Colorado here we come!”

We hugged. I had never felt so sure about anything. I had never been so happy. I knew that I’d quit brooding over the past. I knew that I’d quit agonizing over the present if we could just get the Colorado.

It was going to be the place for me. The place for Maggie. The place for our little Emma. Where we would make a new start and stand in life. The place for us, Colorado-somewhere between the foot of the Rocky Mountains and a cold-water stream rippling over ancient stones. Somewhere in Colorado.

So, to Colorado we went and in Colorado we stayed.

