

Feel Like Flying

“Just remember how fortunate you are.” My wife says, helping me unbutton my syrup stained shirt. “How many people in this world even have a favorite shirt, much less others to replace it with after the dribble syrup all over it?”

“Really? That’s where you’re going with this?” I say as I crumple the crisp shirt into a ball and spike it into the hamper.

“Yes, that’s where I’m going with it. Syrup is no big deal. You have other shirts that look fabulous on you.” She reaches into my closet and grabs my purple Geoffrey Beene and matching tie.

“The purple? I have parent meetings today. I can’t wear purple.”

“The purple is very nice, and it’s slimming.”

Note to self; wife thinks I’m fat, no more French toast for breakfast.

Back in the kitchen I fasten a napkin onto my shirt to prevent another ‘accident’. My wife folds the paper and goes back to the article she was reading when I had my syrup emergency.

“Did you see this?” My wife hands me the morning paper. An article about a man named Bruce Teppin catches my eye. “I didn’t even know he was back in town. Did you?” I barely hear her while I roam the article. It’s too early for me to really read, but after getting enough detail of the story I become more alert. I start again, reading the whole article, word for word.

“Honey?”

I don't really hear her; she's become background noise now. I'm into the article for the third time, trying to see through the story and figure out what must have really happened.

"Honey? Are you OK?" She reaches her hand out and touches mine. I barely feel her. She's more of a breeze on my skin. Finally she raps her knuckles on the table snapping me out of it. "You're going to be late for work."

"Call Principal Lewis. I'm taking a personal day."

"I thought you had parent meetings?"

"They can reschedule." She doesn't argue, after nearly ten years of teaching I have never called out sick. Ben Lewis would forgive me this one transgression.

Once more to the article. A few phrases keep jumping out; *attempted robbery...police called...shots fired*. By the time I reach the point that I can't read anymore my coffee and my French toast have become ice cold. My wife is leaving for work. "Do you want me to stay?" I tell her no, I'll be fine. I hope that's true.

"Local Man Killed in Police Shoot Out"

Bruce was adopted. When he first told me I didn't believe him. It was the summer before fifth grade and I had always thought of orphans as only existing in stories. Oliver Twist, Little Orphan Annie, that sort of thing. They couldn't really exist anymore. Orphans came from the old days when people were always dying of disease and war. But we didn't have those in the 1980's with modern medicine and Ronald Reagan keeping us safe from the 'communist threat.' Jackson Hole, Wyoming, was a safe place to live. Parents just didn't die on you.

I made Bruce take me to his house so I could ask his mom - after all grown-ups don't lie. When we got to his house his mom was making dinner, a cigarette dangling out of her mouth, worn housecoat and curlers still in her hair at four in the afternoon. His house was always dark, even in summer. The sun was out and very bright but Bruce's mom had every drape in the house shut tight. I figured Bruce's mom just didn't like too much light. Bruce told his mom to tell me he was adopted. She didn't respond; she just kept seasoning the chicken in the Shake N Bake bag.

He shrugged. "You ask her."

When I asked she stopped with her chicken and looked at me. "Yes, it's true." She said in a sadly monotone voice. "He's not really ours." Then she went back to her chicken. That's when it first hit me that she never really spoke to Bruce.

Later that day we were under the porch of Uncle Andy's Country Store looking for change that fell between the cracks. Sometimes we would find as much as three or four dollars, which earned us two sodas and several candy bars. Not bad for twenty minutes worth of work, even if it was in the dirt.

We went to the park across from school to enjoy our feast. Bruce told me that he was adopted as an infant because the doctors told his mom she couldn't get pregnant. Then a few years later she got her miracle. They had a little girl, Mary-Ann, but they still kept Bruce because that's what "good Christian parents did." But now Bruce was on the backburner. To make things worse the "miracle baby" contracted cystic fibrosis. Now at the age of eight she was in and out of the hospital. Bruce overheard his parents say that Mary-Ann wasn't expected to make it past the age of twelve. Now that the "miracle baby" was dying Bruce was practically non-

existent. Bruce was just another reminder of his mom's miracle gone horribly wrong.

His mother would make dinner always setting the table for three, but since his sister was usually too sick to eat Bruce would take her spot. Usually unnoticed.

One day, shortly before school started up again, we found a small bird lying in the grass. I picked it up discovering that its wing was broken. We decided to bring it to the vet to see if he could fix it.

As we walked across the field the bird kept fidgeting, like it was trying to get out of my hand. I tried to pet it but this only made it more agitated.

Bruce told me to hold out in my hand; "It'll make the bird feel like it's flying. Make it feel better." I did so and watched the bird. It worked; the bird calmed down a bit.

"He feels better," I said, "he thinks he's flying again." I held him out all the way to the vet's office, but they were closed. It was Sunday. We tried to figure what to do. Bruce decided to take it home. He said he would watch over it; try to feed it some worms from their garden and take it in Monday morning when the vet opened.

I gave him the bird and watched him walk home, his right arm stretched outward, the tiny bird sitting in his hand. The next day Bruce told me the bird had died during the night, he buried it in their backyard. I didn't think a bird could die from a broken wing. "A bird only knows how to fly." Bruce told me. "Take that away and what else do they have?"

That next week school started and we went back to our regular routine. Bruce would often come to my house for sleepovers and really seemed to enjoy the

dinner conversations we had. Whenever my mom showed interest in anything he did his face lit up. Once he had shown an aptitude for drawing and my mom, who was an accomplished artist, tried to give him lessons. But he was impatient and quickly gave up. She did not. Whenever he visited she offered more lessons. That Christmas my parents bought Bruce a sketchpad and a box of colored pencils. Despite his impatience with lessons he was ecstatic to get it. He reminded me of that little bird sitting in my outstretched hand.

But in spite of everything my parents tried to do for Bruce he still struggled, in school and at home. He had less patience for schoolwork than he did for art lessons. That year he was held back. We had our usual summer fun, riding bikes, rafting the river, playing in barns, but since Bruce did not move up with me I didn't see him much when school started again. We lived just outside Jackson Hole, in a little town called Wilson. There were several small towns surrounding Jackson; many of them only existed to serve the ranchers in the area. When those of us outside Jackson reached the sixth grade we were bussed in to attend school with all the other kids. This was the case all the way through to high school.

That first year I tried to invite him for sleepovers but since I never saw him at school I had to call his house. His mom would answer, I would ask for Bruce, she would mumble something and hang up or walk off leaving the phone on the table. These times I would wait for a few minutes to see if someone else would notice and pick up, but they never did. I would hang up and go on with my day.

When Bruce's sister was eleven she died, his parents divorced and his dad moved to California leaving Bruce with his mom. We didn't see them at church

anymore. Whenever my mom saw his mom at the store she seemed to be in a daze. "It's like she doesn't know who anyone is anymore." She said. Bruce withdrew as well. By that time I was in the eighth grade, he was in seventh. I had thought about rekindling our friendship, but Bruce had established himself as an outsider. I was on the football team and becoming quite popular, so to be associated not only with an under classman but one who was so fervently ignored would have been social suicide for me.

Kids will be kids, and kids enjoy teasing those who are different. Although I never partook in any teasing or harassing of Bruce I also never stepped in to stop it either. Which, I guess, makes me just as guilty as them.

Life continued this way for Bruce well into his junior year. I was on track for a football scholarship and dating a cheerleader. Bruce seemed to live in detention, when he wasn't getting suspended. He was in a fight at least once a week. In the beginning he never started them, near the end he was looking for them. He even tried to start one with me once. I still don't know what I did to make him want to fight me that day.

I walked by his locker; I hadn't planned to say anything to him. We'd barely said a word to each other in over two years. But he looked at me and all I could think to do was say; "Hey, Bruce." He just stared at me as I walked past him, then when I was about ten feet away I felt a shove in my back. I turned and there was Bruce, both fists at the ready.

"Come on, asshole." The look in his face was that of a complete stranger.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” I had never been in a fight in my life, and I wasn’t about to make Bruce my first.

“Come on!” Is all he would say.

“What’s your problem? What did I ever do to you?” But I knew the answer before I uttered the question. He just stood there, frozen in place, with his hands up. A crowd formed around and they started chanting; “Fight! Fight! Fight!” One student shouted; “Kick his ass, Charley.” The crowd cheered him, it was clear who was the favorite, and this incensed Bruce even more. I was about to go to it when I could see tears forming in Bruce’s eyes. For the first time I really looked in his eyes. He wasn’t angry. I turned and walked away. “Coward!” He was right, I was.

For the longest time I thought our friendship had never existed for him. But nothing could be further from the truth.

That next week Bruce stopped coming to school, rumors had it that he ran away. One kid said that his mom lost her mind and kicked him out. Another kid told us that he beat his mom up, which is why no one had seen her for a while, and took off. But I knew that was crap, Bruce’s mom would stay in their house for weeks at a time. So for no one to see her around was nothing new. Whatever his reasons for running away no one would ever know.

A month later he was picked up in Cheyenne in a stolen car and sent to the boys prison in Worland, Wyoming. Worland was always a ‘boogeyman’ term for us. If you got sent up to Worland then chances are no one in Jackson would ever see you again. Worland was the next step before getting sent to the state prison. Those who didn’t go on to commit more crimes hardly ever returned to Jackson, doing so in a

small town like this would just be an embarrassment to you and your family. Which is what I suspect to be the very reason Bruce did in fact return to Jackson.

After returning home Bruce floated around for years. He would take one meaningless job after another, always getting fired or quitting after a few weeks. But in a town of less than four thousand people you can only get fired so many times before folks stop hiring you. At this time my mother was a curator at a small gallery in town that catered mainly to rich tourists wanting local art to parade on the walls of their expensive homes. She got him a job cleaning up at night, it didn't pay much but it was something. Two weeks later the owner came in early one morning and found Bruce and a couple of his buddies in the middle of a meth binge in the back room. He called the cops and almost fired my mom. After that whenever Bruce ran into my mom it was just like the fight he tried to pick with me in high school, she was a stranger to him.

Bruce spent the next several years in and out of county, mostly in. As far as I could tell he had no contact with his mom at all. If she even knew he was in town it was only through hearsay.

I was already showered and dressed, so staying inside seemed a waste. I decided to drive out to Wilson. I wasn't sure where I would go or what I would do. I just wanted to go there. My wife and I would usually go to this little restaurant along the highway for breakfast once a month. They had llamas and the best pancakes anywhere. Other than that I had not been to Wilson in over five years.

There's only one road that really runs through the town of Wilson. It's a loop that takes you from the Shell station on the west side, around by the elementary school, a small red schoolhouse built in the 1920's with a solar powered gym built in 1981, and ends right by Uncle Joe's Country store back on the highway on the east side. A few roads veer off here and there that take you to homes at the far end of the village. There used to be a stagecoach style restaurant out there somewhere, but I'm sure it shut down years ago.

The park where Bruce and I found the bird is right across the street from the little red schoolhouse. Bruce's house is no more than a block down the street. I park by the school, it's early yet, kids haven't been let out for recess but I can see one of the classes in session from the street. Mrs. Collins is still teaching fifth grade. When I was nine she seemed so old, but now looking at her again almost thirty years later I realize she had been much younger than I am now.

I walk down the street to Bruce's house. The sun is out, not a cloud in the sky, yet the drapes are still closed. I knock and wait for what seems like several minutes. I knock again, finally Bruce's mother answers. She looks as though she hasn't left the house in weeks, per usual. Worn housecoat, cigarette dangling, but no curlers, her hair has gotten gray and frail. She just lets it hang, stringy, over her white skin.

"Yes?" She asks, not seeming to know, or care, who I am or what I'm doing there.

"Mrs. Teppin? It's me, Charles Pinsky. I was a friend of Bruce's."

She looks at me for a moment. Whether she recognizes me or not I have no idea, she simply walks away leaving the door open. I stand there for a few minutes

thinking at first that maybe she has gone to get something of Bruce's for me, but nothing happens. She just left with the door open, eventually so do I.

I continue walking in the same direction around the loop. Eventually I come to the Shell station, which used to be something else, I couldn't remember what. I do remember they sold the best beef jerky around. I go inside but it's just like any other convenience mart now. I get a Diet Coke and continue walking along the highway through town. I come to Uncle Andy's Country Store and sit on the porch awhile. This was one of the few places in the whole area that has not changed since I was a kid, even the same old wooden porch out front. I look down between the cracks to see if I can spot a couple of kids rummaging around for coins, then I remember that school's in session. I do, however, spot a quarter lying in the dirt. I entertain the notion of going under there and seeing how much money I can find, but the sight of Jackson Hole High School's only Geometry teacher crawling around in the dirt looking for money surely would not bode well on the reputation of the Wyoming public school system.

I finish my Diet Coke and climb the fence over into the park. I was much more agile at nine, I almost fall into the pond three times making my way across the rock bridge. When I come to the picnic area I lie down on one of the tables and look up into the overhang. We used to climb up into the framework of that structure. I was so proud that I had figured out how to do it that I climbed up almost everyday that summer. I don't even entertain that notion now.

As I leave to go back to my car I see a little brown bird hopping through the grass looking for bugs and worms. It looks just like the one Bruce and I found,

except this one's wing is just fine. He hops around a bit and just as I get close to him he takes off flying. I watch him flutter off and think how happy he must be; he's flying now.