

Tarnished Tales

"What a twisted trail we lead when we pursue those darkest deeds..."

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In early 2018 a flu epidemic flooded this prison. The facility was quarantined two or three times, and prisoners were sick and falling unconscious across the compound. Unfortunately, I was one of them.

One night I suddenly felt sick in my stomach and walked towards the restroom. I blacked-out and fell, smashing my face against the top rim of a tall trash can. I awoke on the floor with blood everywhere. Then I blacked-out a second time and do not recall the wheel-chair ride to Health Care. I suffered a broken nose and my two upper front teeth were smashed.

I was taken to the local hospital, then transported in an ambulance to the main prison hospital in Jackson. This complex was named in honor of Dr. Duane L. Waters, who'd served on the "Corrections Commission" for the prison system here in Michigan.

For the next five weeks I languished in Waters Hospital as I ate a meager "Liquid Diet", including Ensure three times daily. Locked in that room triggered my episodes of "claustrophobia" as I paced the floor more than fifteen hours each day. A female nurse remarked, "You're like a caged lion."

I was the only prisoner showing signs of claustrophobia, and I got loud and aggressive about it. Finally, after thirty-five days, I was for the first time seen by a medical doctor who

listened as I explained about the flu epidemic, and that I was no longer sick. Then, with a gust of desperation, I told this doctor about the fifteen years that I did in "The Hole", and how I developed severe claustrophobia as a result. I removed my socks to show both feet were bleeding from the long hours of pacing that floor.

I asked the doctor, "Do you understand claustrophobia..?"

"Yes," he replied.

"I need out of this hospital now," I demanded.

Showing his concern and authority, I was sent back to the Coldwater Facility that same day where the housing units are open-spaced buildings and a relief for someone with claustrophobia.

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At times I feel drawn between Ernest Hemingway and Ernest Shackleton, dare I confess, like a bridge between here and Antarctica, or between here and the closest tavern where a famous author with "Rat Whiskers" is full of vigor, while other patrons thrill at laughing with, and some laughing at, this legendary figure.

One day, while sipping whiskey in a bar, Ernest Hemingway was challenged to pen a story "in six words." Feeling the winds of battle, the master responded with this line, "For sale, baby shoes, never worn."

I carefully studied Hemingway's story, since it would be difficult to achieve. In a breath of envy, I concluded those six words was more of a newspaper ad than a story. Still, the

challenge stirred me as it roiled my sense of creativity and festered deep within.

I've always felt that three elements are needed to create a good story, and they are intrigue, impact and sensitivity. However, to capture all three ingredients in only six words is a serious wall to climb. Its scope of possibility held me in awe, those six words now committed to history.

He savored these times sitting in a tavern drinking spirits with strangers and friends. The great Hemingway, recounting world-wide adventures as the whiskey warmed his soul and the darkness of suicide embraced him forever.

Yes, I am enthralled by the life of this colorful character. To walk in his shoes I once wrote a story "In Nine Words," then later penned another tale "in six words." That was years ago, and I cannot recall the words to either. Therefore, I have again challenged myself to write a story in six words, and it must include those crucial elements earlier mentioned, all three of them.

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"In danger, and bleeding, he fled...!"

Over the years I've noticed my written words inhale a cloud of foreboding. I'm sure this reflects my inner-most feelings about life. I can tell horror stories about prison, and most of them are documented in official records. It seems I'm consumed with anger and hostility as I analyze my life and taste bitter regrets of long ago.

When around fourteen-years-old, while working on my cousin's

daily farm, I developed such a hatred for his verbal attacks that I came very close to smashing him on the top of his head with an axe, but I couldn't command the fiery grit to actually do it. This guy enjoyed dehumanizing people, and I felt the brunt of most of it. He built a nice home which included five bedrooms, three of which were empty. However, like a stray dog, I was forced to sleep in the basement. My bed was a sofa positioned between a refrigerator and a greasy work bench. I apparently wasn't human enough to get a real bedroom.

Be that as it may, I'm convinced anyone can turn ugly if pushed to the edge of resistance.

Still, we all have the power of "choice," and it will greatly affect the road we travel.

With all these things being said, I was once watching the "Geraldo" talk show when the guest was the gruff-spoken journalist, Jimmy Breslin. In its course, Geraldo Rivera asked, "Where does crime begin...?"

"Crime," replied Breslin, "starts in the family..."

I want to introduce you to my family-- to a quagmire of hate and violence and dysfunction. I want to describe how a kind-hearted farm boy transformed into a ruthless animal who once made a man dig a grave in a gravel pit with his bare hands before killing him.

Now, after forty-six years in prison, these old memories never leave my thoughts, and a quivering conscience gnaws at my soul with a vengeance.

wardict of an executed plot, on another day we made a man dig a grave with his bare hands before shooting him and burying his body in a remote gravel pit. Like blood-thirsty hounds from Hades, we were roving marauders in fast-stride as death's ugly eyes gave direction.

Michigan's northern territory, with its abundance of wildlife, is residence to the Tahquamenon Falls--the second largest waterfalls on the eastern side of the United States. In 1889, the last stagecoach to be robbed east of the Mississippi River was in the Upper Peninsula of this state. Some people were killed in the heist, including the driver. The highwayman, a German immigrant, was hunted down by a posse and narrowly avoided being lynched. He did, however, serve the next 24 years in prison. Further, there are the strategically located "Soo Locks" which connect the two Great Lakes of Superior and Huron, and in whose neighboring reaches is the site of the "Edmund Fitzgerald," which sank in a storm in November of 1975, and was later immortalized by the gifted Canadian singer and songwriter, Gordon Lightfoot. Lastly, this state's western upper region is the home of "Copper Country," and experts believe it is where the bulk of copper was mined and then shipped back to Europe. After being smelted and mixed with "tin," these alloys became the new metal which fueled history's "Bronze Age," adding another chapter-N-verse to our early civilization.

As a youngster, I lived in rural northern Michigan in a quaint farming community called "Ocqueoc," some fifty miles from the

scenic Straits of Mackinaw, I was raised by my grandparents while my mother also lived in the house. I attended one of the last "country schools" still used in the state. It was named, the Vilburn School, after a family who lived nearby. It had one teacher and one classroom for all the students which, I believe, went to the eighth grade. It had a wood-N-coal furnace and a belfry on the roof, and the older kids took turns ringing its bell. One day the teacher came to our house for some reason that eludes me. As she stepped from the car she was bitten on the leg by our dog. She threatened to seek a lawsuit, but Grandma said we were safe because there was a handmade sign nailed to the big tree in front of the house which warned all strangers to "beware of the dog." Then there happened the traditional Christmas play which was held at night while the adults and young children crowded in the darkness of the classroom and enjoyed the amenities of this warm and old-fashioned landscape. Seems poetic to say that we treasured those awesome days of adventure in this place of beauty and bountiful things. I cherished this portal in time for the first couple years of my schooling, and still retain precious memories from those sentimental seasons of an innocence long ago.

Grandpa was a hard-scrabble man who married Grandma in the days of the Great Depression, served in Europe during World War II, and survived the tragedy of the Cedarville, a huge ore freighter that collided with another freighter and sank near the Mackinaw Bridge in the summer's fog of 1965. It was one of the largest ships to sink in the Great Lakes, and it claimed the

lives of ten sailors, three of them were never found. There is a 2000 documentary titled "Tragedy in the Straits--S.S. Cedarville Remembered." I was told by a close relative that it mentions Grandpa's name in the dialogue of the film.

So here we lived in filth and bed-bugs. No one cleaned the rooms or prepared a good meal. Beaming a stale vitality for the joys of life, in the worst times there were twelve people living in that deplorable mad-house, including my two aunts and their children. Walking a blurred line between moral fiber and bad energy, no one got married, so none of the "illegitimates" got a father. There was no maturity, no responsibility, no communication, and none of this corroding tribe being held accountable. The proof was in the party, for their lack of ambitions eclipsed any level of logic or parental obligations. With stained impunity, not one of these jaded sisters worked a job, and they all contrived "clever excuses" for this warped and acrid chemistry which they created and tried to disguise. Then, with a whistle of posture and fragrance, every weekend these rowdy alley-cats scurried to the local bar to chase some fluff and fancy.

In a twist of life's lottery these kids, feeling inferior to the world, were cast to the wounding winds of stigma, and no adult in their circle seemed to notice. Adrift with barnyard manners, it was determined these youngsters didn't need a father, or income, or clean house, or good food. Oh no, they didn't need a "real mother," or family structure, or security, or the intrusive inconvenience of genuine concern. Trying to stay afloat

in an ocean full of fiends with not a pittance of pity to be muttered, the cruelties of abandonment ran wild in the air as some throw-away children felt the stinging bayonet of their murky and disgraceful surroundings.

With a smirking scourge of gratification, their forked-tongues produced a cannibal's feast of hedonism, profanity and sloth. "Everybody knows we're doing all we can for our kids..." Or so the big lie went..! While some alienated youngsters were made to struggle in this contaminated cauldron of torment, defect and delirium.

With peace-N-harmony never allowed in a demonic dance of euphoria, my imposing mother, now hog-tied to her own fascination, would storm through the house spitting at people and starting fist-fights, slamming doors so hard that it knocked plaster out of the walls, throwing food across the table and slinging chairs across the room. Parading her macho standards, this voracious reptile, enjoying a bliss in her reign of terror, would then claim to be badly injured in that last rumble, and therefore cannot clean the house, cook a meal, or go get a paying job. So it went year after year as this virus festered in ripe deterioration.

While in elementary school, I asked my mother for help with some school work. Spiralling out of control, she hovered over me and roared, "ask the ___ school teacher, that's what they pay that ___ for..!"

Inevitably, another crucifying moment reared its head when around eleven years old I tore two gashes in the inner-arch of

one foot as I stepped on something sharp while splashing in a down-stream stretch of the Ocqueoc River, not far from the Twin Falls. The cuts were serious and required medical care. Absent of all compassion, my lewd mother, in front of family, friends and strangers, went into a frenzy as she shook her fist and screamed a melody of vengeance. Then with an ashen breath of unforgiveness, she refused to take me to the hospital, even though she had Grandpa's car sitting there in the parking lot. One of my aunts carried me to the picnic table of a lady whom we did not know, and she was kind enough to drive me to the hospital. Mired in a glowering wisp of lunacy, when I got home my mother, unable to veil her domineering vendetta, announced that I would not be getting any crutches. "You can hobble around on that foot until it gets better," she shrieked in a hideous howl..! My aunt, exhibiting a shield of care and concern, later rented me a pair of crutches from the same hospital.

When I asked to go to Boy Scouts the request was denied. Growling a chilled affection, the reason given by both Grandma and my mother was that they could not afford to drive me to town once a week. Yet this was the same town where my mother, the soulless pariah, faithfully went to the bar to pursue lack-luster jollies of forfeiture and disrepute.

No, I could not join the Boy Scouts, but I was often guided to a bedroom where my toothless and erotic mother ordered a child to caress her bare buttocks as she lay on the bed moaning in pleasure of approval, with the door locked and the light out to mask these clandestine violations in secrecy. Then to make things

fair, at least in her crude mind, this rabid ghoul rewarded me with a piece of chewing gum each time. I, being so young, was not able to stave off the obsessions of this cloak-N-dagger carnivore. Conjuring the stealth of an apex lizard, she called these episodes "back rubs," and as I grew older she stopped doing it, probably for fear of me telling the wrong person and her facing public exposure and reproach.

Mustering a two-handed resolution, at thirteen I went to work on my cousin's nearby dairy farm. The work was rigorous and the hours were long as I tried to improve my life. I was paid forty-cents-per-hour which earned me five-dollars a day. This money equated to about one-fourth of the legal minimum wage in those days. So here was I, a resilient, honest and highly-principled young guy who went to school and held a job. Stretching my meager resources, I bought my own clothes, paid for my own food at school, got everybody in the house a Christmas present, and even had some cash in the bank. When my rigid schedule permitted, I went in the kitchen and baked cakes and brownies from the pre-mixed box. Always on the prowl for creature comforts, the adults eagerly helped themselves to those treats. All this while my mother, and other parasites, slouched around that pig-sty watching TV and concocting repetitive faults and fiction so as to not work a job, or contribute anything significant at all. One of my mother's most common lines was, "You're gonna have to learn how to go without." Apparently practicing what she preached, she even refused to earn enough money to buy a set of false teeth...

Entwining her heart with a fractured identity, one day my

mother and her youngest brother had a scuffle which ended with the front windshield being broken in Grandpa's car. In a mode of conspiracy, instead of getting a job and ordering a new windshield, my mother lied to the insurance company as she fabricated a story which fingered some unknown suspect, and in turn allowed my conniving mother to receive a free windshield for the car.

In 1969, I was allowed to buy a rifle and go deer hunting. Trying to be frugal, I didn't buy a hunting suit until the following year. That second season a deer came sprinting down a fence-line towards me, and I opened fire. It was a "button-buck," which because of the short antlers must be tagged with a doe-permit, and I did not have one. An uncle and I gutted the little buck and hid it in some bushes. Working in concert, the next morning a trusted friend helped retrieve the deer in the back of his old Studebaker pickup. Later that evening he returned to our house with some of the venison and a story to go with it as Grandma ridiculed us younger hunters for failing to get a deer. Nevertheless, the only reason I did not claim this trophy was because my mother would call the game warden, and would have gotten a thrill out of it. As the years unfurled, this proved to be the only deer that I bagged in all my life.

At sixteen, I received my driver's license and purchased a car with my own money. When I brought it home, Grandpa rushed to the front of the vehicle and was actually leaping in the air as he waved clenched fists and cursed foul language in my face. He then threatened to get a hammer and smash the windows. In this brief

synopsis let it be known that Grandpa expected me to attend college, and demanded that I pay for this education with my scant savings from working on a small farm. Meanwhile, he never put a penny in the package, and being hobbled by his own weakness, couldn't collect the strength of mind to tell his grown children, including my mother, to find a job and earn some money for this family's practical purpose and benefit.

Describing this anatomy in its deep-seeded context, one must merge between "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest" and "Dante's Inferno," since to compose my mother's biography would require two taunting words: "lie-N-deny!" In a ruse all her own and never trying to mend her stifling disorders, she cast over this family a pallor of pain and dejection with a scowl on her face and a vapor of detestation choking the air. Unwilling to conform to society's orderly review, she became a disease of implosion who trapped her soul in the fumes of turmoil and cheated herself out of life. Then the county paid for a pauper's funeral and her days of wreckage were no more.

Understandably, as a youth, living in this war-zone was very discouraging. Being pushed towards the path to violence, I ingested a stressful mood of struggle, strife and sacrifice which diminished my desire to be good. Leaving their footprint in wet concrete of time, from that declining household all three daughters birthed "black sheep" children. In a forest-fire of disgust, my one aunt birthed FOUR children out-of-wedlock with one of them dying under suspicious circumstances. Going downhill at a high rate of speed, from this rough-shod family three of the boys

~~went to prison and three of the boys spent time in a state mental~~
hospital. Also, one girl and one boy were involved in wanton and
grisly crimes, including murder. At least six people from this
house have bummed off welfare for extended periods of time.
Fermenting in the sewage of this dragon's lair, one night I
caught an uncle trying to molest one of my little cousins. With a
penchant for defiling affairs, he later twice burglarized the
parsonage of the nearby Baptist Church, and each time stole only
the under-panties of the pastor's wife. Rapidly deflating in
human morality, this perverted phantom, now nicknamed "Pants
Thief," was then committed to the state nuthouse for a couple
years.

Another uncle broke into a local tavern and stole some beer.
The owner identified Grandpa's jeep fleeing the scene. Grandpa
interceded and reimbursed the damages to keep his son out of
jail. When it happened again at a different tavern he was sent to
prison. Another juggling act was when Grandpa's brother burned
down a public school in Ocqueoc because he did not get the job of
bus driver. By any measure, in a magnitude of shock-N-awe, we
were the redneck neighbors from Hell...! Braving chambers of
judgment, what worth was expected to sprout from these poisonous
roots of mania...?

Thick as thieves, in the naked light of allegiance our courts
have adopted the supremacy of ancient rulers in their thirst to
be hard on crime. In a puzzle of obscurity, the United States is
so assuming that it boasts "the greatest judicial system in the
world..." Wasn't it the Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz,

~~who not so subtly, said, "No money, no justice..!"~~

What a prophetic testament of truth those words tell. My first conviction stemmed from cashing bad checks. I had "NO JUVENILE RECORD," but still was banished to the world of state prison. They had the option, and could have sentenced me under the "Holmes Youthful Trainee Act," which was a program conceived for troubled adolescents. Or they could have offered a pivotal judgment and sent me to the Army for a few years. Most likely this would have directed me down a different road in life, especially since I was a germinating 17-year-old and could still be salvaged from the elements of crime. Now here I rest in my darkest hour, both a hated and hateful person.

During those years our closest neighbor was the Baptist Church, which I attended but never was warmly greeted or felt welcome. So where were those noble citizens when a downtrodden child, and my vulnerable younger cousins were growing up with nothing..? We strove to survive in this dehumanizing family which had no role models, no mentors, no camaraderie, and not one person intervening on behalf of the children living in these squalid and unruly conditions. Moreover, not one church member, nor any county official, ever gave a hoot..!

In this autopsy of a punctured heart and a homemade knife, I ventured the game of chance to its demolishing end. Since high school I have tasted freedom a total of seven months. Savoring the spices of nostalgia, I wonder what happened to that wholesome farm boy who worked so honorably for everything he had in those days. I'd like to talk with that youngster and tell him...