



Raindrop Races

Martin McMorrow



As kids, PJ and Moose were rarely out of each other's sight. Then, the 1960's happen. PJ's thrill-seeking accelerates. After stops at a psychiatric hospital, military school, and the Marines, he becomes a fixture on Hollywood's Sunset Strip. Moose enters college, but can't overcome his restlessness. He quits, lands in Vietnam, and finds himself alone in the back of his pickup years after the War. But, worlds apart, PJ and Moose maintain their boyhood connection.

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Prologue

The stuff of my very first memory happened in the dining room at the old family home. It was early morning, I still had my satin-edged blanket with me, and it was raining outside. I knelt on the wooden bench that faced away from the bay window, placed my elbows next to one of my mother's plants, rested my head in my hands, and marveled at the raindrops running down the window panes. It was so peaceful. I stayed there until the rain stopped.

Whether we've thought about it or not, most of us have seen a raindrop race. They have taken place on dining room windows, car windshields, and on the hard plastic panes of accelerating airplanes. They've also taken place on big plate glass windows at coffee shops, libraries, and bars. Raindrop races don't follow any schedule, yet somewhere there are millions – more like billions, trillions, or gazillions – of them shaping up every moment of every day. Certainly, no two races could be exactly alike, nor is it likely that two individuals would ever unknowingly witness the same race.

Over the years I've noticed that watching raindrop races can constitute particularly powerful moments in time – as if droplets of rain on glass mirrored slices of our lives. I find it exciting when an individual droplet is impacted by others that trickle down the glass or when an entire scene is changed instantly by a sudden gust of wind. I've reflected on key times when I've been moved, on who or what moved me, and on how I've been moved. During the most special races I've felt an intense connection with everything around me and have experienced a greater sense of belonging in the world. I've also begun to understand how two boys could grow up “on the same glass,” take wildly different paths, and remain intertwined for life.

The Boy with his Back to the Fence

Although I never considered myself to be a businessman, I'd just completed a business meeting in California – a long way from my southern Illinois home. It was a good meeting, but I had the afterthoughts that frequently show up for me following such meetings. I typically thought that so much more could have been accomplished than what actually was. But I got over it. I tossed my work folders on the back seat of the rental car, carefully placed the directions to that night's destination on the empty seat next to me, and pulled onto a four-lane street that would take me to the interstate.

As I drove northeast through Bakersfield, I was looking forward to my foray up the Central Valley to Fresno. I didn't know anything about the Central Valley, other than that I'd heard a few Californians call it that. In some ways, I thought Bakersfield looked like a magnified version of the small towns back home. There were lots of semi-trailer trucks and places where big trucks stop. There was a gaudy, hand-painted sign featuring a big fat pig above a vintage diner that boasted "pulled pork" and other colossal barbeque sandwiches. There were several "Easy Loan" places where I assumed a person could get a few bucks in exchange for their entire next paycheck. And, there were kids getting out of school. It was about 3:30 in the afternoon, August 30, 2010.

Kids were funneling out of the double-hung doors on the front of the school building like water in a rain-swollen stream. Out of the corners of my eyes the children appeared as though they were being pushed and pulled in every direction. Some got stuck on the playground, like tiny twigs in a steady gush of rainwater. Some darted to waiting cars that whooshed off at the head of the stream. Others landed in single file by bright yellow

buses that were poised to take each child wherever he or she was headed.

I wondered where their lives would be headed in Bakersfield, California.

Although I was traveling about forty-five miles an hour, suddenly everything in front of my eyes began to move very slowly. I knew it wasn't truly the case, but in this special moment most of the kids appeared to be standing still. Just ahead of my car, above the street, was a heavy iron crosswalk one tributary of children was using to get to the other side. Up on the crosswalk I noticed a small group of boys. One of them was standing with his back toward my oncoming car leaning against the chain link cage that encased the upper part of the crosswalk.

In an instant, the motionlessness of my view was rocked when one of the kids in the cubby took a roundhouse swing at the boy with his back to the fence. The others in the group immediately followed suit – throwing punches as if it might have been the first time a few of them had ever thrown punches. As the boy with his back to the fence began to recklessly dodge, weave, and duck, one of the kids on the perimeter gave him a swift kick in the stomach. It was the kind of kick that bad guys do when the good guy is down and most of the action is over.

My car rolled through the shadow of the crosswalk. I noticed I was surprised, a little angry, and intensely reminiscent. I slowed the car as much as I could in the heavy traffic and wondered if all the other drivers saw what I had just seen. I pushed on the horn thinking that might be a reasonable thing to do in a situation like this. Then I tried to find the crosswalk in my rear view mirror to see if the horn had done anything that mattered.

As I traveled on toward the interstate I began to question what was taking place up on that crosswalk. Was the boy with

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his back to the fence some sort of troublemaker? Were the other kids paying him back for something terrible he'd done? Did he somehow deserve a good whipping? Were the aggressors actually little California gangsters holding him up for his left-over lunch money? Did he have some sort of peculiar manner or disability that the tough kids thought they could beat out of him? Had he actually done something to warrant such an experience on his walk home from school? My thoughts raced through all the possibilities.

Since I could no longer see the crosswalk in my mirror, I considered turning at the next traffic light to swing around and find out if everything had turned out okay. There was a part of me that wanted to know more – to do more.

But I didn't. I just continued up the street thinking my thoughts and filling in the blanks with whatever seemed to make sense. I suspected that everyone else who happened to notice the kids on the crosswalk might have been doing the same thing, but of course I didn't know that either.

It was just a regular Tuesday afternoon for me. But it was possible that, for the boy with his back to the fence, it might have been a Tuesday afternoon he'd never forget. As I pulled on to the interstate, I wondered if I'd just witnessed a pivotal moment in his life.

Blue Jeans and T-Shirts

When we were very young, all of the boys on my block in Peoria, except one, wore blue jeans and white T-shirts. I had Levi jeans and either Fruit of the Loom or Munsingwear T-shirts. Most of the other kids had Levi jeans too with their copper rivets, Talon zippers, and the golden-orange double-stitching that held them together. But no two pairs looked alike. Cut-off jeans, rolled-up jeans, brand new jeans that stood up by themselves, and old jeans with ragged tears at the knees or next to the back pockets helped distinguish each of the kids in the neighborhood.

The first time I remember meeting PJ, it was late summer and I was sitting inside my jeans next to two or three other boys on the front porch steps at Stevie Preston's house. We were all about five and a half; maybe some had already turned six. I know we hadn't started going to school yet.

Stevie was bigger than the rest of us and looked something like Elvis Presley, one of the Everly Brothers, or Fabian. At the time, he was the only one of us with longer hair. It was combed straight back and always looked as if it was wet. His dad was a businessman at the Caterpillar Tractor Company. My father, who was a pediatrician and a very private man, used to say, "As Caterpillar goes, so goes Peoria." I didn't understand what my dad meant by that when I was a boy. I just took his word for it. However, because of it, I always felt a little concerned for Stevie – particularly a few years later when he and his family had to leave the neighborhood and move to Germany because his dad had to go work at the new corporate office there. I might still have the postcard he sent me from the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago on his way out of the country. Michigan Avenue and Grant Park looked pretty neat from the hotel window, but I could tell Stevie didn't have anything else to write about.

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The three or four of us on the front porch step weren't doing anything in particular that morning. Since we were all so young, I'm not sure we knew how to act when we were just sitting around on a kid's front steps. We had yet to have much practice at that sort of thing. Behind us, a couple of our sisters were doing something too – running in and out of the screened front door, getting little girl things and putting others away, I suppose. We boys were just discovering how to hang out on a warm summer day.

Then, darting from around the back of the house, around the ladder-type television antenna, and out of the fully-bloomed honeysuckle bushes he came. He was the funniest looking of all of us kids. Except for Stevie, we boys all had crew cuts or flat tops that we kept in shape with sticks of pink Butch Wax. Short as our hair was, his seemed much shorter and it set back on his forehead as if it was already receding. His ears were situated well below his eyes and stuck straight out. His eyebrows were heavier than his hair and you didn't have to look real hard to see every little dent on his egg-shaped skull.

He wore jeans and a T-shirt like the rest of us, but I noticed his were not Levi's or Munsingwear and his looked as though they had been painted on him. His body already seemed a bit more muscular or toned than any of ours and his bulky neck made it appear as though his head was a protrusion of his shoulders. His shoes were some brand I'd never seen before and they were black. In our neighborhood nobody wore black gym shoes in the mid-1950's.

PJ ran up in front of us and skidded to a stop. My friends and I fell silent and fixed our eyes on the sight that had just appeared, even our sisters who were standing behind us. We had all heard about this kid, but none of us had yet to have any first-hand experience with him.

Breaking the stillness, PJ whirled around so that his back was facing us as we sat on the steps. Then he unsnapped his jeans, dropped them to his knees along with his underpants, and bent over so that his bare white butt was directly in front of our faces. Absolutely unabashed, he looked back over his shoulder at all of us kids on the porch and said, “Can you see anything? Is there anything on my butt? Is there anything on my butt!?”

Of course, nobody knew what to say. We just sat there with our mouths open watching this unusual little kid bent over with his pants down. But our silence didn’t stop him. He kept asking, “Is there anything on my butt?” as he back-pedaled a little closer, seeming to become increasingly urgent about the whole thing.

The sisters’ giggling had stopped. They may have been a bit frightened. The boys’ silence was finally broken when someone, perhaps it was me, finally said, “No, there is nothing there.” Fact is, no one would have said, “There is nothing on your *butt*,” because we all knew that Stevie’s mom might hear us use that word and then we might not get to sit on the steps together anymore.

When PJ got his response, he stood up straight, hiked up his underpants and pants one at a time, and fastened his jeans. He turned around to face us. Looking somewhat relieved he said, “Well, that’s good because I wanted to make sure I didn’t have any black marks on my butt.”

After a bit more hesitation, Stevie asked, “What kind of black marks?”

PJ said calmly, “The kind you can get on your soul if you’re not good.”

Then he ran back through the honeysuckle, around the antenna, through Stevie’s backyard, under some more bushes, and through the wooden gate to the backyard of his house.

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After PJ ran away, the rest of us kids talked about black marks, good and bad, and anything that any of us knew about souls. We really didn't know much about souls, other than we'd heard that a person cannot see his soul, but somehow you could get black marks on them if you did sins or other bad things.

We didn't talk about it much more that summer morning, probably because something else grabbed our attention. However, I suspect that all the little kids thought about it some more as the day moved on. Black marks on our souls? Were our butts really our souls? What would a black mark look like? If you did something really bad, would you get a really big black mark? Besides exposing himself in public and using the bad word "Butt," what had PJ done that he thought he might have one?

I imagined that all my friends went home that evening, stood up on their toilets, looked over their shoulders, and checked their butts in their mirrors for black marks.

I know I did.



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