

## Eleventh Summer

By Ty Spencer Vossler

Life is short but it's wide.

We were eleven, going on twelve. Twelve—the golden ticket—an age when dreams and fantasies high-five with the hope that they will become reality. How could I—Andrew Johnson—have guessed that, sequestered within the magic of twelve was a dark reality waiting to pounce like a feral river cat?

My best friends were Rodney Rooster Martin, Arnulfo Goofus Rodriguez and Joey Reece. Stick was my nickname. Our epithets were cruelly accurate.

We attended Woodland Elementary School. Rodney and I lived on family farms. Arnulfo's father labored for a large corporate farm and they lived in low-rent housing on one of the properties. Joey lived in Woodland and didn't have to ride the bus to school with the rest of us. Joey didn't have a nickname either and I can't recall why. His ears stuck out from his head like dollar pancakes—we could have come up with something. We gave each other nicknames before enemies had the chance to tag us with one. Kids like Stinky Sandoval, Pork Edwards and Fishface Turman had waited too long.

We gambled on the ancient rickety school bus dubbed the Cracker Box. Wherever it squealed a stop, dogs gathered to race us to the end of their territory. We bet pennies as to which dog would stay in the lead longest. The ancient bus shuddered as it ground through its gears. In between shifts it popped a smoky fart. Sometimes the dogs were lazy—especially if they were trying to impress a female—nothing we could lay odds on.

The big kids—seventh and eighth-graders—sat in the back seats firing lentils through straws or flicking pennies—which we collected for gambling. The morning bus driver was Mr. Hernandez—a timid old man. His plea for peace were ignored and he patiently continued driving as though he were cruising in the family mini-van.

Big kids lowered windows to spit on stop signs and talked nasty to the girls. Mr.

Hernandez crinkled his forehead and tapped the steering wheel in time with the Mexican tunes he listened to on the radio. Probably he counted the days to retirement—laid groundwork for a return to Mexico where he would be accorded with respect.

Floyd—polar opposite of Mr. Hernandez—piloted the afternoon bus. Floyd was an entertainer. The afternoon bus was equipped with a long-armed microphone that swung in front of him for announcements. Floyd sang while he drove. He crooned songs about bowlegged women, impersonated Frank Sinatra and took a stab at hip-hop once in a while. Sometimes he let us talk on the mic before we got off the bus.

Once when I was out with the flu, Floyd’s rich voice drifted lazily over the farm as he cruised by.

“It never rains in California but girl don’t they warn yuh—”

As I remember it was raining cats and dogs.

Every Friday I asked Floyd about his weekend plans and his standard reply was, “I’m gonna go out and chase wild women.”

It was fun to imagine what a wild woman would look like. When he wasn’t driving bus, a list of never-ending custodial responsibilities usurped the rest of his time. Floyd could fix just about anything, kept the classrooms clean and refereed our school sports competitions.

“I’m a maintenance engineer,” he jived. “I studied at the Harvard Institute for the Custodial Arts.”

He still found the time to teach how to shoot a jump shot, scoop grounders, throw a spiral — important stuff.

Many of the Woodland teachers used our tiny school as a stepping-stone to get to Pottersville—where they paid more. Instructors came and went every year. We were all pleased when Ms. Lupe Payán arrived. She was my sixth-grade teacher. After lunch she read us poetry in her soft, lilting voice—leaving the boys with cobwebs and throbbing protrusions. She had long, shiny black hair and sleepy brown eyes. Her curves were barely secreted beneath brightly colored Mexican skirts and blouses she usually wore. When she walked by our desks

the breeze created by her skirt floated the scent of her perfume.

Ms. Payán had a twin sister that taught at Pottersville High School—adding further fuel to our fantasies.

The gang took turns approaching Ms. Payán's desk to ask dumb questions. Strategically, the questioner positioned himself and let a pencil slip from his fingers. Stooping to retrieve it, the rest of us counted off seconds as he examine her smooth, dark legs.

I held the record—7 seconds. I gawked at her satiny calves—the contour of her thighs beneath the thin fabric of her skirt—while the class bubbled in answers on a grammar worksheet.

One morning, as we were taking a Civil War quiz, Rodney Martin passed me a note. It said, I'm going for the record.

I signaled the others the the game was about to begin. They looked up from their papers—grateful for a temporary reprieve from the war. Rodney gripped his pencil and walked up to Ms. Payán's desk.

Rodney had a rooster-tail lock of hair sticking straight out from the back of his head—hence the nickname. Patty Rodriguez sat behind him and sometimes I saw her staring angrily at it—as though any second she'd spit in her hand to slap it down. With hair like that, Rodney was doomed to failure in his quest for immortality.

Sure enough—as he bent to retrieve the pencil, Patty got Ms. Payán's attention with hand signals and ratted him. Rod was sent to the principal's office and my record was intact.

Recess and lunchtime chatter usually focused on Lupe Payán. She filled us with desire, curiosity and butterflies. I still remember comments she wrote on my final report card that year: Andrew is a bright young man and he will do well in seventh grade if he keeps his mind on work.

Nelda Morales sometimes shared top billing with Ms. Payán because she had the biggest tits of any girl in our class. Yet Payán remained the star attraction.

The following year she didn't return. Woodland provided the springboard for a job in

Pottersville. In most ways her replacement was more noteworthy than our lovely Lupe Payán. Her name was Ms. Crooninghill.

Sandwiched between sixth and seventh grade was an unforgettable summer—I'll get to that in a moment. First I want to say something about the incredible Ms. Crooninghill.

Ms. Crooninghill was in her sixties—a tiny woman—ramrod straight with sunken cheeks that ceaselessly flexed. Her hair was a mass of fine gray wire ordered into in a tight bun. She had a prominent wart on her cheek—her voice was shrill and grating like the screech of fingernails on a chalkboard. Yet, her eyes were mysteriously beautiful—deep blue searchlights on a moonless night.

She kept a yardstick at her desk, which she slapped down hard when classroom decibels reached unacceptable levels—above a whisper. She routed boys to the principal's office daily for passing notes, making animal noises or sleeping during class. I was shipped out for passing round a drawing depicting Crooninghill riding her yardstick beneath a full moon.

Principal Mueller ordered lunchtime detention and demanded I give her a formal apology.

I was sent back to class during recess and drummed up every nerve to carry out my mission.

"Sorry about the drawing," I stammered, "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Thank you Mr. Johnson," she scowled, "but the main issue is respect."

"Yes ma'am," I droned.

She used a long pause to study my eyes like a mind reader.

"I have a homework assignment for you to complete this weekend." Her face was stone.

Shit, I winced—payback time.

"You will write a three-page report about witches."

No sweat, I thought, I'm looking at one.

"Your paper must include title and reference page. Be sure you paraphrase—no plagiarizing. Do you remember what that means?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

I really didn’t but figured I would find it in a dictionary later.

“You must turn it in to me on Monday morning before class and I will read it. If I find it satisfactory, I won’t contact your parents. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her eyes penetrated me and I felt my lip quiver. “Yes, ma’am,” I repeated.

That weekend I worked sluggishly on my report with the aid of a set of Funk and Wagnalls encyclopedia’s—which still cracked with newness even though they were going on ten years. My mother had purchased them at the grocery store—one of those deals—get one free for every twenty-five bucks you blow there. My parents used them as filler in a bookshelf previously dominated by Readers’ Digest magazine and a collection of ceramic Victorian ladies.

I watched a few Sabrina reruns on Nickelodeon to supplement the brief paragraph I found in the encyclopedia regarding the witches of Salem. I wrote big and concluded my impressive tome by saying that getting burned at the stake would really suck.

During the Monday morning recess, Ms. Crooninghill asked me to stay in. She silently reread my thesis as I stood before her desk. I’d managed to fit about five words per line, so it didn’t take her long. She had corrected it in red pen and the pages looked as though a pig had been slaughtered on top of them.

Occasionally a slight twitch gathered on Ms. Crooninghill’s face—then died. I was twirling my pencil nervously and it slipped from my fingers—rolled beneath the desk. Her head snapped up.

“Interesting, Mr. Johnson,” she droned and pointed a boney finger at the paper. “It says here that accused witches were burned in Salem for practicing witchcraft.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she puckered her wrinkled lips. “Do you think I’m a witch, Mr. Johnson?”

There was no doubt in my mind—if I’d been wearing Ruby Slippers she would’ve demanded them right on the spot.

# Writing Raw

*All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.*

---

“No ma’am,” I replied meekly.

She reached into her desk and took out the drawing. She handed it to me.

“Would you please tear this up for me?”

I did as she asked.

“Thank you for staying, Mr. Johnson. You’re free to go.”

I rabbitied for the door. Ms. Crooninghill’s voice stopped me before I could make a clean getaway.

“Andrew?”

“Ma’am?” I turned—one foot bathing in the outside sunshine.

“You didn’t mention the laugh in your report.”

“Ma’am?”

“Come now—surely you’ve heard how an evil witch laughs,” her sparkling blue eyes widened.

“Like on Wizard of Oz?” I took a stab.

“Precisely—run along now.”

I exited, gulping for air like a fish out of water. Suddenly an eruption of hideous cackling laughter came from within. The gang hurried over—hungry for gossip—I was speechless.

\*\*\*\*

Ms. Crooninghill served her purpose well—and she stayed at Woodland until her retirement. She was the bottom slice of bread—Ms. Payán the top. Sandwiched between was a cathartic summer of changes—of lessons learned that can’t be found in books or on worksheets. The boys and I needed Crooninghill after that summer. She cast a spell to help us forget—as did Nelda Morales—whose tits grew even bigger over vacation.

Each summer the gang whiled away weekends at the river. Arnulfo worked in the raisin vineyards with his father and brothers—could only join us on Sundays. Joey played summer baseball, but the games were Tuesdays and Thursdays. Rodney and I were fortunate. Most

sweat on our farms was provided by Mexican campesinos. Sometimes my father made me work alongside them because he felt it was important for me to know hard work.

It was strange working in the fields with the Mexicans. I couldn't understand their language—yet they always seemed happy. They laughed and sang as they labored under a thankless sun—were always kind to me—called me little güero. Much later those experiences engendered my deep appreciation for the Mexican culture.

The river was actually a wide man-made canal that carried irrigation water to thirsty Central Valley's farmlands. The term river gave it broader importance. Dry weeds and thorny brush dripped down its inner banks into the bamboo. Segmented bamboo shoots, sheathed like corn stocks—when stirred by a rare summer breeze, the leaves rubbed together, sounding like the swish of Ms. Payán's skirt.

During summers the river was a lengthy white streak of dry san—dotted with bottles, cans, abandoned tires and other cast-offs. We exhumed shopping carts, animal remains, spent shotgun casings and other junk—everything a boy never needed.

Mighty oaks, wrinkled trunks rising from the riverbanks— Red-tailed hawks perched like giant teardrops among the top branches—woodpeckers hammering out Morse code.

On the river that summer, we dreamed of skinny-dipping with Ms. Payán—finding an unopened six-pack. Instead, we found marijuana sprouting from Folger's coffee tins deep within a tangle of bamboo.

Joey Reece made the discovery while snapping a trail into the bamboo. Joey had sharp bony elbows, curly clumps of black hair that camouflaged his pancake ears. He was thin, wiry—easily the best athlete at Woodland. He stumbled upon the coffee cans—fifteen in all—and yelled for us.

They were neatly arranged in three rows of five. In the middle of each earth-filled can grew a small plant. The soil was still moist. Close by was a paperback half-buried in bamboo leaves. Arnulfo snatched at it but I was quicker.

“Put a madre,” he snapped.

Everyone gathered. The cover was faded and torn—looked like a man facing a burnt tortilla—The Journal of Desperate Living, by Owen Zielinski. I opened to a weathered dog-eared page to read.

“Larry remembered that summer morning as if it were yesterday. He was just a kid—eleven or twelve—forced into Camp Rising Sun so his parents could have a vacation from him. Spying through the cover of pines he watched as his cabin counselor kissed Veronica.”

Rodney grabbed at the front of his pants, “Skip to the good part!”

Rod was the only one of us that carried a cellphone and it started playing a Strangers in the Night because it belonged to his mother.

“Yeah—okay—all right—uh huh—okay—bye.” He hung up. “I gotta go in an hour.”

I continued reading.

“Veronica was my age—nervous and unsure. The counselor whispered something in her ear as his hand moved beneath her Camp Rising Sun T-shirt.”

“Ay!” Arnulfo grabbed Joey’s butt.

“Pinche Joto!” Joey flailed his boney elbows.

“Shut up guys,” I admonished, “listen to this part—The pounding in my head was joined by the insistent throbbing of my—shit, the pages are stuck together.”

“Read that shit later,” Joey interrupted, wanting us to focus on the plants.

Arnulfo always carried matches. Once in a while we found a half-smoked cigarette and he’d fire it up and do a perfect impression of Principal Muller.

“Ms. Payán—I called you into my office to see if there’s anything I can do to make you change your mind about leaving Woodland.” Then he’d start unzipping his pants.

Nulfo for short—squat, chubby—easily the worst athlete at school—yet funny. He could distort his cherub face into the oddest shapes imaginable. No matter how hard the rest of us tried, when Nulfo pulled a face in class we busted up. He got us into a lot of trouble that way.

What Arnulfo lacked in athletic ability was replaced by his farting skills. He was adept at controlling tone and volume—efforts shared with an intimate few or blasted during class as the



teacher scratched something on the blackboard. During baseball season he was the equipment manager. He parked himself at the end of the bench and when he let one go, those of us who felt the vibrations raised a hand. This unit of measurement was dubbed the Rectum Scale.

We circled around the Folger's cans. Arnulfo gingerly removed several leaves—snatched the paperback from my hand and tore out a page.

“Fucker.”

“Chill out, Stick.”

Carefully he rolled the paper over the young leaves, twisted the ends and lit it. He puffed but the paper caught fire and he dropped it. The dry bamboo leaves immediately caught and we all began stomping to put it out. I even used the book. Thankfully, we had reacted quick enough.

“Dumb ass—you wanna burn the whole fuckin’ place down?”

Nulfo suddenly transformed into Mr. Muller—acting stoned—staggering and knocking over cans.

“Ms. Payán—the reason I called you into my office is because—I want to fuck you on my desk. I hope you’re not wearing panties because—you know—recess is only ten minutes.”

We were hysterical. Then he picked up one of the cans.

“Good to the last drop.” He grabbed Rodney by his rooster tail and pulled him toward his crotch. “Rooster baby—le’ me give you the last drop.”

Rod tore himself loose, “Fucking Goofus—I swear to god!”

Rodney was worried more that the scuffle had messed up his hair. He had painstakingly tamed the rooster-tail with an experimental mixture of his sister’s mousse and his father’s Brylcream.

“What do you wanna do with this shit?” I asked.

“I’ll take one home—plant it in my back yard—so full of weeds nobody will even notice,” blurted Rodney.

“Leave it here,” cautioned Joey.

“If we get Nelda high maybe she’ll put out.” Nulfo suggested.

“I heard Ramon fucked her,” Rodney shared.

“We know who this shit belongs to,” I said.

“The Fuckabees!” We cried in unison.

The Huckabee’s—James and John—identical twins—and their older brother, David. They had all been sent to the continuation school—yet they had other plans that didn’t require much in the way of learning.

Huckabee spelled trouble. Teachers at Woodland still gossiped about them. They lived on a ramshackle farm four-and-a half miles east of mine. Their father was a farmer of sorts—usually soused. Every so often I saw him at Ali’s market buying cheap whisky.

There was no Mrs. Huckabee. The boys grew up wild and scruffy—yet were strikingly attractive in a coarse way. The twin’s long red hair complemented their fair complexions. David was taller and kept his brown hair short. He had a long scar on his forehead from a knife fight—so it was said.

Moments later our afternoon gathered dust and became a chaotic whirlwind of happenstance and synchronicity.

\*\*\*\*

In the distance we heard the hum of a motorcycle. The Huckabee’s each owned Choppers in various stages of disrepair.

“Vamos!” urged Joey.

The graveness of his voice lent wings to our feet. We fought our way out of the bamboo and onto the sand—which swallowed our feet with each stride. Even so, Joey easily opened up a spacious lead.

Arnulfo begged, “Wait for me—hijos de la chingada!” He soon tired and found a clump of tall weeds to hide inside. I looked back and saw that he wasn’t with us.

“I’m goin’ back for Nulfo,” I panted.

I knew that my self-esteem—always in need of a boost— would benefit from the ballsy points earned. Back then imagination was the only thing I had going—it wasn't nearly enough.

Eleven years old—already towering five-foot ten—I was the target for every skinny joke and nickname known to man— Beanpole, Gumby, Stringbean, Twiggy, French Fry. He's so skinny, when he wears yellow he gets mistaken for a number two pencil.

Stick Johnson. At least I had more talent than Arnulfo who farted and made goofy faces for a living.

When I found Nulfo he motioned for quiet.

"David Fuckabee came down the bank over there with a girl," he whispered. "On the other side of that dune." He pointed to a dense stand of weeds crowning a sandy ridge.

"Yeah?" my heart was pounding.

"Bet you five bucks I know what they're up to."

"Come on—let's find out."

The horrific expression on Nulfo's face was purely gratifying.

"Hijole gringo loco—fuck that—let's get the hell out'a here." He put a hand on my elbow but I jerked away.

"I'm goin' for it," I said in my best macho tone.

I felt a familiar ache, imagining what David and the girl were doing just over the ridge. My bravado surprised me, yet it was the growing pressure in my pants that imparted courage.

"Good luck," Arnulfo said, sneaking away. He glanced back occasionally to make sure I hadn't chickened.

That sonofabitch, I thought. I'd come back for him and now he was high-tailing it out of there without me.

I crept forward and then belly crawled toward the dune, which was topped by skinny reeds and milkweed. I heard voices. One was deep and gravelly—the other was melodious—shrilling like an exotic bird. Positioning myself carefully, I peeked over the dune through the crowning weeds.

Having sneaked some of my father's Hustler magazines out to the hay barn a few times, I thought my education was complete. I'd eavesdropped on the big kids when they talked about girls—was a fool to think any of that would suffice.

The reality was mind-numbing—wondrous and exciting. David Huckabee and a Mexican girl were locked together—her long black hair was splayed on a blanket. The sounds they made clouded up my mind.

David was moving back and forth between her legs as she urged, "Ay si—huh—ayyy."

My whole body jittered and my head felt filled with helium from a county fair balloon. As their actions grew more frenzied I suddenly suffered a huge cramp in my left thigh. Thankfully my squeal blended with the noises they made. I backed down the dune and straightened my leg. As the knot eased I stood up gingerly.

"Ay, me vengo," she cried out as I limped away.

I had witnessed magic—felt transcendent as I rejoined the gang filled with newly acquired knowledge and wisdom.

They didn't believe a goddamned word of it.

Joey and Rooster had stumbled upon yet another mysterious denizen of the river. They put fingers to their lips as we entered a large tangle of bamboo—one of our abandoned fortresses. It had once been a labyrinth of trails leading to various rooms— the treasure room, bathroom, a jailhouse. The bastion had long been abandoned—the smell of shit drove us away—but a few trails were still negotiable. Rodney led us to a chamber. A man lay there—tucked in a fetal position and snoring loudly.

"I seen him around town—collecting cans," Joey pointed to a burlap sack.

"Me too," I whispered, "I saw him digging around in the dumpster at Ali's."

"Smells like shit," murmured Rodney.

The transient rolled to his back and smacked his lips. Then he sat up on his elbows to regard us—blinking—wiping his nose on a tattered shirtsleeve.

"What you want in here, boys?" he said, and his first effort to stand met with defeat.

“He’s fucked up,” Arnulfo whispered.

He made it to his feet—brushed bamboo leaves off his clothing and stared back at us.

“If I’d known company was coming, I would have tidied up the place,” he said in a deep, croaky voice.

His weathered face was covered in white stubble, his long hair was littered with flecks of dirt and leaves. He mostly squinted, but occasionally his eyes flew open to reveal green eyes as intense as a lime-flavored jawbreaker.

He stooped for a baseball cap with an R stitched to the front. A faded red T-shirt overlapped the waist of his baggy gray trousers—which were much too short on him. A pair of beat-up tennis shoes completed his uniform.

“You sleep out here?” Arnulfo asked.

“Home sweet home,” he replied.

“Don’t you got no family?” I wanted to know.

“Used to.”

“What happened to ’em?”

“Better to ask, what happened to me?”

“Let’s go—I gotta get home,” said Joey.

The others turned to leave, but I hesitated.

“What did happen?”

“What’s your name, son?”

“Andrew.”

“Well, Andrew—it’s just that I—sort of just drifted here.”

“Okay. Take care.”

“Will do,” he nodded.

As I turned, something else came into my head.

“Need somethin’ to read?”

I handed him the book and left to join the others. I turned once and saw that the

transient's face looked agonized as he held the book up to his green eyes.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," he said slowly.

\*\*\*\*

We rehashed the day's events, etching the details into our memories—to be retold later with liberal dollops of horseshit—for extra punch. Trying to convincing them about David and the Mexican girl proved fruitless—yet they believed Joey when he claimed to have seen a Red-tail hawk swoop down on a cat and lift it skyward. Go figure.

We talked about our future—an oral form of magic realism. None of us wanted to be farmers, teachers or janitors—even though Floyd was pretty cool. We dreamed of being DJ's, winning the lottery, or racing stock-cars. Joey wanted to play Big League baseball.

"I'm gonna be a pimp," Arnulfo announced.

"You mean puchacha?" countered Joey.

Now that Ms. Payán had traded in Woodland for Pottersville, we focused on Nelda Morales. She sometimes wore dresses to school and we devised new ways to gain access to the hidden beauty between her legs. Thanks to Rooster pencils wouldn't work. I came up with tiny mirrors taped to tennis shoes, and Joey mentioned the micro-telescope advertised in all the comics.

"Why not just be honest with her," offered Rodney.

We all looked at him for a moment and then shook our heads at the same time.

"Send Goofus," he amended. "She'll feel sorry for the poor bastard."

"Ah Nelda," Nulfo rehearsed, "lets me and you blow this hick-town—set up house in Pottersville—what say, babe?"

Rooster picked up, "Why that sounds delightful," he pulled at his T-shirt and pinched his chest to make tits.

"Ay baby—oh yeah," Arnulfo humped a young oak tree.

"She'd laugh when she saw your Tootsie-Roll," Joey teased.

# Writing Raw

*All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.*

---

Nulfo wrestled Joey's leg, thrusting like a dog, "You like that Tootsie?"

"Pinche joto!" Joey kicked him away.

I knew the truth. Even Joey Reece—with his love for baseball—was stranded at third base with regard to sexual particulars.

Rooster asked Joey to talk about the Red-tail hawk again.

"Wish it'd swoop on my sister," I sneered. My sister Brenda was three years older—a high school sophomore after summer.

"Shit—let me swoop on her," Arnulfo grabbed at his crotch.

We climbed up the banks of the river and Joey began his five-mile trek to Woodland. Woodland—funny name for a town nearly devoid of trees—a farm labor community where most residents work in the fields. Joey's dad worked for the irrigation district.

Rod's farm was a few miles south of mine—his bike was hidden among riverbank brush. Looking back I wonder how in hell our parents ever let us out of sight—yet farm communities are tight-knit—seem safer. I suppose they carried the romantic vision—nothing will happen to my son because he's with the other boys—all good boys—he's safe.

Rodney rode off, his rooster tail sticking up like an antenna. We heard his cell phone go off in the distance—Strangers in the night—

Arnulfo's father had dumped him off at my house earlier so that he could join us at the river. My bike had a flat—bad karma with bullhead stickers—Nulfo didn't own one, so we walked. The ranch was only about a mile away.

When we arrived, my mother finally surrendered to pleas for Arnulfo to spend the night. It was rare to be allowed a Mexican friend sleepover. Like gum stuck beneath a student desk—you don't see prejudice until you feel it there.

Nulfo called his dad to make sure it was all right to miss a day working in the vineyards. By then his father had probably finished a six-pack of Corona, so he was in a jolly mood—which translated into a quick stamp of approval.

Goofus never complained about being poor—packed like a sardine in a room he shared

with three younger brothers. When we were together he liked riding my bike, looking through my comic books—sneaking off to the barn to look at my collection of purloined girly mags.

My mother politely inquired about our day at the river. We left the part about motorcycles, pot growers, sex and the hobo. As far as parents were concerned, the river was a day at the park.

That night I let Arnulfo have my bed and I made a nest on the floor next to him with some old blankets and a quilt. In the darkness we whispered.

“You think Nelda and Ramon did it?” I asked.

“I saw them kissing behind the cafeteria.”

Ramon was an eighth grader—already wore sideburns. He put tacks under his shoes so that they clicked loudly when he walked. I still don’t know why.

“Let’s make crank calls,” He suggested.

“Nah, my fucking sister’s got ears like a bat—she’ll rat us out.”

“Maybe if I fucked her first.”

“Jesus, give it a rest.”

On hot summer days, my fifteen-year-old sister wore next to nothing. Goofus drooled over her like a street dog. Brenda was a light sleeper—regularly caught me pilfering chocolate chips from our mother’s baking supplies—liquor from the forbidden kitchen cabinet.

Thanks to the intoxicating newness of summer an idea distilled in my mind—one that would change our lives forever.

“Let’s sneak to the river,” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Arnulfo answered.

\*\*\*\*

We waited until we were sure the rest of the household was asleep. My father was a light sleeper—and early riser. Silently we slipped out into the warm night and I slowly pulled the door shut and left it unlocked.



Our house was built at the end of a long lane, edged with tall palm trees that my great grandfather had planted when he emigrated from Germany. In the darkness they looked like giant Q-tips. As we reached the end of the lane, we were startled by a noise coming from a clump of weeds. On the farm such sounds could have been opossum or a badger—a coyote or the rare mountain lion that sometimes wandered down from the Sierra Nevada's.

I turned on my flashlight and Ike—the family dog—leaped to greet us.

“Chingada!” Arnulfo's favorite word sprung from his mouth.

I bent to scratch Ike's belly and the old Australian Shepherd wagged the stub of his tail like a hairy thumb.

Arnulfo took a lock-blade out of his pocket.

“I'll cut your nuts off,” he threatened and slapped at a mosquito on his arm.

Ike sniffed at a clump of weeds and marked it. He spent most of his waking hours pissing. Ike had an uncanny ability for reaching any objective with a lift of his leg.

My sister once spent hours creating an early California Mission out of sugar cubes for third-grade social studies. I helped her a little bit because she promised to give me the mission after it was graded so that I could use it as a fort for my plastic army men.

When finished she set it on the picnic table in the back yard to dry. My mother asked me to go on poop patrol. Ike used the back lawn as a bathroom, and I earned fifty cents a week by scooping it with a flat shovel. So that's what I was doing when Brenda went into the kitchen for a glass of tea. I watched as Ike slinked into the yard and make a beeline for the table.

He loved a challenge. He sniffed around the table and figured the calculus. As my poor sister returned, Ike unleashed an arching yellow fountain on the mission. The tea glass slipped from Brenda's grasp and shattered.

“I'm gonna kill you!” She found a yellow plastic Wiffleball bat and chased him, weeping and shouting.

I later heard my father whisper to our mother, “Ike's an atheist.”

Ike tagged along with Arnulfo and me. There was a twisted comfort in having him along.

Perhaps he'd piss on any enemies we encountered.

Arnulfo began telling one of his fragmented urban legends. The way Arnulfo told stories, you had to fit the pieces after he was done.

“Did you hear what happened last year?” He never waited for an answer. “There was a car parked on the river bank right around here—it was in all the papers—I think it was a ‘69 Buick Electra. They had the windows down because it was about nine hundred degrees out.”

He paused just long enough for me to patch it together and then, “This dude picked up a chick at the 5-Hi Club and they were fucking in the back seat—a mean-ass pit-bull jumped in through the window and—” Arnulfo finished predictably—making a grab for my crotch, “bit his nuts off!”

“Faggot,” I said, twisting away.

“Maricón,” he countered.

That signaled the start of a never-ending insult game and I didn't feel like playing, so I kept quit.

Arnulfo fished a Snickers bar out of his pocket and offered me half. The hand holding his half dropped for a moment at his side—Ike snatched it.

“Pinche perro!” Nulfo tried to kick Ike—slipped on a patch of Johnson grass that Ike had just pissed on. “Chingada!” he sprang up and sniffed his shirt.

“Now you're Ike's bitch!”

I laughed and backpedaling as Arnulfo chased me with the soiled shirt in his had.

“You got bigger tits than Nelda!” I pointed.

He soon ran out of gas, put the shirt back on and we journeyed onward toward the foreboding banks of the river. Weak batteries made my flashlight nearly useless so I turned it off. Under a toenail-clipping moon the river's steep sides looked like a sleeping snake. Muscle-bound oak trees loomed hauntingly—filled with unseen life. Chirps, croaks and screeches reminded that life was all around. Skunks, opossums, bats, frogs and owls were some of the critters working nightshift. There were lots of feral cats born on the river. We learned the hard

way to leave them alone.

Mysterious coyotes were seldom seen. The nightly keening fed our imaginations with primitive grist. We suspected that feral cats were a primary food source for them.

As we arrived to the river, Ike had disappeared. Secretly we missed him—not that he offered any real comfort. You see—Ike was a chicken-shit dog. The ranch cats regularly beat the hell out of him and I personally witnessed him flee from gophers, toads and field mice. Still—the sound of his license tag jingling against the metal chain of his collar was comforting.

A warm breeze swept over us and bamboo leaves rustled. Soon melted snow from the Sierra Nevada Mountains would swell the river. Every year we built a raft and braved the easy-going currents that we referred to as dangerous rapids. Yet for now—the river was our Sahara.

The whispers of the night were more intrusive than the whine of a diesel tractor. Even crickets were unnerving. Every creaking branch, bat screech, the distant bark of dogs, brought us closer to full retreat.

“Let’s make a pact,” I suggested, “no scary stories.”

“Deal,” Arnulfo answered quickly.

A sudden rustling from a stand of bamboo caused Nulfo to cross himself, “Ay Dios mio!” Ike sauntered out, wagging his stub and flipping over for a belly rub.

“Christ,” I scolded, reaching for his collar. “Wish I had a leash or something.”

The rare summer breeze drifted lazily across the bamboo and lifted the soft sound of harmonica music. Ike’s rolled to his feet—ears strained, head cocked to the side.

“You hear that?” I whispered.

“Bet it’s that tramp we saw.”

“Maybe,” I gripped Ike’s collar tightly.

Arnulfo’s face lit up, “It’s Floyd with a wild woman.”

I laughed into my hand. Arnulfo had impeccable comic timing.

We sneaked toward the source of the music until we saw firelight—crept forward until we were about thirty yards away—hid behind a large mound of Catch-weed—named because

of the painful quarter-size burrs they carried. Peeking over, we saw the transient's face glowing eerily in the flames as he pressed the harmonica into sad service. I gripped Ike's collar so that his license wouldn't jingle.

Fingers of flame seemed to dance with the music. I didn't recognize the tune as the hobo's mouth moved from one end to the other. He didn't play very good but it provided pleasant ambience—the darkness forgave his mistakes.

After a while he stopped, tapped out the saliva on his knee and slid the harp into his shirt pocket. He picked up the book I'd given him and strained to read by firelight. I kept Ike steady while he licked his balls—thankful that he wasn't the kind of dog that barked just to hear the sound of his own woof.

The hobo stared into the flames for a time and then thumbed through the pages. He read for a minute and began crying softly.

“What the fuck?” Arnulfo whispered.

We were both uncomfortable with hearing an adult crying.

After pulling himself together he fed the book into the hungry fire—lay down on the sand and broke into sobs—growing louder as the book flared and the pages curled. Wood settled beneath the flames—the resulting updraft lifted the front cover away from the spine of the book so that it spun with glowing edged and laded behind Arnulfo and me. I picked it up. What survived was the smoking image of a man walking toward an all-encompassing, creosote darkness. When I was much older, I finally figured out that he had probably written the book I'd handed him. Somehow it had contributed to his present condition.

Moments later we heard motorcycles. Our knees quivered and we sat with our backs to the protective clump.

Arnulfo motioned wildly that we should go. Yet there was too much open space between us and the canal bank. I put my hand up and signaled for silence.

“Maybe they'll have girls,” I whispered, tightening my grip on Ike.

Nulfo seemed to calm down a bit. He licked his lips and smiled.

“Tell me again—how did she sound?” he asked.

“Ay, me vengo,” I mouthed the Spanish words chiseled into my memory.

“Orale,” he said.

The tramp sat up as the bikes parked on the bank parallel to him. I saw Arnulfo clenching his fists as boots tromped sown the bank through the dry weeds. Ike nervously licked his chops, tugged against my hand and whined softly.

“Shhh,” I admonished, soothing him with my free hand. I swallowed hard and stood tall enough to peek through the brambles. Arnulfo joined and we both stroked Ike’s back.

The three brothers wore T-shirts and jeans. Their hair had been sculpted wildly by the wind. The twins—James and John—walked arrogantly over to the bum. David brought up the rear, shuffling, stumbling and sending sand in all directions.

Ike’s rear leg lifted for a scratch. As I looked down, his license slipped from my grip and jingled against the chain. I thought to slip it off, yet then he would be free—to give us away. His muscles were jittery with pent-up energy. Arnulfo’s eyes were wide and my head pounded with each thump of my heart.

“What the hell we got here?” spat James or John—we couldn’t tell them apart.

“Hi boys,” the hobo murmured and stared down at the sand.

One of the twins patted his pants pocket, “Got a cigarette old man?”

“Nope.”

“What’s that then?” He gestured at a square in his shirt pocket.

“Harmonica.”

The twin snatched it from his shirt pocket before the transient could stop him.

“Play us somethin’.”

Without waiting for a response, the twin blew and slapped his knee rhythmically.

The other twin clapped and sang, “Grab your partner by the tits, swing’er ‘round until she shits, throw’er up against the wall, shove your dick in balls’n’all!”

Arnulfo covered his mouth and I could tell he was storing the lyrics for later. David was

ten yards from us—swaying and smoking a cigarette. John—or James—disappeared into a bamboo stand.

“Check it out,” chortled the other twin as he humped a phantom woman accompanied by the harmonica.

“Idiot,” David shook his head.

Arnulfo needed a collar too as he fought the urge to laugh.

“What the fuck,” a shout from the bamboo stand, “some cocksucker’s been into our shit!” The twin returned with an empty coffee can and squatted next to the tramp. “Is this your work old-timer?”

David mumbled something and then fell on his ass.

“Fuck—what was in that shit?” he wanted to know.

The harmonica twin closed cupped his hands around the harp and blew high notes directly into the transient’s ear. Reflexively the old man’s boney elbow came up and smashed into the antagonist’s nose—harmonica flying from his hand. The twin staggered back and with the bottom of his T-shirt, he wiped a trickle of blood.

“Muthufuckuh!”

His twin brother laughed, “Caught you a good one.”

David was passed out—mouth ajar. Occasionally he flung up a defensive hand against an enemy in his nightmare. The injured twin looked to make sure David was out.

“Sonofabitch!” The bleeding twin sent a roundhouse into the man’s face. The old man toppled and scrambled to get to his feet.

Ike gave a short woof and I clamped a hand around his mouth so that his complaints were reduced, “Mff, mff.”

Smelling blood in the water the other circled and kicked the tramp in the stomach.

“Leave me alone,” the man gasped—tucking into a fetal position.

His plea was ignored—replaced by yelps of pain as the brothers stomped and kicked.

“Mama!” he cried, trying to cover his head.

A short time later, sweating and puffing—they stopped.

“Stupid ol’ fuck,” chimed James—or John—dabbing his nose with the back of his hand.

The other wiped his forehead with the bottom of his T-shirt.

“Man—that’s a helluva workout.”

Ike was struggling and Nulfo’s mouth hung open and his eyes were closed.

The vagrant lay twitching—one leg kicking spastically. Gradually the motion slowed to a stop. A wet spot formed at front of his pants as a piece of firewood settled and sent fireflies into the summer sky.

“He dead?” asked the bleeding twin.

“Playin’ opossum,” poking the still man with his foot.

“Nope,” shaking him by the shoulder, “dude—hey, get up, man.”

A twin tossed some sand on David’s head.

“Wha—?”

“Get up, man.”

David fought to sit up.

“Old man screwed the pooch.”

David’s forehead crinkled—his chin tucked in as his mouth tightened and curved downward.

“We was just havin’ some fun,” the other lookalike explained.

“Cocksuckers,” David scolded,” rubbing hands over his face. “Hide’im in the bamboo and grab the plants—cocksuckers.”

Ike was struggling, so I released his mouth and fell to petting him. He was panting so hard that Arnulfo put a finger to his terrified mouth and implored Ike with his eyes.

The twins argued as they kicked sand on the fire but Dave wasn’t listening. They were background noise—a dull humming in his head—annoying and unrelenting.

“Ain’t nobody gonna miss this fucker,” grunted one of the twins as they dragged the body into the bamboo.

A jackrabbit suddenly burst from its hiding place in there. Ike tore from my grasp to give chase. The twins watched as Ike tore past in hot pursuit—jingling all the way.

David groveled to his feet and turned toward our hiding place—narrowing his eyes. I prayed he couldn't hear the beating of our hearts. He took a few lurching steps forward, squinted into the darkness and moved his to one side.

The twins emerged from the bamboo carrying the bare-root plants. David glanced back and turned again toward us. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette—fired it up—took a long drag and exhaled slowly.

Christ, I thought, what if Chickenshit comes back?

"Hey man, we better get these into some fresh dirt," advised a twin.

"Yeah," David whirled and followed his brothers up the bank.

Nulfo and I stayed frozen until the choppers were a distant thunder.

My jaws hurt from gritting my teeth. I wanted to check on the old man, yet my quivering legs refused to take me back into the bamboo. Arnulfo tugged aggressively on my arm and we crept silently away.

Reaching the upper bank, we jogged until we reached the boundaries of the farm. Arnulfo dropped to his knees—gasping— holding his sides. I hugged arms to my chest and felt my childhood slipping away.

"Christ," were my first words."

"Chingada," Arnulfo panted.

\*\*\*\*

That rest of the night imagination—past ally—was our worst enemy.

We sat atop a haystack in the white barn. Heavy crossbeams above our heads creaked and groaned—the corrugated-metal roof popped. Cooing pigeons flapped and scurried—showered nesting material to the barn floor.

We couldn't be sure David Huckabee hadn't seen us. They certainly knew Ike. Funny



thing about farm communities—you get to know your neighbor’s and your neighbor’s dogs.

The sky was a gathering mass of unseasonable clouds— blotting out stars and the crescent moon.

“We gotta tell somebody,” said Arnulfo.

“You know what’ll happen if we rat’em out,” I cautioned. A cow moored laconically in the distance.

“What about Rod and Joey?”

“Especially not those fuckers,” I said emphatically.

Arnulfo nodded. He was terrible with secrets—fully understood the torment he’d face when others bragged about summer doings. Depending on him to keep his trap shut made me edgy to say the least.

We almost convinced each other that the drifter wasn’t dead or if he was—he was better off. It didn’t work—only grown-ups can justify themselves that way.

Toward daybreak we watched a coyote loping across a field toward the river. Before sneaking back into the house we emptied sand from our shoes and picked cockleburs and fox-tails from our socks and pants. The tang of nervous sweat—dirt and weeds— clung to our bodies and pervaded the air as we finally lay in my room, lost in our own thoughts.

Later, as Arnulfo snored, I heard the patter of rain on the wooden shingles of the roof. It helped me to relax—somehow the rain would make it clean. Maybe the tramp would come to after the first few drops—find a strong oak to recover beneath.

He had cried for his mother—the memory of it made me sob quietly into my pillow.

At sunrise my father went into the kitchen and soon the coffee machine was dripping like the rain.

“Ike—where’ve you been?” I heard him ask.

I got off the floor to look out my bedroom window. Chickenshit was trotting up the lane toward the safety of his doghouse.

“You look like hell,” my father added.

By then my mother had joined and bacon was soon sizzling as a radio voice droned on about the effect unexpected rain might have on the raisin grapes.

Arnulfo snored softly—mouth twitching—practicing goofy faces even as he slept. I listened to my parent’s warm voices—the sound of rain—clink of silverware as it was laid out. I even knew when my father was putting on his jacket to work in the shop as he always did on rainy days. It was all familiar, routine and I liked it that way.

Looking down the lonely lane where Mr. Hernandez would pick me up when school started again—I half-expected to see three motorcycles—soggy riders hatching plans to shut us up. Yet, there was emptiness and the rain.

A few hours later Nulfo’s father drove up in his battered grey Chevy pickup. Now I was vulnerable. I wrote a last will and testament, leaving my entire estate to Ms. Payán—a bee-bee gun, stamp collection, comic collection. Perhaps she’d make such a fuss at my funeral that I’d achieve a post-mortem erection. The rest of the gang would double the fun if her twin sister showed.

It rained hard the rest of the day and part of the next. My father said the river was rising and asked if we’d started building a raft. I thought of the river—the lazy current—imagined the gang and me floating on a crude raft while I wrote memoirs in a spiral-bound notebook:

Life on the River, by Andrew “Stick” Johnson

Ms. Payán was nervous.

“Andrew,” she said, “if we get caught—I’ll lose my job.”

I took her into my arms, “Don’t worry doll-face—this is between you and me.”

Yet I knew—there’d be no rafting this year—or ever again.

The rain stopped. I scanned the Pottersville newspaper— watched local television for any information that might shed light on the transient’s fate. Noticing a sudden interest in current events, my folks took it as a sign that I was finally growing up.

My conscience held me hostage. Often I saw the Huckabee’s humming down the cracked country roads—hair blowing—faces scowling. Finally I realized that they didn’t have it

out for me. Arnulfo was itching to spill the beans and I threatened to castrate him if he did.

“We’d look like idiots if we said anything now,” I argued.

\*\*\*\*

Nearly two months passed before an Irrigation District employee discovered remains. I asked Joey Reece what his dad knew about it. The county coroner’s office assigned, “natural causes” to the death. The body was identified as a homeless man and there was no identification to tell them who he was. He was buried in a pauper’s grave at the Woodland cemetery.

Nothing else was ever said—case closed. The Huckabee's had gotten away with murder.

I was filled with resentment and guilt. We should have said something—Arnulfo and I would have been hero’s jig we had. Our fame may have induced Nelda Morales to show her tits and there’s little doubt Floyd would’ve given us our own show on the bus ride home.

Would’ve—could’ve—should’ve—empty words. Evidence was rinsed, carried away by brown river water and we entered the seventh grade unheralded. I was Andrew “Stick” Johnson— cowering in the back row of another classroom.

\*\*\*\*

Time has a way of letting dust collect on dreadful memories. Seventh grade gave us Ms. Crooninghill, who provided reasons to return to the Emerald City of our youth—where the great and powerful Oz awaited requests amid the dissipated smoke of our remaining childhood.

Floyd serenaded with songs, talk of wild women and on the bus ride home I gazed north toward the river—the swishing bamboo that shrouded dark mysteries.

One late afternoon—just after 8th grade graduation—I walked to the river alone. Arnulfo and his family had moved to Texas where much of his family lived. He’s the only one I would have wanted there with me.

The river was smaller than I remembered. I breathed the straw of bamboo, the spicy

# Writing Raw

*All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.*

---

aroma of earth and brush. Unrelenting summer waters had reshaped the river bottom. I found a rusty Folger's can half-buried in the sand—pried it out with my foot and kicked it.

That old man had a history. I'd heard stories about homeless people who were once lawyers, doctors, teachers—fathers. How'd he get so lost? What causes lives to shift like sand on a river bottom?

Two weeks before my freshman year at Pottersville High, Arnulfo and his family returned to Woodland for a short visit. He got a kick when I told him Lupe Payán was my English teacher. He patted his shirt pocket and apologized for not having a pencil.

I asked if he'd kept the vow of silence and he confessed having told almost everyone in Texas. At first I felt betrayed, but then it was okay. After all—Arnulfo never could keep a secret.

The End

**Ty Spencer Vossler bio:** Ty Spencer Vossler (MFA) currently lives in Oaxaca, Mexico with his BMW (beautiful Mexican wife) and their daughter. Vossler attributes his creative and original writing to the fact that he shot his television twenty-three years ago.