

1. Cruces Gate-That Morning



“Don’t want to end up a cartoon in a cartoon grave yard”- Paul Simon

The old man sighed; OK, he thought, gazing at the wrinkled, browning apple in the fruit bowl, it isn't going to get any fresher. He had watched it deteriorating for three days now and, nope, it wasn't filling back out or getting any smoother. "I guess it figures," he murmured, "We're all just apples in the end." Pushing back from the table he rose and walked into the bathroom. As if to define the truth of what he had just said he looked at his face in the mirror. Yep, he thought, there's the apple turning to rot. With a sigh he turned and walked to the back door and went outside for the fourth time today. His thoughts went back a couple hours to morning.

When he awoke his back was hurting him. It hurt most every morning now and, though he hid the pain from his wife and grown children as best he could, he had already acknowledged that the pain was just another step down the staircase to death. He didn't want to think this way but the numbers didn't lie; he was 70. No, he certainly didn't want to think this way. Not in the least. His was not a voluntary melancholy. What he wanted was to be healthy again. Sitting outside in the back, looking at the oaks which he knew would outlive him, his focus switched to watching the birds. He lived on the border of an oak woodland. A creek gurgled in the backdrop of nature's sound track, easily missed if one didn't know it was there. It was a harmony which didn't get past him. A harmony that seemed to him like a symphony. Each instrument tuned to perfection and blending in a chorale of sound far surpassing

Beethoven or Bach. Far more complex than computer generated noise which some called music. He had played guitar for many, many years. He loved harmonies and acoustic guitar and, while listening to the natural sounds of the woodland, harkened back to when he first gotten interested and started playing his instrument; a Martin D28 six string.

It had been Paul Simon whose playing of guitar, lyrics, and finger picking first intrigued him to buy an inexpensive gut-string guitar. He took to that guitar with a vengeance not allowing anything to get in his way while trying to master it. At least, to master Travis picking and replicate the plucking of Peter, Paul and Mary as well as Mr. Simon. The hours that he had spent learning guitar had been during his growing from adolescence to manhood. For the first time in his life he had built a road on which only he had traveled. While Led Zeppelin and Cream were screaming out their songs he played and developed his own finger picking style. learned that he had a voice which, though not on par with most, could hold a tune. All of which cemented the guitar as a friend for life. He called his guitar Mr. Martin and it went with him through great times, to death of family, and, lord knows, the turmoil of his life.

His young life had been stormy. A family once solid turned to griping and fighting on a daily basis. There had even been an exchange of blows. He was far to young, aged someplace between 6-9, to understand what had taken place but the result of the dysfunction (he later coined this word as dysfucktion) was to sew the seeds of personal dysfunction which damn near killed him. It had gotten so bad that he had joined the U.S. Navy, knowing full-well that going to war in Vietnam was virtually inevitable, just to get away from the screaming maelstrom of dysfunction and impending doom of his family.

It was in the Navy that he first injured his back. It hadn't been combat related and he hadn't reported to sick bay when he injured it. A bad move which he would later regret. Had he had

confirmed that he had injured it while on duty he would have had his back covered for the rest of his life by the government. As it was, he had just toughed through each siege of back pain as it occurred. A few days off and being careful as he could then going back to work. That had sufficed for all these years. Now, however, the pain was chronic and somewhat debilitating and probably more than enough reason for the age in his face. Still, there were birds.

He had purchased a birding book many years ago just to learn the names of the different species. He immediately threw out the latin nomenclature of naming birds. He'd had enough latin growing up in the Catholic church which he quit when he was fifteen. That had caused a round of mortar attacks from his father which he had shrugged off as more of the same and never went back. All that latin would do is make more work when he just wanted to know a Flicker from a Chickadee. A crow from a hawk. He already was fairly sure that, in the wild, he could tell a penguin from an ostrich so he never learned the latin.

This late morning, however, there was peace and tranquility for him. When the weather was this pleasant, and the birds so busy doing what birds do, he tended to let his eyes and mind to unfocus, allowing the Earth's symphony to take him away where ever it wanted him to travel. It was sometimes hard to come back from a few places he went. Hard to return to the real. In one place was a grey gravel road cut into the grassy earthen banks of a hillside. Inevitably here, the sun was bright, the air cool and the colors intense. The sky was so achingly blue and close that he feared to raise his hand as it seemed doing so would pierce the blue letting in the black cold of space. It was also quiet and still. He found himself walking towards a ridge where the road cut a thin horizon line at its summit. What was over that hill he didn't know. Sometimes he got close to the top of the hill and others he pretty much stayed still and listened to the lack of sound. Perhaps, he mused, a lack of sound isn't quite correct. More

likened to the ocean sound of a sea shell to the ear. Yes, that's it, the quiet of space in which currents moved unseen. Well, he reasoned, that's as close as this mind can get. It was clear to him that sitting, mesmerized, was probably a foolish waste of time when dishes needed to be washed and rinsed and put away. Still, it was a place he liked to go. There was never any discord here. Never a sound that wasn't soothing. Not a care in the world just for that short, heavenly minute.