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Story VI

by Tom Ellis Richmond

Story VI is a slice of Richmond's Fake Book, a collection of short stories which we hope to make available in the fall of 2005.

i'm not the person i've been looking for these years. i found this out when i last visited my parents. i drove to the town lake and threw rocks at the water. i wasn't that interested in them skipping, just the satisfying plunk i remembered rocks making as they violently disturbed the surface. i hadn't found myself when i thought i had.

the lake was different. the rocks were different. the houses were different...my truck had changed, even. supposedly dale henson lives in one of the houses, spicing up the small farming community with wild parties, demi-celebs, fireworks. it's upsetting for some people; they're just not ready for the town to change.

in high school i used to back my white truck up to the water, let my feet dangle from the tailgate, and just throw rocks. i started this when melissa left.

not like i had anything else to do. the first time i went to the lake to throw rocks i was feeling anxious. the spare time was getting to me, and i no longer had any reason to finish my delivery runs with any haste. not that it mattered; no matter how slowly i drove my truck, zigzagging through town, i still finished more quickly than i should have.

so i drove to the lake. what else can a high schooler do? trying to get a fake ID so i could drink wasn't even a possibility, the county was not only dry, but bar-free at the time. well, aside from the czech "old man" bar in the town down the highway. either way, drinking was out of the question. so i drove to the lake. i tried to find as many ways there as i could

...there are only three.

i started skipping rocks at first. then the flat rocks ran out, so i moved on to the "maybe" rocks, and eventually i was stuck with boring "throw at dangerous animal" rocks. so i tried to skip them. no luck. again and again they would strike and sink with a resounding plunk!

so that's how it went until i got so frustrated i stopped trying to skip rocks and just started throwing them against the surface as hard as i could. and the habit was born. i don't exert as much effort these days, nor have i for so long... i'm just too tired to give a damn about force. so now i just lob them. same sound, same feeling, same smells...it suits me just fine. i know i'm little more than a collection of trained skills, slowly turning emotionless and callow...that is if i'm not already there.

who stole my soul?

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no one was sick that year, and those that were had already died. this really cut into my budget, but i didn't want to see those people, anyway...it was depressing. i'd pull up in my white truck, grab the right prescription, and the ghost story would begin.

the houses always had wood siding, peeling paint, sidewalks fractured by the shifting black earth in that town, riddled with weeds, missing house numbers, and one of two characters meekly standing behind a screen door...which character depended upon attire: there were moo moo's and funny trousers, take your pick.

at first i was treated as if i were a spy. me with my nimble limbs, working joints, taut skin, energy. i suppose i looked much like a lion as i walked up to the door with a smile on my face. i was always happy at first, to me it was a job. then...slowly...seeing the same hands withered, torn, crumpled, contorted, reach through the tiny crack in the door for their heart pills or blood pressure pills or diabetes juice...or whatever...began to wear me down. their eyes always looked as if so many tears had fallen from them so quickly that a watery film became a permanent fixture to keep them from

drying up so they wouldn't become like tiny balsa wood planes ready to be snatched up by the wind.

it finally set in after a few weeks. i was naive. i thought i was helping them free up some time from their busy lives. then i started to notice the empty driveways, garages sealed shut with ivy, the smell of a television that never turned off. they were all shut-ins too weather-worn to go much of anywhere. so i started asking them questions about their lives.

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i sometimes wonder if the lake i remember ever even existed. i can envision it so clearly, and for a brief moment as i threw rocks i managed to lay the skin of that memory over the current lake and feel a sort of death rattle signifying the end of a very significant period in my life. if the lake was gone, dried up and preserved in my mind, so were those years. never had i been so angry at the world. my entire life i had been trying to find one single place that would stay the same and a person to share it with, to insulate myself from the ephemeral quality of life. and now there was just this corpse in its place?

so i stopped lobbing the rocks and threw.

the old people answered the questions the same way every time. sure, there were variations, but they always ended with them standing behind the screen door waiting for the son or daughter to come visit them. their children invariably lived down the road or the next town over...but they never visited their parents. sometimes i knew their grandchildren, i went to school with them, maybe even had crushes on some of their granddaughters at one time...but the stories always stayed the same.

at first i'd ask if things had changed when i dropped off their pills, but the way their heads tilted as their eyes were sucked off into space and their cheeks sucked in slightly told me the conclusion had settled in for the winter and probably wasn't moving come spring.

everyday eddie would fill the prescriptions, place them into a box, and tell me who i needed to collect money from. i wasn't expected back until 6 at the latest, so i could take as much time as i needed. at first i was anxious to get things done quickly, i was trying to impress eddie so he wouldn't fire me. but he grabbed my arm as i was rushing out the door one day and held it for a moment squeezing it as if he had something important to say.

so i took his advice and started keeping the cardboard box in my truck and returning the money the next day. this way i had time to step inside for a cup of coffee or lemonade or something liquid. it was hard, at first, to pretend i hadn't already had 5 cups of coffee at every other house before theirs in the delivery route, but eventually i learned to pace myself. thankfully, the coffee was always so good. peculated and filtered with egg shells, deep and black, rich. i still can't make coffee that well.

i quickly discovered that eddie was right when he told me i was the only person visiting most of these people. there were times when i'd pull up to see the mailman dropping mail into the box right beside their door as they stared like starving dogs beckoning him to at least wave...he never noticed, or never seemed to care. so i'd talk with everyone a half hour or so and be on my way to the next house.

then they started getting too sick to stay alone and were moved to a nursing home. by this time their lonely screen door stare was the only thing on their faces no matter what you said to them. they'd be in a trance, turned towards the window, eyes welling up permanently, never crying. i never understood how time could freeze them into such a horrible cross-section of life.

i'd go to the lake every sunset i could free-up after melissa left. i'm surprised the lake never ran out of rocks. seemed as if it washed them back up on shore, it knew the plan i had kept secretly in my heart. i was going to fill it full of rocks until it became smaller and smaller and save the things at the bottom.

then the people in the nursing home started dying. it happened all at once. i stopped going to their funerals, i was tired of explaining to family members that i was the pharmacy's delivery boy that visited their parents or aunts or uncles every week. i didn't want to remember them with a casket frame, anyway.

eventually i didn't have a job, anymore. my clientele was gone, and the town had no need for a pharmacy with a soda fountain anyway. so that was that. i still went to visit everyone, though, the ones that were still hanging on for some odd reason. sometimes i would show up and no one would answer and i'd check the obituaries. it was a sad process, watching them all die. i always wished i could have created a place for them all to meet so they could be friends. most of them liked dominos and the rest liked parcheesi, so it would have worked out, i think.

but high schoolers dream big.

roy was my favorite. he was a pastor in west texas before he retired and moved. his second wife was blind, but still loved to watch television. there were john wayne commemorative dinner plates hanging proudly on their wall, a john wayne standee, john wayne posters. it's too bad his hero couldn't save him from his wife's death.

he talked more after that, told me his stories, the things he'd seen. he was a beautiful man, and died today.

the lake changed long before this last rock throwing session. it began changed, it was never finished in the first place. when it was being built a flood filled the lake overnight drowning the tractors and steam shovels used to dig it in the first place. supposedly they were still there.

and maybe one day i would save them and set them free.

About The Author

Tom Ellis Richmond is a writer in the Dallas area.

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