

## *The Write Place At the Write Time*

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Come in...and be captivated...

### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.





"Like the Wind" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhillarts.etsy.com

I am a Writer

by Pat Greene

I spent my youthful years living and breathing my desire to be a writer. Right now I'm not even sure if I had a plan "B" back then, but for some reason, I was always good at fitting in, no matter what I decided to set my mind to doing.

I had quit my schooling very early and by the time I turned fourteen, I was putting in long hard days, as a farm laborer. A poverty stricken childhood makes a child grow up fast and by the time most poor children reach twelve, they are already considered adults.

There is an old saying, "you never miss what you never had". I missed the fact that my family had no money when I was growing up. I hated being poor and I hated even more, what being poor deprived me of. I didn't want to quit school but I had to. I was a good student and what's more, I actually liked going to school. I hated always having to wear hand-me-down's and most of all, I hated having to go to bed hungry at night.

After I left school, my style of writing changed immediately. It seemed to mature and grow right up there with me and there were times when I found an awful lot of my life's crazy little answers through my writing. My writing was one friend that I could always rely upon... to understand me completely. I was always one who made the best of every situation and I quickly learned that positive thinking made my life a whole lot easier to live and it certainly made me more fun to be around.

I went from farming to construction, to bartending and although I used to be the biggest coward that one is ever likely to meet, I actually took up being a bouncer. I was a six foot two bags of bones and to this day I am still amazed that I actually survived that era in my life. I went through my ups and downs and when most other logic failed me, I always had my writing to turn to. I was a huge romantic back then and I dreamed of one day writing the greatest love story ever told.

Even now as I sit here writing this, I wonder where over thirty years from my teens have gone to. I have gone through change after change in my life and yet I am still here reaching out to an old friend that has never through all that time, even once left me down.

I'm a reasonably successful businessman today but I still have reasons in my life to worry about money. I continue to have a close relationship with my writing but unfortunately, I don't have the proper time to give to my writing right now. In my childhood, I took on the belief that my writing was going to bring me out of poverty. I used to make believe that it was going to make me rich one day.

I have long accepted that writing was a gift given to me for reasons a whole lot more important, than my financial status in life. I spent my childhood and my younger life editing everything.....even the raw truth of my writing. There was a very long time there, where it was difficult for me to distinguish what was real and unreal and I feel certain now that the truth is what makes writing more understandable and thus makes it more successful.

Not all of us have to be published authors, for our writing to be a success. I may never get to pen that one great novel but I've been writing now for over forty years and that in itself is an incredible personal accomplishment.

Do I doubt that I'm a writer?

Not for a very long time.

## The Jocks, the Jets, the Grubbies and the Ghosts of the Past

by Don MacLaren

When I was a sophomore at East Grand Rapids High School there was a very beautiful, young woman who taught the English class I took. She had been Miss Ohio, and was often the object of my 15-year-old sexual fantasies. Her class came right after a 75-minute lunch break we had. One day in February, before Miss Ohio's class, three friends and I went to some woods nearby and passed around a fifth of whiskey, drinking it straight between about five or six bowls of marijuana as a snowstorm began to rage. We finished the bottle of whiskey just in time to get back to school, chewing gum and managing to drop Visine in our eyes on the way - despite the snow falling in our faces. One of the guys that had been partying with us felt sick in the class, and Miss Ohio led him to the bathroom whereupon he puked, then went home for the day.

At East Grand Rapids High School there were three cliques: the "jocks" - those who were into sports, the "jets" - those who were into looking good, getting good grades, following the status quo and acting rich, and the "grubbies" - who were into drugs, crime and revolution (or so we thought). The grubbies had a reputation for - among other things - not bathing regularly, hence our name, probably something like hippies in the '60s or grunge rockers in the '90s. I alternated between something like a jock or a jet during my freshman year of high school, but by spring of my sophomore year I was 100 percent grubby.

The grubbies congregated around a bench in the first floor hall, across from the cafeteria, where we would exchange information about where to get drugs, where to buy or sell stolen property, etc. There was also an area outside, a cement "porch" with a cement roof supported by cement pillars we would congregate at, sitting on the edge of the porch with our feet dangling over it, smoking cigarettes until one of the teachers came by, whereupon we would cup our cigarettes in our hands, hiding them until the teacher left. Some of the jets I used to hang around with when I was a

teacher left. Some of the jets I used to hang around with when I was a freshman would make comments about me as they walked past one of the grubby zones. "MacLaren's a grubby," they'd say, which was in the eyes of most jets something like saying "MacLaren's a rabid dog." Nevertheless I was proud to be a grubby.

At that time the Elton John song, "Benny and the Jets" was very popular, and I remember seeing part of the lyrics to the song on one of the bathroom stall doors in the school, as if the lyrics to one of the most popular songs at the time were written specifically to attack the jets at East Grand Rapids High School. The jets were what the grubbies thought of as the establishment, the status quo, the wealthy, materialistic, capitalistic criminals too concerned with their superficial wants to see the damage their evil was doing. Most of the jets had plans to go to college, and though many of the grubbies would go too, most of us could have cared less whether we went or not. Colleges were part of the system we wanted no part of that gave us Vietnam, ghettos, pollution and The Partridge Family.

There was one guy who got just about every award possible for scholastic achievement at the school in his senior year (my sophomore year). The whole school had assembled in the gym and he came up to the podium again and again to receive different awards. He was a very pimply, long-haired guy in blue jeans who walked with his shoulders hunched over - probably from hunching over books for so long. He was also a grubby. I thought that was interesting given that most grubbies like me didn't care about grades, though some of us read a lot on our own.

After my sophomore year was over, a bunch of us went to some woods out in the country to drink and get stoned, and the grubby genius was there. He was going to India, he said, not to college. He wanted to drop out of plastic American society and save humanity. Most of the grubbies though, were really no more socially conscious than anyone else at the high school. I thought of myself as kind of a Robin Hood when I stole something, sucked on a joint or dropped acid - taking energy away from the system and putting it into the revolution, where it was needed. Of course, I was full of crap, but I thought there were so few choices if you didn't toe the line and conform.

When I was 15 or 16 I made my first feeble attempts to write, and articulate my version of grubby philosophy. The song that happened to be the catalyst was Billy Joel's "Summer, Highland Falls." One of the lines is "and as we stand upon the ledges of our lives, it's either sadness or euphoria." Like many adolescents, I was probably borderline manic-depressive, so the lines seemed fitting and the song moved me.

Gerald Ford was president at that time; the man Nixon picked to replace vice-president Agnew after Agnew was forced from office for cheating on his taxes. Though Ford was basically a clean politician, he lacked the dynamism necessary to get the country out of its malaise in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate. He pardoned Nixon and presided over the country during the oil crisis. Gerald Ford also fell down a lot. Gerald Ford was from Grand Rapids. (When I tell people I grew up in Grand Rapids, even today, they still say "Yeah, Gerald Ford's hometown.")

I became a grubby just as Nixon resigned and the man who had his residence in East Grand Rapids became president. Though Gerald Ford wasn't tainted by any scandals, he pardoned the man who presided over one of the biggest in US history. I think it fitting that just as I chose to spiritually drop out of American society, a man from Grand Rapids took the position as its leader. Ronald Reagan once said that the Soviet Union was the center of evil in the world, but for me Grand Rapids was the center of evil. It was the Hades I was destined to visit and do my time in, but the place I knew I would leave ever since the day I had entered its gates.

After high school I didn't go to India, or to college either. I went to work in a factory. Not long after that I broke up with a girlfriend, quit drugs and moved out of my parents' house into my own apartment - where I slept between ten-hour graveyard shifts operating a press at the factory.

The day after my neighbors downstairs were robbed at gunpoint, I went to a Navy recruiter's office and signed enlistment papers that put me on a train

to boot camp outside Chicago, an aircraft carrier in San Francisco Bay, and on patrol off the coast of Iran.

After leaving the waters of the Arabian Sea, I did go to college, graduating as valedictorian at City College of San Francisco, then to UC Berkeley, where I was a member of the Honor Students' Society.

After Berkeley, I moved to Japan, where I learned enough Japanese to work as a translator writing business letters, and where I got enough practice writing business letters to publish one in *Business Week*.

Once, in the middle of a business trip I stopped in Grand Rapids, where I took a walk alone into that field where we'd drunk whiskey and smoked pot. I stepped on something that I thought was a stone, but bending down I saw it was a pot pipe. An empty fifth of whiskey lay as its companion nearby. I picked them up, intending to throw them away, but then I thought better of it and buried them instead. When I was finished I paused and said a prayer to the ghosts of my past as a strong wind whipped my face and the first snowflakes of the season began to fall. Then I made my way back to the road I had taken to get there, and set off in a new direction.

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### Little Kids on Big Rocks

by Mark Barkawitz

While on vacation at Big Sur in northern California, I follow my brother-in-law Bob up the giant rock formation that dominates the shoreline of Pfeiffer State Beach. Clinging to its face with my talon-less fingers, I'm careful to place each sneaker toe securely in the worn footholds that mark the steep pathway.

At the top, brother Bob sits on his haunches and leans his 35mm lens down over the seaward side of the rocks at a pair of basking sea otters in the water below. Staring downward at the rolling ocean makes me dizzy. I back away but my uneasiness remains, so I begin to climb back down the same way I came up. It's impossible not to stare down to where the waves explode violently off the rocky formation far below me.

Halfway down, I cross paths with a barefoot man in a straw hat followed by his two, young children—a boy and a girl—who struggle to ascend in their flip-flops. Their father reaches his hand down and pulls them up the face.

I continue my descent until finally reaching the sandy beach. I should rejoin my own family on their beach chairs and towels, where my ten-year-old son still sulks because I wouldn't let him "climb the big rock with you and Uncle Bob!"

Instead, I position myself below the family, who clings to the upper ledges of the giant rock formation. I'm soon joined by a young man, who likewise cranes his neck upward and comments matter-of-factly beside me: "Disaster film in the making."

Without altering my gaze from the trio on the face, I reply: "You must be from L.A., too."

I'm pretty sure he nods.

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Setting up the Aquarium

by David Schwartz



We cleared the cobwebs from the aquarium, which sat dormant for five years. Great names like *Xiphophorus maculatus* and *Helvostoma temminckii* swam through my head. I ran my fingers rake-like through the gravel at the bottom of the tank.

“Perhaps Sara has buried some pennies in here.”

“I doubt it. She has not played in here very often.”

It was true. An empty aquarium does not have the attraction or facility or drain pipes. Three-year-old children are pulled toward water implements like plants are drawn to sunlight. Nevertheless, there were – and still are – some very interesting objects at the bottom of the tank. I had dug them out as an archaeologist might have done: the cap to a pen, an old shopping list, a cigarette butt, and some metal objects, which I could not identify.

*Pterophyllum sacalove*. *Librates reticulatus*.

“If you liked the aquarium so much, why didn’t we set the tank up sooner? Why did we ever even take it down?”

“The fish died.”

“We could have replaced them,” she spoke with the voice of a police officer or a park ranger.

“Who wanted to clean the tank?”

When Sara awoke from her nap, I took that as an opportunity to explain

that we were going to set up the fish tank again. She appeared to be delighted.

With a monkey grin and an elephant smile, she asked, "Me too?"

Mistake number one had just occurred. Never, never, agree to let a child help you to start operating – or doing anything – with a fish tank

My wife, so much wiser and foresightful than myself, immediately informed me that I was now in charge, the tank was now my project, just Sara's and mine. She then abandoned ship; so to speak, we were not really on a ship. There was, however, water in the basement.

"What are we doing, Daddy?"

She frequently asks that question. She, like most children, was not so much nosy as curious. I have never told anyone this but I like curiosity. At times I am affected with it myself.

Realizing that I had not yet answered her question, I immediately molded my features into my answering face and said, "Well, we are going to smooth out the gravel, now I don't mean smooth right out of the tank. But just make it appear flat and bold. And then we will put the gravel at the bottom here," I pointed, "...and put in some rocks and shells."

You know, shells only seem to be hopes of mountains. I didn't think of this by myself, but my children brought this to my attention.

Meanwhile I began to hear the repetition of that single word which can be a noun, an adverb, and a stone on the road to Disney Land. It sang out in a beautiful song-like sound, rose into a dust-blown character finally lasting in the sound I would expect in an atomic blast

the sound I would expect in an atomic blast.

“DAD!!”

I responded immediately while holding my head in my hands. “Yes?” It was the most positive word I could gather in so little time as it takes to break the sound barrier.

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeated.

“Yes, why are we putting stony and grimy things in the bottom of the bowl?”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” I made a long winding series of two letters, “...to make the fish tank look pretty.”

I had studied philosophy, and was acquainted with the whimsy and silliness of children. But this question seemed like it wanted to be answered. So I answered it. If you had been paying attention, you may have noticed the answer is both contained and held in, on, and with, a few paragraphs above. But if, you either cannot, or did not notice, I will repeat myself. (well for the sake of honesty, I have a good computer, so I will clip and paste the above just below)

“Well, we are going to smooth out the gravel, now I don’t mean smooth right out of the tank. But just make it appear flat and bold. And then we will put the gravel at the bottom here,” I pointed, “...and put in some rocks and shells.”

She gave me a very unique look. Now, I have always thought she looked unique, in a very attractive way. But this unique look was one, which would be placed (in the dictionary) between friendly amusements and (following the circus theme) terrifying as a panther attack.

“To make the fish tank look pretty,” I added.

“Why?” she shot back, unsatisfied.

I have studied children now for twenty-three years and I know they really enjoy asking “why” questions. In fact, I know that when reading this she is thinking in her head (what else do you think) 'Why?'

With children, even up to ages twenty-three and fifty-two the shortest question in the universe is never answered to a child’s content, or in better terms, his or her contentment.

“So,” I did my fatherly thing, “...so the fish have a pleasant home. Now Sara,” I continued, trying to change the subject, “...you must remember never to stick your hands in the ...”

“Can I plunge my hands?” she asked.

I decided to just ignore her question, knowing I was violating a rule here. I continued not changing the rhythm or sound of my voice, “...never stick your hands in the tank and never play with the electric cords.”

”Why?”

That word again! That word I used to use so often and now detest. I thought to say “Because” and leave it like that. But that was my child, that is to say one of my most favorite persons in the whole wide universe (she would ask me how I knew that about the whole wide universe) and two, she could tell if I was telling the truth. I just ignored the second fact. I am not a pathological liar, nor am I a pathetic liar. (Sara, who never lets conversation just drop, would surely ask what kind of liar I was...)

The question was asked and I, because I am a father (notice I did not say a good father) decided to respond. I did respond once but now it was another time.

I screwed my head on and said, “Because I do not want you to get electrocuted.”

“I get hurt?”

I was so proud she was asking a question which was both not “why?” and was intelligent, that I answered with sincerity and pride, using my very best 'fairly good fathers voice.'

“Yes,” I said with the most terrifying voice I could muster. “You can get hurt very badly. “

“Why?”

Well you knew that question was coming didn't you?

I explained the basics of electricity, threw in some comments concerning nuclear fission (Or is it fusion?), a few notes comparing Immanuel Kant and Franz Rosenzweig. Then I informed my daughter that I was now ready

and I said, "Recognize, then I informed my daughter that I was now ready to put water into the tank.

As a quick short witticism she held her nose. It was as if she was afraid of water but I knew that was not true. She was an early swimmer, and her favorite drink, after margarita was water.

Mistake number two: Never fill your aquarium with water

It may be difficult but parents should develop the appreciation for an empty fish tank. Just think how pleasant a very large bowl of water is. Just think how pleasant it is that the water is in the bowl and not being drained on your head. You can even drink water, but I must admit I do not like the taste.

Generally, the realization came (semantic word meaning, "real is a tion," leaving it up to philosophers to say what a "tion" is) that Sara would not agree that an inch of water was sufficient under the ten-gallon tank. We agreed to fill the tank to the brim under the condition that she not help pour the water or be thinking about helping.

"Okay, I fill the pitcher."

Mistake number three: never relent

Water nearly covered the kitchen floor. But she would faithfully hand me the half-empty container. Needless to say, this made the process take twice as long.

When the tank was full, Sara asked me what all the connections drooped over the side were and what their functions consisted of.

”What's this?”

“This is an aquarium. Fish live in it.”

Sara, a beautiful and intelligent girl asked, “What is the difference between this and a fish tank?”

When we had but a single very small fish, we did have a bowl and, since it had been emptied of fruits and vegetables, a tiny fish lived in there quite happy and sound. But with a dozen or so fishes we required something larger. In any event, this was long ago...

“Daddy,” there was a cry which not only suggested terror, but threw it out in tons of sorrow. “You put water in the ‘quar ‘um’?”

“Yes, I already have.”

She moaned in agony, “We cannot put fish in there! They will get all wet.”

I slapped my hands to my head. One landed on each side. This proved two things. First, heads are useful for smacking and, second, it hurt to hit your own head. But anyway, I had enough sense to reply, “Fish live in water.”

“Daddy, we buy fish, don't we?”

“Yes, we will buy some fish.”

Here her eyes glistened with mystic enchantment. Her voice raised in excitement, and fell with a suitable loud bang. “Today?” she glimmered inside a large gleam.

“No,” I explained as I suddenly went to the bottom of her “Like the least little bit” list.

Seeing her eyes puff in what I can only describe as disaster, I explained. Explanations are the gleam in the eye of the sun. Hurriedly I jumped into and out of an explanation: “First we have to let the fish tank filter for twenty-four hours (say that ten times real fast), and then we will get some fish.”

“Two fish, I want two fish, two fish, two fish. Two, two, I want two fish.”

“Two brown fish,” I teased, knowing her favorite color was orange, interspersed with a pattern of red stripes.

“Yeah, we put one in now and save the other to put in later.”

I smiled a both fatherly and amused smile. “Put one away?”

“Yeah, for later.”

“But where? In the refrigerator?”

She shrugged her shoulders, placed an amused smile, which overtook her lips, and said between the smile, “Yeah, in the refrigerator.”

I wanted to get clear about what she wanted. A slow shock rambled across



my face. I took a sip of my coffee, I thought about going to bed, then I thought about what I would do tomorrow, and finally I rubbed my eyes and looked lovingly at the little girl in front of me.

Words slowly rose to and through my lips. "No. No, no, Sara! Any fish we buy will have to go directly into the tank."

"Why?" she questioned.

"Because," I answered.

"WHY?" she asked with a voice demanding seriousness.

"Because, that is where fish live."

"In a tank?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm as sure as rain," I said and immediately began, as I never had up to that point, began to wonder what that meant. Was rain always right? What would happen if rain was ever wrong? Would that just cause the saying to be changed or ignored or would it cause the fall of the Roman Empire? (I sure hope Roman Catholics do not get mad at me for saying that)

"... and is that true?" I heard her end a question.

"Yes!" I said, as if in a positive mood.

“Why?”

“Because,” I suddenly achieved a good thought, “Gasteropelecus levis.”

This answer seemed to satisfy her. But it was time again to remind her not to climb on the tank, or put her hair in the water. As I spoke, the plastic *Echinodorus panuculatus* floated to the top of the tank. Naturally, Sara would not leave the room in order that I might submerge the plant and bury the delicate base under some gravel. My wet, dripping hand was barely extracted and in search of a towel when Sara was climbing the console and reaching for a loosened wedge of water milfoil. I warned her never to reach inside the tank, and threatened to empty the water if anything was going on, and put away the filters, air pump, scuba divers, sea shells, thermostat and plastic plant life, if she ever did so, or attempted to do so again. She swathed away, apparently remunerating the rule.

Mistake number four: never turn your back on your children

That evening Sara claimed she was too tired to be concerned about, and certainly with, her dolls. Her last question before going up the stairs summed up all the innocence, tenderness, and essence of childhood.

“Tomorrow we buy the fish?”

Her face looked so innocent and polite I knew I would not refuse, and before I could form words to make a reply, my mouth put out words that sounded like, “Yes, Sara, tomorrow we will go to the store to buy fish.”

“At the fish store?”

My mouth formed the words which spelled out, “No, the bakery,” but when my lips pushed out words the words sounded very much like, “Yes.”

Before I could put an end to the conversation, she pointed words at me and I heard, “We buy two fish?”

“Yes, we will buy two fish.”

“Two brown fish?”

“Yes, Sara, if you want brown fish we will buy two brown fish.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, Sara, I already said tomorrow, and have I ever lied to you?”

I saw her lips thinking and I was afraid she would call me a liar. But she didn't.

Her head went somnolently into my wife's shoulder. She was asleep. As she carried her up the steps, because her bed was at the top of the stairs, her ears were spread apart a little bit. As I watched, some visitors came floating from her ears. There was *Hyphessobryco flammeas*, and *Mollinnesia latipinna* paddling through her dreams.

I went to check to see the water temperature was within the safe zone for fish life. There I found florid yet buoyant Lucy— oh I should tell you that Lucy was Sara's favorite doll before you think it was another child and quit

reading. So there I have saved you to continue on to the end. As I was saying, Lucy was there, fulfilling the flotsam drifts of my daughter's imagination.

She, Lucy the doll, took a week to dry.

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### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.





"Like the Wind" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhillarts.etsy.com

I am a Writer

by Pat Greene

I spent my youthful years living and breathing my desire to be a writer. Right now I'm not even sure if I had a plan "B" back then, but for some reason, I was always good at fitting in, no matter what I decided to set my mind to doing.

I had quit my schooling very early and by the time I turned fourteen, I was putting in long hard days, as a farm laborer. A poverty stricken childhood makes a child grow up fast and by the time most poor children reach twelve, they are already considered adults.

There is an old saying, "you never miss what you never had". I missed the fact that my family had no money when I was growing up. I hated being poor and I hated even more, what being poor deprived me of. I didn't want to quit school but I had to. I was a good student and what's more, I actually liked going to school. I hated always having to wear hand-me-down's and most of all, I hated having to go to bed hungry at night.

After I left school, my style of writing changed immediately. It seemed to mature and grow right up there with me and there were times when I found an awful lot of my life's crazy little answers through my writing. My writing was one friend that I could always rely upon... to understand me completely. I was always one who made the best of every situation and I quickly learned that positive thinking made my life a whole lot easier to live and it certainly made me more fun to be around.

I went from farming to construction, to bartending and although I used to be the biggest coward that one is ever likely to meet, I actually took up being a bouncer. I was a six foot two bags of bones and to this day I am still amazed that I actually survived that era in my life. I went through my ups and downs and when most other logic failed me, I always had my writing to turn to. I was a huge romantic back then and I dreamed of one day writing the greatest love story ever told.

Even now as I sit here writing this, I wonder where over thirty years from my teens have gone to. I have gone through change after change in my life and yet I am still here reaching out to an old friend that has never through all that time, even once left me down.

I'm a reasonably successful businessman today but I still have reasons in my life to worry about money. I continue to have a close relationship with my writing but unfortunately, I don't have the proper time to give to my writing right now. In my childhood, I took on the belief that my writing was going to bring me out of poverty. I used to make believe that it was going to make me rich one day.

I have long accepted that writing was a gift given to me for reasons a whole lot more important, than my financial status in life. I spent my childhood and my younger life editing everything.....even the raw truth of my writing. There was a very long time there, where it was difficult for me to distinguish what was real and unreal and I feel certain now that the truth is what makes writing more understandable and thus makes it more successful.

Not all of us have to be published authors, for our writing to be a success. I may never get to pen that one great novel but I've been writing now for over forty years and that in itself is an incredible personal accomplishment.

Do I doubt that I'm a writer?

Not for a very long time.

## The Jocks, the Jets, the Grubbies and the Ghosts of the Past

by Don MacLaren

When I was a sophomore at East Grand Rapids High School there was a very beautiful, young woman who taught the English class I took. She had been Miss Ohio, and was often the object of my 15-year-old sexual fantasies. Her class came right after a 75-minute lunch break we had. One day in February, before Miss Ohio's class, three friends and I went to some woods nearby and passed around a fifth of whiskey, drinking it straight between about five or six bowls of marijuana as a snowstorm began to rage. We finished the bottle of whiskey just in time to get back to school, chewing gum and managing to drop Visine in our eyes on the way - despite the snow falling in our faces. One of the guys that had been partying with us felt sick in the class, and Miss Ohio led him to the bathroom whereupon he puked, then went home for the day.

At East Grand Rapids High School there were three cliques: the "jocks" - those who were into sports, the "jets" - those who were into looking good, getting good grades, following the status quo and acting rich, and the "grubbies" - who were into drugs, crime and revolution (or so we thought). The grubbies had a reputation for - among other things - not bathing regularly, hence our name, probably something like hippies in the '60s or grunge rockers in the '90s. I alternated between something like a jock or a jet during my freshman year of high school, but by spring of my sophomore year I was 100 percent grubby.

The grubbies congregated around a bench in the first floor hall, across from the cafeteria, where we would exchange information about where to get drugs, where to buy or sell stolen property, etc. There was also an area outside, a cement "porch" with a cement roof supported by cement pillars we would congregate at, sitting on the edge of the porch with our feet dangling over it, smoking cigarettes until one of the teachers came by, whereupon we would cup our cigarettes in our hands, hiding them until the teacher left. Some of the jets I used to hang around with when I was a



teacher left. Some of the jets I used to hang around with when I was a freshman would make comments about me as they walked past one of the grubby zones. "MacLaren's a grubby," they'd say, which was in the eyes of most jets something like saying "MacLaren's a rabid dog." Nevertheless I was proud to be a grubby.

At that time the Elton John song, "Benny and the Jets" was very popular, and I remember seeing part of the lyrics to the song on one of the bathroom stall doors in the school, as if the lyrics to one of the most popular songs at the time were written specifically to attack the jets at East Grand Rapids High School. The jets were what the grubbies thought of as the establishment, the status quo, the wealthy, materialistic, capitalistic criminals too concerned with their superficial wants to see the damage their evil was doing. Most of the jets had plans to go to college, and though many of the grubbies would go too, most of us could have cared less whether we went or not. Colleges were part of the system we wanted no part of that gave us Vietnam, ghettos, pollution and The Partridge Family.

There was one guy who got just about every award possible for scholastic achievement at the school in his senior year (my sophomore year). The whole school had assembled in the gym and he came up to the podium again and again to receive different awards. He was a very pimply, long-haired guy in blue jeans who walked with his shoulders hunched over - probably from hunching over books for so long. He was also a grubby. I thought that was interesting given that most grubbies like me didn't care about grades, though some of us read a lot on our own.

After my sophomore year was over, a bunch of us went to some woods out in the country to drink and get stoned, and the grubby genius was there. He was going to India, he said, not to college. He wanted to drop out of plastic American society and save humanity. Most of the grubbies though, were really no more socially conscious than anyone else at the high school. I thought of myself as kind of a Robin Hood when I stole something, sucked on a joint or dropped acid - taking energy away from the system and putting it into the revolution, where it was needed. Of course, I was full of crap, but I thought there were so few choices if you didn't toe the line and conform.

When I was 15 or 16 I made my first feeble attempts to write, and articulate my version of grubby philosophy. The song that happened to be the catalyst was Billy Joel's "Summer, Highland Falls." One of the lines is "and as we stand upon the ledges of our lives, it's either sadness or euphoria." Like many adolescents, I was probably borderline manic-depressive, so the lines seemed fitting and the song moved me.

Gerald Ford was president at that time; the man Nixon picked to replace vice-president Agnew after Agnew was forced from office for cheating on his taxes. Though Ford was basically a clean politician, he lacked the dynamism necessary to get the country out of its malaise in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate. He pardoned Nixon and presided over the country during the oil crisis. Gerald Ford also fell down a lot. Gerald Ford was from Grand Rapids. (When I tell people I grew up in Grand Rapids, even today, they still say "Yeah, Gerald Ford's hometown.")

I became a grubby just as Nixon resigned and the man who had his residence in East Grand Rapids became president. Though Gerald Ford wasn't tainted by any scandals, he pardoned the man who presided over one of the biggest in US history. I think it fitting that just as I chose to spiritually drop out of American society, a man from Grand Rapids took the position as its leader. Ronald Reagan once said that the Soviet Union was the center of evil in the world, but for me Grand Rapids was the center of evil. It was the Hades I was destined to visit and do my time in, but the place I knew I would leave ever since the day I had entered its gates.

After high school I didn't go to India, or to college either. I went to work in a factory. Not long after that I broke up with a girlfriend, quit drugs and moved out of my parents' house into my own apartment - where I slept between ten-hour graveyard shifts operating a press at the factory.

The day after my neighbors downstairs were robbed at gunpoint, I went to a Navy recruiter's office and signed enlistment papers that put me on a train

to boot camp outside Chicago, an aircraft carrier in San Francisco Bay, and on patrol off the coast of Iran.

After leaving the waters of the Arabian Sea, I did go to college, graduating as valedictorian at City College of San Francisco, then to UC Berkeley, where I was a member of the Honor Students' Society.

After Berkeley, I moved to Japan, where I learned enough Japanese to work as a translator writing business letters, and where I got enough practice writing business letters to publish one in *Business Week*.

Once, in the middle of a business trip I stopped in Grand Rapids, where I took a walk alone into that field where we'd drunk whiskey and smoked pot. I stepped on something that I thought was a stone, but bending down I saw it was a pot pipe. An empty fifth of whiskey lay as its companion nearby. I picked them up, intending to throw them away, but then I thought better of it and buried them instead. When I was finished I paused and said a prayer to the ghosts of my past as a strong wind whipped my face and the first snowflakes of the season began to fall. Then I made my way back to the road I had taken to get there, and set off in a new direction.

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### Little Kids on Big Rocks

by Mark Barkawitz

While on vacation at Big Sur in northern California, I follow my brother-in-law Bob up the giant rock formation that dominates the shoreline of Pfeiffer State Beach. Clinging to its face with my talon-less fingers, I'm careful to place each sneaker toe securely in the worn footholds that mark the steep pathway.

At the top, brother Bob sits on his haunches and leans his 35mm lens down over the seaward side of the rocks at a pair of basking sea otters in the water below. Staring downward at the rolling ocean makes me dizzy. I back away but my uneasiness remains, so I begin to climb back down the same way I came up. It's impossible not to stare down to where the waves explode violently off the rocky formation far below me.

Halfway down, I cross paths with a barefoot man in a straw hat followed by his two, young children—a boy and a girl—who struggle to ascend in their flip-flops. Their father reaches his hand down and pulls them up the face.

I continue my descent until finally reaching the sandy beach. I should rejoin my own family on their beach chairs and towels, where my ten-year-old son still sulks because I wouldn't let him "climb the big rock with you and Uncle Bob!"

Instead, I position myself below the family, who clings to the upper ledges of the giant rock formation. I'm soon joined by a young man, who likewise cranes his neck upward and comments matter-of-factly beside me: "Disaster film in the making."

Without altering my gaze from the trio on the face, I reply: "You must be from L.A., too."

I'm pretty sure he nods.

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Setting up the Aquarium

by David Schwartz

We cleared the cobwebs from the aquarium, which sat dormant for five years. Great names like *Xiphophorus maculatus* and *Helvostoma temminckii* swam through my head. I ran my fingers rake-like through the gravel at the bottom of the tank.

“Perhaps Sara has buried some pennies in here.”

“I doubt it. She has not played in here very often.”

It was true. An empty aquarium does not have the attraction or facility or drain pipes. Three-year-old children are pulled toward water implements like plants are drawn to sunlight. Nevertheless, there were – and still are – some very interesting objects at the bottom of the tank. I had dug them out as an archaeologist might have done: the cap to a pen, an old shopping list, a cigarette butt, and some metal objects, which I could not identify.

*Pterophyllum sacalove*. *Librates reticulatus*.

“If you liked the aquarium so much, why didn’t we set the tank up sooner? Why did we ever even take it down?”

“The fish died.”

“We could have replaced them,” she spoke with the voice of a police officer or a park ranger.

“Who wanted to clean the tank?”

When Sara awoke from her nap, I took that as an opportunity to explain

that we were going to set up the fish tank again. She appeared to be delighted.

With a monkey grin and an elephant smile, she asked, "Me too?"

Mistake number one had just occurred. Never, never, agree to let a child help you to start operating – or doing anything – with a fish tank

My wife, so much wiser and foresightful than myself, immediately informed me that I was now in charge, the tank was now my project, just Sara's and mine. She then abandoned ship; so to speak, we were not really on a ship. There was, however, water in the basement.

"What are we doing, Daddy?"

She frequently asks that question. She, like most children, was not so much nosy as curious. I have never told anyone this but I like curiosity. At times I am affected with it myself.

Realizing that I had not yet answered her question, I immediately molded my features into my answering face and said, "Well, we are going to smooth out the gravel, now I don't mean smooth right out of the tank. But just make it appear flat and bold. And then we will put the gravel at the bottom here," I pointed, "...and put in some rocks and shells."

You know, shells only seem to be hopes of mountains. I didn't think of this by myself, but my children brought this to my attention.

Meanwhile I began to hear the repetition of that single word which can be a noun, an adverb, and a stone on the road to Disney Land. It sang out in a beautiful song-like sound, rose into a dust-blown character finally lasting in the sound I would expect in an atomic blast

the sound I would expect in an atomic blast.

“DAD!!”

I responded immediately while holding my head in my hands. “Yes?” It was the most positive word I could gather in so little time as it takes to break the sound barrier.

“Why?”

“Why?” I repeated.

“Yes, why are we putting stony and grimy things in the bottom of the bowl?”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” I made a long winding series of two letters, “...to make the fish tank look pretty.”

I had studied philosophy, and was acquainted with the whimsy and silliness of children. But this question seemed like it wanted to be answered. So I answered it. If you had been paying attention, you may have noticed the answer is both contained and held in, on, and with, a few paragraphs above. But if, you either cannot, or did not notice, I will repeat myself. (well for the sake of honesty, I have a good computer, so I will clip and paste the above just below)

“Well, we are going to smooth out the gravel, now I don’t mean smooth right out of the tank. But just make it appear flat and bold. And then we will put the gravel at the bottom here,” I pointed, “...and put in some rocks and shells.”

She gave me a very unique look. Now, I have always thought she looked unique, in a very attractive way. But this unique look was one, which would be placed (in the dictionary) between friendly amusements and (following the circus theme) terrifying as a panther attack.

“To make the fish tank look pretty,” I added.

“Why?” she shot back, unsatisfied.

I have studied children now for twenty-three years and I know they really enjoy asking “why” questions. In fact, I know that when reading this she is thinking in her head (what else do you think) 'Why?'

With children, even up to ages twenty-three and fifty-two the shortest question in the universe is never answered to a child's content, or in better terms, his or her contentment.

“So,” I did my fatherly thing, “...so the fish have a pleasant home. Now Sara,” I continued, trying to change the subject, “...you must remember never to stick your hands in the ...”

“Can I plunge my hands?” she asked.

I decided to just ignore her question, knowing I was violating a rule here. I continued not changing the rhythm or sound of my voice, “...never stick your hands in the tank and never play with the electric cords.”

”Why?”



That word again! That word I used to use so often and now detest. I thought to say “Because” and leave it like that. But that was my child, that is to say one of my most favorite persons in the whole wide universe (she would ask me how I knew that about the whole wide universe) and two, she could tell if I was telling the truth. I just ignored the second fact. I am not a pathological liar, nor am I a pathetic liar. (Sara, who never lets conversation just drop, would surely ask what kind of liar I was...)

The question was asked and I, because I am a father (notice I did not say a good father) decided to respond. I did respond once but now it was another time.

I screwed my head on and said, “Because I do not want you to get electrocuted.”

“I get hurt?”

I was so proud she was asking a question which was both not “why?” and was intelligent, that I answered with sincerity and pride, using my very best 'fairly good fathers voice.'

“Yes,” I said with the most terrifying voice I could muster. “You can get hurt very badly. “

“Why?”

Well you knew that question was coming didn't you?

I explained the basics of electricity, threw in some comments concerning nuclear fission (Or is it fusion?), a few notes comparing Immanuel Kant and Franz Rosenzweig. Then I informed my daughter that I was now ready

and I said, "Recognize, then I informed my daughter that I was now ready to put water into the tank.

As a quick short witticism she held her nose. It was as if she was afraid of water but I knew that was not true. She was an early swimmer, and her favorite drink, after margarita was water.

Mistake number two: Never fill your aquarium with water

It may be difficult but parents should develop the appreciation for an empty fish tank. Just think how pleasant a very large bowl of water is. Just think how pleasant it is that the water is in the bowl and not being drained on your head. You can even drink water, but I must admit I do not like the taste.

Generally, the realization came (semantic word meaning, "real is a tion," leaving it up to philosophers to say what a "tion" is) that Sara would not agree that an inch of water was sufficient under the ten-gallon tank. We agreed to fill the tank to the brim under the condition that she not help pour the water or be thinking about helping.

"Okay, I fill the pitcher."

Mistake number three: never relent

Water nearly covered the kitchen floor. But she would faithfully hand me the half-empty container. Needless to say, this made the process take twice as long.

When the tank was full, Sara asked me what all the connections drooped over the side were and what their functions consisted of.

”What's this?”

“This is an aquarium. Fish live in it.”

Sara, a beautiful and intelligent girl asked, “What is the difference between this and a fish tank?”

When we had but a single very small fish, we did have a bowl and, since it had been emptied of fruits and vegetables, a tiny fish lived in there quite happy and sound. But with a dozen or so fishes we required something larger. In any event, this was long ago...

“Daddy,” there was a cry which not only suggested terror, but threw it out in tons of sorrow. “You put water in the ‘quar ‘um’?”

“Yes, I already have.”

She moaned in agony, “We cannot put fish in there! They will get all wet.”

I slapped my hands to my head. One landed on each side. This proved two things. First, heads are useful for smacking and, second, it hurt to hit your own head. But anyway, I had enough sense to reply, “Fish live in water.”

“Daddy, we buy fish, don't we?”

“Yes, we will buy some fish.”

Here her eyes glistened with mystic enchantment. Her voice raised in excitement, and fell with a suitable loud bang. “Today?” she glimmered inside a large gleam.

“No,” I explained as I suddenly went to the bottom of her “Like the least little bit” list.

Seeing her eyes puff in what I can only describe as disaster, I explained. Explanations are the gleam in the eye of the sun. Hurriedly I jumped into and out of an explanation: “First we have to let the fish tank filter for twenty-four hours (say that ten times real fast), and then we will get some fish.”

“Two fish, I want two fish, two fish, two fish. Two, two, I want two fish.”

“Two brown fish,” I teased, knowing her favorite color was orange, interspersed with a pattern of red stripes.

“Yeah, we put one in now and save the other to put in later.”

I smiled a both fatherly and amused smile. “Put one away?”

“Yeah, for later.”

“But where? In the refrigerator?”

She shrugged her shoulders, placed an amused smile, which overtook her lips, and said between the smile, “Yeah, in the refrigerator.”

I wanted to get clear about what she wanted. A slow shock rambled across

my face. I took a sip of my coffee, I thought about going to bed, then I thought about what I would do tomorrow, and finally I rubbed my eyes and looked lovingly at the little girl in front of me.

Words slowly rose to and through my lips. "No. No, no, Sara! Any fish we buy will have to go directly into the tank."

"Why?" she questioned.

"Because," I answered.

"WHY?" she asked with a voice demanding seriousness.

"Because, that is where fish live."

"In a tank?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm as sure as rain," I said and immediately began, as I never had up to that point, began to wonder what that meant. Was rain always right? What would happen if rain was ever wrong? Would that just cause the saying to be changed or ignored or would it cause the fall of the Roman Empire? (I sure hope Roman Catholics do not get mad at me for saying that)

"... and is that true?" I heard her end a question.

"Yes!" I said, as if in a positive mood.

“Why?”

“Because,” I suddenly achieved a good thought, “Gasteropelecus levis.”

This answer seemed to satisfy her. But it was time again to remind her not to climb on the tank, or put her hair in the water. As I spoke, the plastic *Echinodorus panuculatus* floated to the top of the tank. Naturally, Sara would not leave the room in order that I might submerge the plant and bury the delicate base under some gravel. My wet, dripping hand was barely extracted and in search of a towel when Sara was climbing the console and reaching for a loosened wedge of water milfoil. I warned her never to reach inside the tank, and threatened to empty the water if anything was going on, and put away the filters, air pump, scuba divers, sea shells, thermostat and plastic plant life, if she ever did so, or attempted to do so again. She swathed away, apparently remunerating the rule.

Mistake number four: never turn your back on your children

That evening Sara claimed she was too tired to be concerned about, and certainly with, her dolls. Her last question before going up the stairs summed up all the innocence, tenderness, and essence of childhood.

“Tomorrow we buy the fish?”

Her face looked so innocent and polite I knew I would not refuse, and before I could form words to make a reply, my mouth put out words that sounded like, “Yes, Sara, tomorrow we will go to the store to buy fish.”

“At the fish store?”

My mouth formed the words which spelled out, “No, the bakery,” but when my lips pushed out words the words sounded very much like, “Yes.”

Before I could put an end to the conversation, she pointed words at me and I heard, “We buy two fish?”

“Yes, we will buy two fish.”

“Two brown fish?”

“Yes, Sara, if you want brown fish we will buy two brown fish.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, Sara, I already said tomorrow, and have I ever lied to you?”

I saw her lips thinking and I was afraid she would call me a liar. But she didn't.

Her head went somnolently into my wife's shoulder. She was asleep. As she carried her up the steps, because her bed was at the top of the stairs, her ears were spread apart a little bit. As I watched, some visitors came floating from her ears. There was *Hyphessobryco flammeas*, and *Mollinnesia latipinna* paddling through her dreams.

I went to check to see the water temperature was within the safe zone for fish life. There I found florid yet buoyant Lucy— oh I should tell you that Lucy was Sara's favorite doll before you think it was another child and quit

reading. So there I have saved you to continue on to the end. As I was saying, Lucy was there, fulfilling the flotsam drifts of my daughter's imagination.

She, Lucy the doll, took a week to dry.

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