

## The Test

Like angels, heroes walk among us. And for the most part, both do so without our knowing. Now, as a general rule, angels like to do their work behind the scenes, preferring to keep their acts of goodness and mercy quiet. Same for heroes. But on occasion, heroes reveal themselves to us that we may bask in the glory of their presence and benefit from their deeds. When and why they choose to make an appearance is something of a mystery.

Being in the right place at the right time seems a major part in the making of a hero. But that is too simple.

To say anyone would act heroic under even the most ideal circumstances is probably naive. There must be more to it than that, some inner quality that is ignited by circumstance to bloom into the bright shining light of heroism. But I could be wrong. There might not be anything more than chance involved, and, of course, someone around to witness the hero in the making, and spread the legend. The right time and place, at least for me, was a cool afternoon near the boardwalk in affluent Vero Beach.

“I’m hungry,” she said, and I knew she meant it. We were out on one of our Sunday drives, the journeys taken to stare at other peoples’ success, break the 4<sup>th</sup>

commandment, and otherwise dream of what might have been. Or should have been, if only this had happened, or that had not, or if the spinning wheel of fortune had moved one last notch. I had a million excuses for why people weren't driving by the front of my house with envy.

"Okay," I said. I knew how she was when she got hungry. Low blood sugar was her excuse for the temper she could not control. That, and the stereotype of the high-strung redhead. I wasn't the only one good at making excuses. I started looking for a suitable restaurant.

"Tractor Bob."

That was the input of my two year old son. He was strapped into the car seat behind us, content with the world, and the toy he clasped in his tiny hand. Happy just to be with his mom and dad, the heroes he worshiped, ignorant of their shortcomings and still relatively unscarred by their selfish actions and ultimate inattention.

Some years ago in the immediate aftermath of an airline tragedy, a host of people stood idly by, watching flailing passengers sink slowly into the Potomac, when suddenly, Robert Plant, a mere truck driver, said enough was enough and jumped down into the icy water and up to heroic stature. And when Reagan was shot, not all the steely-eyed Secret Service Agents surrounding him leapt into harm's way, as we had been lead to believe they would. Oh sure, many surged at the gunman, but only one hero willingly jumped into the path of the bullet to protect his President. And more recently, hundreds of firemen and police officers rushed into two doomed burning towers in a heroic attempt to save lives. An attempt, which sadly, only ended in their sainthood.

So, heroism does have a 'right place and time' prerequisite; but more as well. A hero has some indefinable something in him, allowing him to act as he does. An elusive component of character I have yet to find, and truly had no need to even seek.

Until just yesterday.

But the existence of a heroic character component became clear on that cool sunny Florida afternoon drive. Yesterday I learned more about myself than I had in the previous forty six years of my existence. I finally lived up to my own potential, and became the man everyone already perceived me to be. Up until yesterday I had no idea why I was put on this earth, and been allowed to stay, despite countless near misses.

Yesterday, I discovered the reason for my existence.

Throughout all my life people have told me I had such 'potential', such a 'bright future', wrapped up in me it was scary, at least to me. With so much going for me, for a while I had no doubt that I would end up President, then I discovered the science of pedigree, and wasn't willing to do the hard work to overcome it. So I set my sights lower and decided my boyhood fantasy would have to do, but my inner ear betrayed me there, as who could imagine an astronaut that got motion sick. Wealth then became my fallback goal, but lady luck was not on my side, so the biggest game in town eluded me as well.

Pedigree, health, luck; always something beyond my control, preventing my ultimate success. I was always great with excuses.

"Jack is hungry, too." My wife added, like I wasn't going to buy them lunch and she had to make a federal case out of it. Sure, I was tired of buying him those kid's meals, so we could throw them away twenty minutes later, untouched. And so far as my

wife was concerned, I knew food in her belly would only do so much to change her temperament.

I kept looking for a place to eat.

I decided not to answer her, rhetorically or otherwise. We didn't need to fight now. Over yet another trivial matter that masked the true shakiness of our marriage.

"Why didn't you turn down that last street, the one leading to the causeway? I think I saw some other restaurants there."

Of course, we were well past the aforementioned turn by then. Was she looking to start an argument? No doubt she is as unhappy in this marriage as I am.

Again, I didn't take the bait. I am trying to make things better between us.

"Tractor Bob."

I smiled and slowed, looking for a place to turn around.

Then I saw the mom, riding her nice bicycle, with her infant in one of those seats that attach precariously to the back of the bike. The little seats I used to give my brother rides on forty years ago scared the hell out of me. So these so-called child safety seat things make my blood run cold. As if the little helmet she had on her baby was going to save him from the severe head trauma just around the corner.

"What..." said my wife beside me. The tone of her voice made me look up, past the pending accident and inevitable lawsuit. To where the father was pushing an older child on her bike, trying to catch up with the yuppie mom with her baby death trap.

I say father, but that may not have been the case, probably wasn't. He was big, or seemed so, standing there beside the tiny girl on her tiny bike. There was no way she and

the man were going to be able to keep up with the hard pedaling mom. The girl was having trouble maintaining her balance. Was trying valiantly, but failing miserably.

He had long hair and tattoos on both his big arms.

Probably from prison.

No, he definitely was not the little angel's dad. He was just mom's way of getting back at the girl's father after the divorce. The divorce that left her with the beach house, the Mercedes, and little else other than the six thousand a month in alimony and child support that allowed her not to work and continue her quest to 'find herself'. She was probably still pissed off at the court about the unfairness of it all.

Dad probably lived in a one-bedroom apartment, surviving on cat food.

The girl was five, maybe six. And pretty as can be, with dark brown shiny hair. The kind of hair her mother might have had twenty years ago, and still tried to buy at the beauty shop each week for a hundred bucks a pop.

Good luck.

The little girl's hair was flying this way and that, almost sparkling in the late afternoon sun. It was like one of those television commercials, where the supermodel shakes her head from side to side, the lustrous strands never failing to land in perfect cascades. The ones where the sea breeze is pushing the stuff into such a beautiful mantra that you want to go buy some of that magic shampoo yourself, even though you are a forty six year old balding man. But this girl had the real thing.

And the boyfriend looked about twenty-eight. Yes, definitely the boyfriend. Because he couldn't have been the dad. No dad would do what he was doing.

Would he?

You see, there was no wind. Not yesterday, at the beach.

It was one of those rare magical days when even the ocean is like glass, casting a reflection of the cloudless sky, making it impossible to see where the sea ended and heaven began. No wind. Nothing to cause the tiny girl's hair to flip about like those models in the commercials. Nothing to make it cascade so vibrantly in the radiant sun.

Just the boyfriend hitting her repeatedly.

Hard.

Smashing her head with so much force it jerked back and forth, flinging her beautiful no-need-for-hundred-dollar-a-pop hair like a gale was whipping it about.

"Tractor Bob," Jack said, into the silence of the girl's screams, our windows rolled up as we slowly passed the bizarre scene. The mother had paused, watching the man abuse her daughter, with a strange frozen look on her face. Like, maybe she had punished her ex' enough. Perhaps keeping tattoo boy around wasn't such a good idea, after all.

And we slowly rolled by.

In that moment, my life became clear to me. My foot came off the gas, just a bit. The ex-con continued to slap the girl. My wife never finished her sentence. Jack kept playing with his toy. The world paused.

This morning as I write this, I am still amazed at what happened yesterday at the beach, near the boardwalk of affluent Vero Beach. Shock? Yes, because if he could hit that tiny girl in public, how did he terrorize the family in private. I am very much against society dictating how we discipline our children. Sparing the rod definitely spoils the child. But this was an abomination.

The car kept rolling.

The girl's face screwed up in pain, her mouth open in a silent scream. The attacker's stare met mine for an interminable, contempt filled second.

And my purpose on this planet became obvious. All those years of mediocre success, and impossible dreams, boiled down to this. The years of scholarly excellence, athletic achievement, and exemplary military service added up to the ability to do great things. This was my Potomac, my World Trade Center. I had squandered my potential for all my life in a morass of excuse. But sometimes you are given a chance to do something late in life to make those wasted years become trivial.

Redemption was just a few steps, just moments away.

I was at the right place at the right time. I had a chance to become a hero, at least to a little angel with bright and shining hair. Maybe to a mom that just needed a little help to climb out of the cesspool her life had become. And maybe even to a wife that couldn't stand me, no longer fooled by the exterior trappings and the hollow promise of success. But most importantly, to a son, who would not understand why his bruised and blooded father returned to the car, triumphant. A smiling hero whose legend would grow with each passing year, no matter what the outcome of the confrontation.

"Tractor Bob."

The car kept rolling.

I don't remember even looking in the rearview mirror, to see how the scene played out. Didn't matter. Time was up, the moment passed, and what was done was done. I couldn't see where the ocean met the sky. The woman knew her hundred dollar highlights could never come close to the luster of her little girl's hair, and the convict

knew and didn't care what they did to child abusers in prison, and Jack still knew he had the greatest hero in the world for a father.

And I finally knew what I had become, perhaps always was. Self-realization, that instant when you finally recognize your essence, can be a wonderful thing. Can be, but often is not. I no longer have to fear becoming a failure, not living up to the potential everyone has always seen in me.

The car kept rolling.

THE END