

Arlo

Arlo was a guy I met while working at a mobile home manufacturing plant in Cedar Rapids in 1970 or 71, but everything came a little late to the mid-west so it was still the 60s in dog years. I'd been working there for a couple of months and hadn't really noticed the guy. He was kind of mousy and worked up on the mezzanine assembling the roofs while I was running the forklift down on the floor. But one day as we were all heading out for lunch, he approached me and asked if I wanted to come over to his house for lunch. I didn't have any reason to say no, so I went.

He lived nearby in a small apartment with his young wife Sue and infant son Derek. The winter sun was shining brightly into their modest home. Sue was shy and cute in a maternal teenage sort of way and the baby was precious as most babies are. Sue was surprised to have a guest but threw in an extra can of Campbell's soup and made another sandwich while I held little Derek. After lunch the "men" retired to the living room for a smoke. Shortly after we finished the joint it was time to go back to work.

We hadn't been back to work ten minutes when there was a huge crashing sound from above. I looked up in time to see an assembled roof, which was in the process of being crane lifted towards the top of a waiting home, slide sideways on the crane hooks until it was dangling by one edge. Just about the time it reached the tipping point I saw a slender figure leap from the roof back onto the mezzanine. Arlo had just come within milliseconds of being seriously injured. The procedure was to have a "man" on the roof, strategically placed for balance. I will never know if Arlo started to abandon the roof prematurely, causing it to tip, or if he took off after the roof had already reached the tipping point. But at any rate he was emotionally shattered and left immediately, never to return.

At the end of the shift, I stopped by his place to see if he was all right, and to smoke more pot. He said he was but that he was never going back. Thus began one of the strangest friendships that I have ever had. And that's saying something.

As I spent more time with Arlo, I realized that he was significantly more immature than I was which was also saying something, and was quite willing to let his teenage wife carry the burden of both caring for the baby and making sure the

rent was paid and that food was on the table. Nixon's approach to ending welfare was to make it twenty times less user friendly. What had taken one short visit to the county welfare office for annual re-certification now took half a dozen visits of several hours each. Sue would dutifully put in the time with Derek on her knee while Arlo and I would be tramping through the woods outside of Cedar Rapids or road tripping in my VW, all while smoking copious amounts of weed.

Arlo made little or no effort to find another job even though there were plenty out there. He preferred to cultivate the unemployed hippie lifestyle. It chafed my ass that he was so fucking irresponsible in regards to his family and I would occasionally get on him for it. But even though I was still employed, I *was* leaving my young wife, albeit with no kids, at home alone while I was out, for hours at a time, getting stoned too. So, I wasn't exactly on the towering high moral ground.

Then one day, as we were riding in my bug smoking yet another bowl, Arlo made a startling announcement. "I think I'm gay". I didn't really know much about gay people. I'd been hit on by a young gay man and a fellow gay student

while I was in ninth grade and fled both attempts without freaking out or thinking too much about “gayness”. But this guy was my friend and his being gay was not going to change that. What did change my feelings towards him was that he totally abandoned his wife and son to spend all of his time hanging out in gay bars and hooking up. I even went looking for him in some well-known gay bars in CR, to give him a piece of my mind. And I did find him one day. He was half drunk and very smarmy, congratulating me on my “coming out”. I informed him that I was not there because I was gay. That I was there to remind him that gay or not he was still a father and had an obligation to support his kid and Sue. He just laughed in my face and told me how much freer he was now and how he wasn’t going back. I resisted the urge to punch him in the mouth then walked out.

I didn’t hear from Arlo for over a year. I did run into Sue and Derek occasionally. She told me that Arlo had met some guy who had paid his way out to the west coast where the gay scene was a lot more vibrant than it was in Iowa. Sue and Derek had moved back into her folk’s house and seemed to be doing OK. Thank God she had that option.

A few months went by and I happened to see Sue again. She was very excited. She told me that “Arlo has found Jesus and given up the gay lifestyle. He wants to get the family back together. He wants us to come to Washington state, where he is now, and put our marriage back together. My folks are paying for us to fly out there next week.” She was so happy that I could not think of raining on her parade but I did feel some creeping skepticism. A few weeks later I got a call from Arlo. They were all living happily, with the Lord, in a small trailer outside of Seattle. When I inquired about employment, he assured me that “the Lord wants me to focus on spending time with my family right now so Sue went down and signed up for welfare again. God is taking care of us and I will get a job in good time.” My skepticism was no longer creeping. It had broken into a full sprint.

So, I was not surprised to see a sad and dejected Sue about six months later back in Cedar Rapids. All had gone well for the first couple of months. They had joined a church and the church community provided a lot of support for these young, novice Christians. Arlo’s story about Jesus saving him from the evils of being gay played well with that crowd and they were drawn into the bosom of the congregation. Someone gave them a car and another church goer even offered Arlo a

job. So off to work he went. For about two weeks. After that, Sue reported, he quit the job and began to become disenchanted with the church. Shortly after that he demanded that Sue call her folks and tell them she needed money to buy clothes for young Derek. She complied and so did her folks. When the money arrived however, Arlo had other plans for it. He went out and bought a fat bag of reefer. A short time later, after the next check from Sue's folks, Arlo took all of the money and the car and abandoned his penniless family once again. This time, leaving them two thousand miles from Sue's folks. Of course, her folks bought a plane ticket so she and Derek could return to Cedar Rapids and move back in with them.

This was the cycle that Arlo would repeat for the next couple of decades. And for reasons that it would take dozens of therapists, years to sort out, Sue faithfully reprised her role in the cycle. Each phase of the cycle would last approximately three to six months. Hippie with, then without, family at side. Gay blade with family abandoned for "freedom". Then back to Jesus, requiring family to re-join him at wherever he happened to have landed, all at Sue's parent's expense of course. I became very disgusted with Arlo's total lack of understanding of how awful he was treating Sue and Derek.

But once in a while and always when he was with Sue, he would call and invite me over. As the years passed, I was amazed that Derek hadn't turned into a mass murderer. Not only was he a fairly nice kid but he really looked up to and craved the attention of his on again off again dad.

The last time I saw Arlo was in the mid-nineties. I was living in a cabin I had built from reclaimed lumber and had a career working with adults with cognitive disabilities. I was divorced from my second wife and had three kids. I had never missed a child support payment or a visitation with my kids. Arlo called and asked if he could come up. This time I had plenty of reasons to say no but instead said "OK".

He showed up in the late afternoon. I figured he would be interested in seeing my place as I had been dreaming of buying land and building a cabin when we first became friends. He was not. He was there to tell me that all this "living in the woods is just a distraction provided by Satan to keep you from coming to Jesus". He still had those lightening quick reflexes that had saved his ass that day up on the roof at the mobile home factory. As he saw me come up out of the chair with murder in my eyes he bolted through the door and

ran down the drive as I yelled “If I ever see your slimy ass again, I will kick it up between your shoulder blades”.

I never did see Arlo again. But my dad sent me an article a few years later reporting that Arlo had been convicted and sent to prison for having sex with an underage neighbor girl. I was never sure which part of the cycle that might fit into, but I was confident that he would be willing and able to continue running through his cycles while incarcerated.