Falling Stars

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breath upon my face, looking at me and into my eyes. My eyes could not focus though—much less process what was going on around me. I felt like I was in a bad dream and in this dream, I knew that I had died. Except it was not just a dream. As I peered back into the concerned eyes of my mother leaning over me, I realized I was the one in the body bag.

My father never had many material things. In fact, when I was a child he never had a permanent residence. Sometimes when we stayed with him he didn't even have food. However, he was rich in love for my brother and me. He would do anything for his boys; we were his pride and lifetime achievement. In return we loved him just the way he was: with his unkempt beard, ragged jeans, stained shirt, and torn shoes. He was a kid at heart and never felt a need to be responsible.

People gravitated to my father because with him it was always time for a good time. He lived life like a rock-star and the people that knew him loved him for it. The party didn't exist before he got in; it wasn't even planned. This inner eternal fun that exuded from him was a bright light in peoples' lives.

At my father's funeral it was standing room only. As I arrived, “Danny Boy” playing on a Sony CD clock radio sitting on a plastic chair, a photo of my dad about 35 on the Feather River holding a salmon, and a potpourri of people, the only seats available were for immediate family. A long procession of friends, family, and ex-girlfriends or wives took the podium. Some sobbing and some trying do like he would have, making it a party. I took the podium like the former. Then my cousin stood at the podium, differently than everyone else and the room calmed as he spoke with a story teller's enthusiasm. He recounted a night we had spent camping with my dad.

The outdoors were one of the few places my father was truly comfortable. He tried to share his love for it with us as often as he could. The night is one that I also have never forgotten and still often think about.

It began one sticky, hot summer evening when my cousin had come with my brother and me to stay with my dad over the weekend. Upon our arrival at his house the woman my dad was shacking up with threw us out because she didn't want three kids staying all night in her house. So to make the
best out of the situation my dad decided to take us camping at
the outlet on the Feather River. He said the King Salmon were
biting really well there.

Without sufficient camping gear or food, we trusted
the river to be kind to us. Between the four of us we had one
sleeping bag, a change of clothes each and our fishing gear.
We did manage to find an old blanket and some foam padding
at the river's edge. My dad and brother would share the
blanket and foam; my cousin and I would share the sleeping
bag.

Thanks to the dam projects, there was an old
abandoned road that got us to within fifty feet of the outlet.
The road had been used by workers that built the fore bay
and the after bay below Oroville Dam. The bays were used
to make hydro power by pumping water through them. My
Grandfather had come to Oroville to work on the Oroville
Dam. This was a place my dad had known since he was a boy.
At the outlet, where the after bay dumps into the Feather River,
the ground was covered with the powdery reddish brown dust
that is typical of Northern California. The outlet itself roared
with the force of ten million gallons of water, drowning out all
other sounds. A mist cast across the area making an oasis of
green in an otherwise dry and brown landscape.

We arrived at about 6:00 pm with the sun solidly in
the sky but quickly plummeting towards the horizon. After
about two hours of fishing the outlet with no luck, it was time
to go and start a fire. A ridge buffered the campsite from the
overwhelming noise of the outlet. At the campground the river
had already worn out its fury and whimsically swirled around
making an ideal location to catch channel cats with live bait;
we used crawfish. By now the sun was out of sight but still
making its presence known over the horizon. We switched our
fishing gear over for catfish then took a quick dip in the river
before it got too cold out. Fresh from the river we made our
beds, which consisted of a cleared area covered with tufts of
grass.

Soon my father had finished his bottle of blackberry
brandy and he and my brother were asleep. My cousin and
I lay next to each other, cold because we were still wet, the
fire had gone out, and the night breeze was blowing solidly.
The moonlight was casting bold shadows on the sand. The
silhouette of the swaying grass played on the ground. Frogs
chirped in the distance as snakes slithered hunting their night's
meal. The sounds of the wildlife intertwined with the distant
sound of the outlet making a haunting bounty of sound and
silence. Cool night air equalized the sounds so the loudest
and quietest were easily heard together. Lying there I could
not help but feel a connection with my surroundings. All the
things I couldn't see were easily felt.

Then, like the start of a fireworks show, the first
shooting star shot across the sky. It was bright orange, yellow,
and red. There was a tail that crossed the entire sky. Simply
put, even at that young age it took my breath away. By itself
it was amazing, but before the glow had completely faded an­
other equally impressive shooting star screamed across the sky,
then another, and another, and so on.

They came down so constantly my cousin and I
started counting them. Late into the night we had counted
one hundred and seventy two. This was an absolute once in a
lifetime night. When it was all over we couldn't help feeling we
had witnessed one of the heavens' most spectacular displays
ever offered.

As my cousin spoke I had found myself emersed in
that night and my dad was alive again. A smile had crept across
my face for the first time in awhile.

After the service was over, all the condolences given
and everyone was gone, the funeral director gave me the paper
work the cemetery would need to make sure my dad got his
vetran's plaque.

As I drove down the serpentine road of the cemetery,
I thought back to my cousin's story and that night which was
so indicative of my father. Something that looked terrible
would turn out to be something great. My dad lived his life
like one of those shooting stars, letting gravity determine his
destiny, creating a beautiful spectacle in its blazing destruction.