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Falling Stars

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Falling Stars

Hix: Falling Stars

Chris Hix

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 another 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 emerged 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 paperwork the cemetery would need to make sure my dad got his veteran'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.