

SHADOW OF SONOMA MOUNTAIN

Howling Under the Solstice Moon by Ana Manwaring

I'm truly blessed to have a job I love, teaching creative writing and autobiographical writing classes through a local community college. My students, mostly retired folks with time—finally—to pursue their passions, never fail to awe and inspire me. Recently Cliff Zyskowski read the following story to our Autobiographical Writing class and, when he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. With Father's Day looming, I couldn't resist convincing him to share his tender tribute to his daughter. After all, Melinda was born in the shadow of Sonoma Mountain.

First Born to Run—a Father's ode to the joys of parenting

I'm almost certain it happened the night we camped at Frog Lake—at a small campsite in the Austin Creek State Park along the upper ridge of the redwood forest in Guerneville, California. Yes, that's most certainly when it happened. Your mother loved to camp. She became so alive and full of wonder and joy at the prospect of sleeping outside—on the hard ground—one old cotton Mexican blanket subbing for a real sleeping bag, mosquitoes gently buzzing our ears, patiently hovering above the site of their next meal, all in a tent with no rain fly. Why was no one else camping that weekend?

Leanna packed some alfalfa sprouts, pita bread, tempeh, and tahini, all placed in recyclable wax bags. We were still in the honeymoon phase of our relationship. I was an inexperienced former altar boy and repressed non-practicing Catholic; Leanna, a Sonoma County hairy-legged, Birkenstock wearing earth momma who had captivated my heart like a trackless high speed rail on a non-stop journey to Nirvana. I really didn't know the difference between love and lust. Being with your mom

during those early years, made no difference.

Yes, you were a child conceived in a whirlwind of passion, love and connection. The night was cold and wet, the wind blowing its breath upon us with drops of rain. We didn't notice till morning that our tent sat in a puddle of pooling rainwater, blanket soaked, our bodies huddled closely as we shivered to the glowing light of a new dawn. Your conception was destined to be the pairing of opposites, conceived in the moment, brought into the world with a purpose, yet perhaps lacking a plan, stability, maturity, insight, or foresight—but looking back I realize you are the culmination of all the ecstasy and elation we created that special night.

Text to you: "You are a product of all that love."

Your reply: "Your last text means a lot to me."

Melinda is the name I chose for you. You were named after a childhood friend. My neighborhood pal was a tomboy, climbed trees, played kick ball—you know, all the same things I tried with you. I'm so glad your love of baseball continues. I know you don't have a great love of backpacking or camping, but just us carrying on the tradition of rooting for the home team gives me pride as a father. At least I did a few things right.

I remember the morning of January 11th, 1981 as no other day before or since. Foggy, drizzly, damp, we holed up in our home birthing room created as a sanctuary to welcome you into the world. Candles lit, crystals freshly sanctified with cleansing Goat Rock ocean water, certified midwife extraordinaire and Cotati legend Joan Lashbrook, present. 300 births and counting: you and your mom's care under her gentle guidance.

The moment I caught you bulging out from the birth canal, slipping and sliding into

my arms, your airways cleared of amniotic fluid, and you gazing up at me, head full of hair, waiting for the afterbirth, waiting to suckle—you, the miracle of creation, profoundly shook the core of my being.

My text: "I worry some times if a couple of weeks go by and we haven't connected."

Your reply: "I'm glad you told me, crazy me, I sometimes wonder if you guys forget about me. . . perception vs. reality, learning a lot about the difference."

I remember when we took a whitewater rafting trip outside of Happy Camp just south of the Oregon border. The minimum age for the rafting trip was supposed to be twelve, but I talked our way onto the tour by saying that you played three sports and were very "athletically mature." I know, bad role model, me. On the long drive to Happy Camp, I made a cozy bed for you in the back of my Ford Escort hatchback. I had given you the brochure describing the trip's itinerary. I was impressed by the proud owner, who stated our trip would be special because we would be able to raft in tribal waters.

"Dad, do you think these Indians are still mad at us for taking their land?" You asked after waking up from an afternoon nap during the drive. I almost turned around right then as thoughts of Wounded Knee and pale face retribution made me think twice about my choice of our vacation destination.

The three-day tour on the Lower Klamath River was run by a Native American, a one man tour company. We slept in tipis, ate smoked salmon, sang tribal lullabies, and paddled our raft along sacred native reservation land. We observed otter, black bear, bald eagles, class-three rapids, and almost got swamped during the Dragon's Tooth Rapid. Remember at the end of the magically wonderful

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tour: proud tribal stories, homemade blackberry pie, Chief said he wanted to help us return to society by taking us to the dumps? At sunset on the last night of the rafting trip, he took us to a dumpsite just outside of Happy Camp. Several black bears had gathered to pick through the discarded waste as an old Indian tried to chase them away with a broken broomstick.

"Welcome back to your world" stated Chief as he sent us on our way, provoking an angst in me that simmers to this very day.

I remember later when I believed my search for a mate and a stepmom was finally over. We moved in together, she had a daughter the same age as you. You know I spent serious time with my practiced eye, searching for a family for us both. Being a single parent was not my ideal "it takes a village to raise a child" situation.

"Dad, I'm so happy for you. Now you'll have somebody when I grow up and move out."

This statement coming from you shocked me with relevance and perceptivity. Yes, you were born to be a marriage and family counselor. See how

my parenting has given you fuel to build a rewarding career? Of course, we know that relationship didn't work out just as the idea of me buying you those Easter basket's priced half off on the day after Easter because I thought it was more important to be able to get you a bigger basket, but this merely left the impression I was only half invested in loving you.

My text: "Mindikins, I'm so proud to be your father. . . I love you."

Your reply: "Dad, you know it's safe to tell me anything at any time."

Are you reaching for the Kleenex yet? Dry your eyes, blow your nose, and text your kids—especially you dads. This year, instead of the usual Father's Day celebration, do something new. Howl at the moon. Our guest columnist, Cliff Zyskowski, is the father of three, a state licensed Psychiatric Technician, Professor Emeritus, Sonoma Bear Flag advocator, life-long Cubs fan, a keyboardist and writer, and an occasional late-night moon howler. If you miss him under the Solstice moon, meet Cliff at 4zpeople@comcast.net. And have a Happy Father's Day!

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