

Brooks

Hiking Sedona, the Grand Canyon, and the San Pedro River, including a visit with my cousin in Tucson, our recent vacation in Arizona was a success. The last time I visited—incredibly, 30 years ago this month—was a much different experience. Hoping to explore countless wild areas of the southwest, I became ill in New Mexico, and finally turned my truck around just west of Casa Grande, Arizona.

I did see some beautiful sites, but it was an earlier encounter in Arkansas that became the most significant experience of that trip. I wish I had paid more attention, spent more time within that encounter, but I considered it a mere footnote on a journey to explore other things. That was a mistake. The gifts life offers often come wrapped in plain paper, if at all, and may vanish before you realize their value or wisdom.

Late in the day on April 5th, 1989, I picked up a hitchhiker along Route 40 west of Little Rock. Fairly tall and humping a backpack, he wore round wire-rimmed glasses and kept his greying hair tied back in a short ponytail. He said his name was Brooks and that he

was a Vietnam vet. Aiming for Boulder, Colorado, he needed to obtain college records there—for future classes, I assume—because he wished to become a writer. We got to talking, and he gave vivid descriptions of the places where he grew up, and the many places he worked. He showed me photos of his nieces and nephews, and said his father was a chemical engineer, his mother a pianist. He was very dramatic and enthusiastic in his stories, but never mentioned his tour in Vietnam. As it was getting late, we agreed to camp together for the night in the national forest north of the highway. But first he wanted to buy booze. Now off the interstate, the first town we hit was “dry,” this being the Bible Belt, so we ended up in Altus, where we purchased the local wine.

Driving north into the Ozarks, the back roads were lined with log cabins, house trailers, and homes made of brick, stone, or scrap wood and tin, some on the verge of collapsing. We passed vineyards, sandstone cliffs and waterfalls, a sawmill, and an old man surveying a yard totally blanketed by junk. Our dirt road dead-ended at a river and the campground. I don't recall anything about dinner, but we did drink around the fire, especially Brooks. He began to transform, acting out stories—using perfect accents—of his experiences in Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and Italy. He told me he was evicted from a Glasgow steel mill while working as an illegal immigrant, and how he once got tickets to hear the Pope speak in Rome. At one point, while walking with him through the

campground, he yelled a few times out of the blue. The drinking and stories continued, but I finally had to turn in. I slept in my truck, while he slept on the ground against a tree, wearing the bright blue ski jacket he pulled from his pack. He continued talking for a spell, and later I heard him again, quietly speaking to himself in the middle of the night.

I never got his last name, or if I did, don't recall it. Nor which branch he served in, or what his duty in Vietnam was like, or why he wanted to be a writer. I could have asked more questions, I could have traveled with him to Boulder and had a real adventure—but I let his behavior unnerve me. The next morning I dropped him off at the highway, saying I preferred to travel alone. He simply nodded.

Brooks was severely disturbed, and though I couldn't know the nature and origin of his illness, I realize now it must have caused him confusion, fear, and pain. At the time I don't recall feeling much empathy for him, even noting in my journal that I wouldn't stop again for another hitchhiker. Was I that insensitive, selfish, or afraid? Why did I stop for him? I am now a writer, echoing the dream he shared those many years ago, and like him, like many others, I struggle with my own burdens. I didn't see it at the time, but Brooks became a model for my future characters. He will always be there, in the background, the prototype of our flawed

humanity, ready to share a ride, a drink, or a story—anything to ease the pain and loneliness on this journey called life.

In my current work, a novel as yet untitled, I explore PTSD, the wounds that cause it, and the attempts of my characters to hide their scars, numb and divert their pain, and if lucky, become healed. In this story, a disgraced school teacher searches for her father in Binghamton, New York, only to be swept into the troubled life of a Vietnam vet. It takes place in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, and one of the most tumultuous times in American history. Its road difficult, its destination uncertain—this novel has been challenging, but when published I plan to dedicate it to Brooks. Wherever he is, I hope he has found peace.

“Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,”
The shade replied,
“If you seek for Eldorado!”

from Eldorado, by Edgar Allen Poe