

The Fiction Of Marlon

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By Marlon Pearson

Acknowledgements

I remember years ago watching a late night talk show. I don't remember the host. I don't remember any of the guests except for Joe Walsh. He was the musical guest for the night. Before he started into his first song he made a dedication that has stuck with me all these years. He said "I'd like to dedicate this song to all the people who have never had a song dedicated to them." I think that is the coolest dedication ever because it had the chance to make so many people feel good. All the people, including me, who never had a song dedicated to them got that song that night. Maybe I'm taking my own experience and projecting it out to the rest of the audience, but Joe's dedication really was a 'feel good' dedication. At least it made me feel good, and I hope it made others feel good, too.

I believe Joe went on to sing "Life's Been Good". I don't have a Maserati that does 185, but my life has been good so far. Along the way there have been plenty of people who have encouraged and supported me. P.A., you are a constant source of encouragement, support and inspiration. Your shine always warms my life. Manual, Bob, and ZZ; thanks for being my captive audience during our drives to Lake Tahoe and those pizza and movie nights. You guys always listened to my story ideas and gave me your honest feedback and opinions. That's what friends are supposed to do. I thank all of you.

While I don't want to duplicate Joe's exact dedication, I do want to try to share that same spirit with all of you. This book is a collection of my short stories. They are fictional slice-of-life tales I hope you will find entertaining and interesting. Each story stands on its own, with a unique narrator each time. I hope they give you a life-is-good feeling. Please enjoy them.

More of my work can be found at <http://www.tfom.net>

Regards,

-Marlon Pearson

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Biscuits

Some people look at my dog and they are appalled by his fatness. I admit he is a happy fat dog, but he does get walked. He gets some agility training, too. But he never ever gets ‘dog food’. As long as I have lived on my own, I’ve had my dog, but never have I allowed dog food in my house. Human food is all we eat. It’s a health issue.

I don’t go to the pet store. I don’t even go down the pet food isle at the grocery store. There’s a pet food smell that permeates all of it, and I never want to experience that smell again.

Back when I was young, too young to look beyond my own adoration for my parents, they took advantage of me in a sick, sick fashion. They look back at it and laugh. They call it harmless fun, but I ask you to be the judge.

Back then, a fun Saturday morning for us was a trip to the local farm and feed store. My dad worked there and it was such a great adventure to walk in, holding his hand and mom’s hand, too. The workers always gave us a warm welcome, waving to dad, smiling at mom, and commenting on

how much I'd grown since the last Saturday visit. It was the excitement of being a young family on an adventure together.

The feed and farm store was huge, with a two-story tall ceiling. It had rows and rows of barn supplies and animal feed. There was a smell of hay and earth throughout the place. Up in the rafters, small groups of Chickadees cheerfully raced from beam to beam. It was the place I learned to count up to five. Dad would start me with row one and go up to row five, not just counting, but also explaining the stock of each row. Row one held nails and screws; row two contained hinges and brackets. Dad said rows three and four were for the cowboys. Three had all sizes of ropes, along with bridles and leather gloves. Row four had saddle goods and accessories. Five had canine treats and toys.

Maybe it was my fault. Mom says I was pretending to be a dog. Don't all kids do that? She says we were walking down row five and when I noticed all the puppies and pooches on the boxes and bags, I got down on my hands and knees. I started barking and panting.

"Oh...what a cute puppy" she said.

I barked.

"I bet you're a good little puppy" she replied.

As she grabbed a chew toy off the shelf, she asked "How about a toy, puppy?" I shook my head 'no' and barked. She grabbed another one, "How about this one?" I barked 'no' again. She paused and looked around.

"Hmmm...how about a treat?"

Who says no to a treat? So while I was enthusiastically barking and spinning around in anticipation of my treat, she grabbed and opened a box of Kennel Corner's Better Biscuits. I stopped spinning when I saw she held a treat in her hand. Still playing the dog, I barked and begged. She gave me my first, but not last, dog biscuit. It was dry and crunchy and not at all sweet. Looking back, it really wasn't much of a treat. Mom patted me on the head, and as dad came around the corner and down the aisle, mom told me to stand up, then she closed up the box and put it back on the shelf.

For the next two years, we made many of our Saturdays special by going to dad's workplace. Even though Saturday was dad's day off, he sometimes would help customers, folks that he knew. If he went off with the customer, mom and I would usually find our way to row five. When I was a good puppy, I'd get a treat. It wasn't always Kennel Corner biscuits. Sometimes it was Alpo Tasty Treats or Furminator Dog Bites. Once it was Mr. Eds Natural Biscuits. I actually gagged on one of those. Good thing, too, because I later found out they contained horse parts.

I cried on the Saturday morning I found out my dad had changed jobs and we would not be going on our adventures anymore. Mom must have suspected my devastation because after she dried my tears, from her apron pocket she pulled one last treat. I wanted to wolf it down in anger, but I knew it really was my last treat so I had better savor it, just nibble away at it. Plus, I knew very well that those biscuits were dirt-clod hard and too dry to take in big bites.

I had completely forgotten all of this until I moved out on my own. At 23, I had just started renting one side of a duplex. One evening after work, I was out front watering the lawn. A stray dog, a very scruffy looking Spaniel and something mix, came trotting down the block. I watched him as he went past tree after tree without stopping. When he got to my driveway, he sat down right in front

of me. He looked up at me and tilted his head as if I'd just said "hippopotamus". I asked him if he was hungry. He sure looked it. He barked and spun around in a circle. Without really thinking, I said "Oh what a cute puppy. I bet you want a treat!"

That broke it for me. Memories of the feed and farm supply store raced into my mind. My mouth went dog-biscuit dry and I may have let out a little yelp. In an instant, I knew I wasn't ever going to give him or any other dog of mine a "treat". I marched into the kitchen and from the refrigerator I grabbed an unopened package of Kraft American Cheese Singles, a 16 pack. On my way back out the front, I went through the garage and picked up my new lawn chair. At the driveway, I snapped it open and plopped down in it. With a glutinous resolve, I tore open the cheese pack. My new dog, "Scotty", and I easily made our way through that pack of 16, and we've lived happily off human food ever since. It's a health issue. A mental health issue.

Saving The Earth

There's a place just east of Bakersfield, California called Weedpatch. A man-made irrigation canal runs through the eastern part of Weedpatch. On the south side of the canal there is a pheasant farm. It sits amongst small, dusty houses and unpaved roads.

In the spring time, around Easter, kids will walk along the canal's south bank. They'll bomb the canal's tadpoles with dirt clods, but they'll leave the regal birds alone. They'll swat at dragonflies and dance around bees, but the corralled fowl will remain unharassed and mostly ignored. When an Airforce jet flies low overhead and blocks out all other sound, the kids stop and the adolescent amphibians get a chance to regroup at the water's edge as the ripples dissipate. The pheasants don't notice a thing.

Downstream is a grate across the canal and things get caught in it. Not strange things, but strange in the water. Why is there a cowboy shirt, with three pearl snaps on the sleeve, in the water? A thermos cap jitters between two teeth of the grate, but can't make it past either one. Rumors of a large catfish, idle and indifferent, waiting at the base of the grate, always are discussed amongst the children because their dads talk about it, too.

Across the water, on the remote, untouched northern side, corn stocks, short and green, are two to four inches out of the rowed ground and no human is ever seen over there.

"It's the moon over there", one kid says. "And this is the earth. Let's bomb It", someone shouts as he reaches for a dirt clod. "Let's nuke it", another shouts. Soon, their side of the canal is barren of loose rock and dirt, all launched to save the earth.

Saving the earth is what was done back then, back when kids played.

A February Sunday in Milpitas

It's that California Sunday when the cherry blossoms suddenly appear, brilliantly white, obnoxious and jubilant. Their overnight usurpation of the starkly winter-aged and weather worn tree branches is complete. In this morning's bright, breezy sunlight they celebrate their victory like Mardi Gras party goers crowding the streets on Fat Tuesday. The wind gives their celebration a swaying, undulating motion while the attending honey bees and hummingbirds provide a subdued soundtrack, just audible as my dog and I walk past their vibrant merriment.

The two trees in my neighbor's front yard are in full bloom, as is the solo tree we pass a few minutes later while we continue on our normal Sunday trek.

When we turn from our residential street to the busier boulevard, I see the same Big Whitey's shopping cart I saw last Sunday. Its right front wheel is still pinned under the lower support brace of the 46 bus stop bench. I wonder if the Whitey's coupon flyer from last week has survived these last 7 days. Something flutters in the cart's basket but I'm not yet close enough to see what it actually is.

Before Jace and I can get to the bus stop, a dull black compact pickup truck, pulling a long, flatbed trailer, rattles to a stop just past the bus stop bench. Seeing the pickup halt in the bus zone, I immediately stop and think "That's illegal. You can't park at a bus stop". Then I notice the rattling noise was from a dozen or so shopping carts already harvested and stationed on the flatbed trailer. The truck driver has set the hazards lights to flashing.

Two slight, tattooed youths rise up from their riding stations in the back of the truck and make the jump directly onto the flatbed dory. They surround a mechanical contraption situated at the front of the trailer. This thing has a stout post coming up from the trailer bed to about waist height. On top of the post is some type of wheel or spool with a coil of wire rope wrapped around it. Off the wheel there is a 24 inch arm sticking out towards the back of the trailer. A handle is connected to the wheel, too.

While the first youth addresses the mechanism, the second goes to the back of the trailer and kicks a lever that drops the trailer's tailgate to make a ramp. The second one checks the security of the wrangled carts as he walks back to the front of the trailer to wait on his companion, who is still bent over the mechanism. I didn't see it, but the first youth must have released some lock on the wheel because he straightens up and steps back. The second youth is now pulling the wire rope out from the wheel, first he feeds it through the ringlets on the mechanism's arm and then he walks with it to the back of the trailer. The mechanism's handle spins as the rope and the second youth make their way to the back of the trailer. He stops at the edge of the trailer. He doesn't get out of it.

The shopping cart is just a few feet away, but instead of walking to it and hooking on the rope, the youth stays onboard. He pulls more rope and coils it at his feet. Now he has the end of the rope in his right hand. When he raises his arm, I see there is a stiff lead on the rope end. The lead is just about 2 feet long. It looks like a mini javelin, with a small arrowhead tip.

He pulls his arm back, pauses for aim, then shoots the javelin right through the plastic lattice of the front of the Big Whitey cart. It's an easy target and he has a direct hit on the first try. He grabs the wire rope and starts to pull it in. At the same time, the first youth has started to work the mechanism's handle. Once the slack is gone from the rope, youth-two lets go and moves out of the way.

Whitey's cart doesn't put up much fight as youth-one works the handle to reel it in. He pulls it free of the bench brace. Once the cart is free of the bench, youth-one stops cranking and the other youth grabs the wire cable that is now stretched tight between the mechanism and the cart. He walks along the trailer's back edge towards the street side of the trailer, taking the cable with him. His pulling of the wire rope causes the cart to angle off the sidewalk and towards the street. He continues to pull the cable until the cart has dropped off the curb and is in the street. Youth-two let's go of the rope and signals to Youth-One. With the cart in the street, One starts reeling it in towards the trailer. This all seems well practiced.

One quickly has the cart at the edge of the ramp, but then the cart stops. Surely it is supposed to just go up the ramp and onto the trailer, where it will be subdued by these youths. Something else has happened, the cart is not complying.

After a couple failed attempts to crank forward, One cranks the handle backwards to loosen the rope. He yells

"Ishmael, what's wrong back there?"

"Come take a look, Kwee." is the reply from Two. Jace and I take that as an invitation to move a bit closer, too.

One sees the same thing I do. When the tailgate was dropped to make a ramp, it didn't lay flat on the road. Because the back of the trailer was pointed slightly in towards the sidewalk, instead of being parallel to it, part of the lip of the tailgate landed on the curb. This left part of the tailgate up off the road. From where Jace and I stand, a few steps behind the trailer, we can see the right triangle that was created by the mishap. The roadway is the base of the triangle, the curb is the short perpendicular piece and the ramp is the hypotenuse, running from the top of the curb to the road's asphalt some 5 feet out from the curb.

Like most grocery shopping carts, Whitey's carts have a lower frame, a lower lip, where shoppers can place heavy or bulky items. When One pulled the cart towards the tailgate, the gate was just high enough off the road for the cart's lower lip to slide under the tailgate. It looks as if Whitey's shopping cart is attacking the trailer. It appears that Whitey is taking a big bite out of the trailer's tailgate.

One inspects the situation for another couple seconds, then he speaks to Two and points to a spot in the back of the truck. Two nods and hustles to that spot, jumping back across the divide to the truck bed. He bends down and comes up with a long, hooked pole. A fisherman's gaff is in his hand. He looks at One, who quickly nods. Two hustles to rejoin One. Together they use the gaff to push Big Whitey's cart back and free of the ramp, again being careful not to fall out of the trailer.

One heads back to the mechanism while Two continues to work the gaff. Next, Two gaffs Big Whitey's lower lip and begins to lift the beast up onto the ramp. Two's feet are planted far apart. In his right hand he has the end of the gaff, with his knuckles tucked into his hip. His left elbow is stuck into his gut and his left hand grips the gaff about three feet from his right hand hold. He starts to lean back and lift. I can see the gaff bending under the massive weight of Big Whitey. The front wheels reluctantly come up off the sea of asphalt.

Two continues to lift it, but he also pulls the gaff in towards himself, bringing the cart closer while raising the front. The cart is tilted at an angle that is akin to when an ocean dwelling mammal breaches the liquid surface.

“Thar she blows!” I shout jovially and then glance at Two, Ishmael, for a reaction.

He slowly shakes his head side to side. It’s an “Oh, brother” shake, but he says nothing and keeps on task.

The wheels are well above the ramp when Two half turns to One and yells “Alright”. One gets cranking on the mechanism. As the carcass is brought on board, Two removes the gaff from lower lip and then skillfully sinks it into the back of the beast, where he uses it to lift the back wheels up over the void and onto the ramp. One and Two have complete control over Big Whitey and skillfully maneuver it the rest of the way up the ramp and then in line with what they’ve already harvested. Two sets the gaff down so he can unhook the rope.

As One and Two begin to tie down Big Whitey’s cart, Jace and I decide it’s time to continue our morning trek. We slowly walk by the bus bench and are alongside the trailer as they finish securing the wheeled thing. We watch as Two raises the tailgate and engages the lever to hold the gate in position. At the same time, One goes and reels in the last bit of rope and then bends over the mechanism, presumably to engage the same hidden clasp he initially used to free the rope. Two picks up the gaff and joins One at the front of the trailer. One, then Two, deftly jump back into the pickup bed. Two quickly returns the gaff to someplace in the truck bed. By the time they are in their seats, we are nearly at the cab of the truck. The captain has started up the truck and when One taps on the roof, the anchor is lifted and they set sail.

As they lurch away from the bus stop, out of the driver’s window emerges a pale hand with gnarled, boney fingers, followed by an arm inside the sleeve of a dark blue pea coat. As the hand and arm are extending out from the window, the palm is up, as if to check for rain. When the arm is about two thirds out of the window, it stops extending. The palm rotates until it faces down. The arm bends at the elbow until the palm is against the outside of the truck door. The hand moves in a slow, caressing circle over a discolored area of the truck door. The palm does a second and a third circle over the area. There’s a formality about these movements that is reinforced when at the end of the third circle the arm is straighten back out, the palm is rotated back to facing upward and then arm and hand are retracted back into the truck.

Naturally, my eyes are drawn to this love zone on the truck door. Before the truck can get up to full speed, I am just able to see the object of the captain’s affection. It’s a bit faded, but I can tell it is a round decal about 14 inches in diameter. In the center is an image of a lad harpooning a shopping cart. There is some block lettering around the perimeter of the decal. I have to hurry to read it. I quickly go around the lettering once to find the spacing and word breaks. The truck is pulling away but I have enough time to make a second pass. I read it out loud

“A. Hab’s Cart Retrieval and Rendering Service”.

I look to Jace, who’s busily inspecting the bus stop sign post, and I say “A. Hab? Captain A. Hab ?”. Jace has no answer for me.

He makes the post his and we move on. It’s just another two blocks east before the boulevard reaches the foothills. There’s a four way stop, with the north-south road crossing the boulevard. At the base of the foothill intersection we take a right and head south. This is my favorite part of the walk because there’s very little car traffic and with the foothills on our left it feels more remote and rural than it really is. There are a few family farms and some abandoned fruit and nut orchards spread across the apron of these rolling hills. Sometimes I see wild turkeys or deer in the orchards. Twice I’ve seen coyotes higher up the hills.

Jace and I walk quietly for a couple miles, eventually turning back into the residential area. We

return home just in time for lunch. Lunch is simple and easy. A tuna sandwich, chips, baby carrots and a High Life do the trick for me. Jace gets a half scoop of kibbles and bits and a dish of fresh water.

Our afternoon habit on nice Sundays such as today is to retire to the garage and contemplate the beauty of life. I open up the garage car door, then clip Jace's collar onto his garage leash and I set up my lawn chair. From our station we can see up and down the block and to the east, above the rooftops of our across-the-street neighbors we can see the upper region of the same grassy foothills along with the wonderfully blue February sky that we saw on our walk. We sit easy and watch the afternoon slowly arrive.

Later on, Jace barks me awake. As I look around my world I see something that reminds me it's that special time of year when the deaf kids and the old, hard-of-hearing folks like me have an afternoon chance. Even if we can't hear the worn out melodies of "Pop goes the weasel" or "It's a small world" announcing the impending drive-by of Perez's ice cream and salty-sweet motor-powered snackatorium, we have a visual cue that gives us a chance to call him to heel.

In particular, the local ravens have come to understand the ways and means of Perez and his converted postal truck. For over 20 years, from the day after Epiphany to the day before Christmas, Perez has driven the same route, with the same converted all-metal US Postal truck, and, as far as I can tell, the same two song play list.

Here in Milpitas, February is when leftover walnuts from the nearby abandoned orchards are ready for easy picking and all the ravens have come to know it. The young ravens will try to crack the nuts simple by dropping them in the road. They'll pull a nut from the tree, fly to a nearby streetlight and from that perch they will drop the nut onto the road, hoping gravity will do the job. I've seen it take as many as ten tries, ten drops, before a nut cracks.

The older, wiser ravens have a much better system. They go pull the nuts off the unattended trees, fly high overhead to spy the Perezmobile, and then dart down in front of it and lay their nuts out on the road. On a clear, sunny day like today it is somewhat mesmerizing to watch.

Image this sequence. You're looking out over the neighborhood roof tops. From beyond the local rooftops, a raven shoots up in the air, hangs there for a few seconds, then darts down towards some nearby neighborhood. Then another raven does the same, but this one darts down a little closer to your neighborhood.

You know what's coming. You start thinking about the Mint Chocolate It's Its or the ice cream drumstick headed your way so you go get your buck fifty and watch the ravens get closer and closer. Here's Perez turning onto your street and at the same time you see raven after raven setting uncracked walnuts in front of his vehicle. Perez seems oblivious to the ravens, but he somehow hits every single nut in the road. He's like an old magician doing card tricks for the thousandth time. While he drives, he doesn't even think about the nuts. He just nails them.

The ravens lay the whole, uncracked nuts in front of Perez like believers with offerings to their savior, then after he has passed, they jump at the opened, exposed manna he has delivered unto them. Us hard of hearing know the swooping ravens signal our opportunity for an afternoon repast, a delight, a snack of our choice, from the Perezmeister.

From my lawn chair in the garage I wave him down. I get up and grab a handful of coins from the change-jar I keep on the workbench. I watch as he stops on the far side of the street, but right in front of my driveway. He's a good man. When he stops, three ravens, each with a walnut in its beak, come to rest on the Perezmobile roof. Jace guards the house while I go visit with Perez and

his ravens.

With his Real Madrid soccer shirt on, it is easy to talk with Perez, I just ask him about his team. While he fishes around in the freezer for my It's It he updates me on the latest news. Apparently a nearly blind linesman missed an offsides call that cost Real Madrid their last game. I tell him "Man, bad officiating sucks. That's the worst way to lose. Do you think it will happen to your team again?"

Up on the Perezmobile metal roof, one of the ravens must have grown impatient waiting for Perez to get going again because there's a tapping, gently rapping right above the driver side door. Perez pauses to give my question serious consideration. After a few seconds, he shakes his head no and answers my question with "No, nevermore, nevermore".

His answer causes us both to pause. Shortly, we hear it again, the tapping, somewhat louder than before. As I start to ask him about his sometimes girlfriend, Lenore, another raven lands on the roof. Perez and I hear Jace bark at us. "You know what he wants" I say. Perez asks "Chicarones?" I nod. He sets Jace's bag of fried pork bellies and my plastic wrapped mint-flavored chocolate dipped ice cream cookie sandwich on the window sill. "Two fifty" he says. "That is such a deal" I reply. He chuckles, I pay and pick up my winnings. "See ya next time, Perez" I say.

As I walk back to the garage I see the two kids from next door, Max and Min, come rushing out their front door. Max pushes the spring loaded screen door wide open so they both make it out, but right after Min is past it, it bangs closed. The kids have their sights set on Perez.

"Wait Perez ! wait!!" they yell in unison even though he hasn't moved.

They each do a quick glance-glance to check the street is clear enough to dart over to Perez's window on the street side of his vehicle. They get there safely and begin bouncing in front of his window, scanning all the colorful ice cream and popsicle choices displayed around Perez's serving window. I don't hear what they order, but Perez has them setup quickly. They grab their selections and, after another quick glance-glance, dash back home.

"Mom, can we eat them now ?" I hear Max ask as he disappears through the front screen door. Min is right behind him with "Pleaseeee?" Their screen door bangs again, followed by the sound of their front door closing, too. The kids go in and out often enough and loud enough that I know the sounds, same as I know the sounds of my own front and screen doors. Perez starts up his vehicle and heads on down the block. The roof top ravens take flight and then start swooping down in front of his truck.

Now I'm in my chair with my It's It and it's goodness. I've opened Jace's bag of deep fried pork bellies. Between my bites of It's It, I throw Jace pieces of his chicharones. Most of them he snatches right out of midair. A few bounce off his bite attempt and he has to chase them down. It's Sunday afternoon so we take our time and enjoy our snacks. After we finish, I take the wrapper and empty bag to the trash, then go inside to get a sweater and the Harlan Coben book I started last Sunday.

When I get back to my chair in the garage, I see Jace is sleeping on his rug next to my chair. The kids are back outside and racing up and down the sidewalk on their rollerblades. Their dog, a friendly, intelligent, protective mongrel, is out there with them. As Max zooms by he calls out "Hi Jace. Hi Mr. P." Jace sleeps, I wave. Min is next with "Hey Jace. Hey Mr. P". I wave to Min. Last comes their dog, Coco. She trots along behind the kids, her kids.

The kids' playzone extends just 2 houses on either side of their home so while they burn off their

sugar rush they will be zipping back and forth past my driveway about 18 times a minute. On their next zip past my driveway I notice Coco is carrying a small, grayish, disk in her mouth. Curious about it, I call her over. Of course, the kids keep skating but Coco comes to me. I pet her a couple times on the head and then take a closer look at what she's carrying. It's a rice cake. I tell her "Eat it, girl, eat it". She tilts her head to one side and gives that confused you-don't-make-sense dog look. I go to reach for the rice cake and she jumps back in a playful way.

Just then, Min comes back by so I tell her Coco has a rice cake. Min slows down, glances at Coco and answers "Yea, she likes to bury them in mom's flower bed." "Does she ever eat them?" I ask. Min replies "No, I don't think so" and takes off to catch up with her brother who just went by.

I look back at Coco and she is watching and waiting. I call her over again and manage to get the cake, intact, from her. She backs up and starts barking at me. I know she is a Frisbee dog and loves to play fetch with a tennis ball, too. I wonder how well the rice cake would fly.

I remember the one time I tried a rice cake. It was at a co-worker's Super bowl party. By the start of the fourth quarter all the good stuff was gone so we made due with rice cakes and Heineken. After one bite of the Styrofoam-quality ufo "cake" I was ready to fling it back to Mars. I suspected my actions would be frowned upon so it was a good thing I accidentally dropped it on the floor...and stepped on it.

With Coco wanting to chase something and me suddenly wanting to make up for that unflung desire, the obvious action is to give it a fling and see if she can catch it. Maybe there's a new sport in the making.

We move out into the street to get her some running room and so she does not, in her canine enthusiasm, crash into either of the kids. I figure the cake is too light to go as far as a real Frisbee, but we will see. I hold the it like a Frisbee and call to Coco "Ready, girl". Coco senses my intention and she crouches into a ready stance. I give the thing a fling and she immediately sprints after it. At about ten feet out the rice cake starts twisting and is corkscrewing for a certain crash landing. When it's a couple inches from the asphalt, Coco catches up to it and goes for the grab. She chomps down on the rice cake and it immediately cracks and crumbles into a dozen different sized pieces. Coco hits the brakes, spits out the small piece in her mouth, then goes over to sniff a couple of the bigger pieces. She trots back over to me with a "What now?" look. I shrug and head back to the garage and my book. Coco rejoins the rollerblade brigade.

With the simple background sounds of kids playing and nearby lawns getting mowed, I relax and read my paperback. Later on I hear Mrs. Woodson call out for Max and Min to come inside. I glance at my watch and see I've been reading for over an hour. It has gotten chilly and going inside sounds like a good idea to me, too. I mark my spot in the book, then wake up Jace and unhook his garage leash. He gets up and we both head for the inside door. I push the garage door button and watch as the garage door panels slowly descend and mark an end to a well spent February Sunday in Milpitas.

Okay, so this morning I'm out on my Saturday morning run. It's a beautiful day and I am enjoying the spring weather. There are always some local wild life and it's fun and encouraging to see all the little critters scurrying around. I'm cruising along the last leg of my run, when I see this crow on the trail up ahead. I notice it is hopping, as crows often do, but it is hopping in the same spot, just going up and down, not hopping around, as crows are wont do. It's like the crow is jumping an invisible rope. It takes me a good 25 seconds to get near enough to the crow to see what it's doing. It just keeps jumping straight up and down. The last few seconds, when I'm close enough to it, I can see it is actually shuffling its legs back and forth with each hop, like a boxer in training! As I get right next to it, as a joke I say "Good luck, Rocky". It raises both its wings over its head while it bounces around in a circle, then it takes flight.

Now that's not the weird part. What I didn't notice until the bird took flight, was the cross-eyed gopher that had been blocked from my view by the bird-in-training. The gopher, he's a little dude, but the first thing I notice is the attitude he is projecting through his posture. His hind quarters are pressed to the ground and his front quarters are fully extended up, so he has this aggressive stance, like a low trajectory missile, albeit a furry little missile. And to go with that, he is giving me that Catholic Teacher stare down. I'm thinking "Whoa, chill dude. I'm just cruising through" Then I see he is wearing a tiny beanie and he has a towel draped over his shoulder. I can't help myself, I yell "Hey! Mickeey. How ya doin'?"

He says "Keep it going, kid", at least that's what I heard from him. I tell ya, I ran that last leg like I was training for Apollo. It felt good. When I got back to my place, I checked the refrig and fortunately I didn't have any raw eggs so I settled for some Gatorade and a granola bar. That's the life !

Argentina

Even when his head is shaved you can't see the pea size blemish, except when he has spent a sunny day walking along the tracks. This many years later and the mark that looks like an entrance wound, just above his left ear, still has a pinkness that becomes visible only when the rest of his head has tanned. On the back of his head, just right of center and higher up than the blemish, is a three-quarter inch crescent scar with some pock marks inside the arc. There's no pinkness to these, but they are raised up and always visible. Ask him, and he'll give you a wild story about how he got the blemish, the scar and pocks all at the same time, but not from a bullet when he was down in Argentina for the CIA, as you might think. He will tell you about how he and his older brother had a big train set when they were kids. How their dad bought them a sheet of plywood to nail the train tracks, the plastic trees and little ticket booth and other scaled scenery on to. He will tell you about how he and his brother spent hours planning out the whole 4 x 8 landscape, with the track layout, including switch locations and the supply tower for the coal carrying cars. Then he will tell you about setting up the train on the track, getting the order of cars just right. The engine in front and the caboose at the end, coal cars next to the engine and freight cars after. He and his brother were in perfect agreement on everything until they went to set the caboose on the track. For some odd reason, his brother wanted to put the caboose on backwards. At least it was backwards to him.

Backwards was wrong. He and his brother got into a disagreement that escalated into an argument. As they were yelling at each other about which end of the caboose is the front end, their dad comes into the garage with a "What's all this damn yelling about?" He turns towards his dad's voice so he doesn't see the caboose come flying at his head. The toughest, hardest part of a HO scale train piece is the coupling mechanism. It is constructed to endure lots of hooking and unhooking by none-too-gentle hands. Throw one of those train pieces in a nice, tight spiral, the coupling mechanism leading the way and you've launched an aerial attack. His angry, wrong brother was also the quarterback for the flag football team so when the caboose bounced off the back of the receiver's head, it first dug in a little bit, then fell to the floor as an incomplete, but hurtful pass. As the receiver went down from the blow, the left side of his head, just above his ear, briefly rested against the tip of the soldering gun left poised on the plywood, after having just melted solder over a wire connection. He will tell you all this, but as you look in his cool eyes and listen to his precise diction, you will be inclined to think Argentina is more likely. *

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