

De Amicitia

By James N. Myers

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If a man should ascend alone into heaven and behold clearly the structure of the universe and the beauty of the stars, there would be no pleasure for him in the awe-inspiring sight, which would have filled him with delight if he had had someone to whom he could describe what he had seen. (*De Amicitia*, xxiii, 28)

So wrote Marcus Tullius Cicero, quoting from memory the thoughts of Plato's friend Archytas of Terentum.

What's so good about friendship? The answer I think is "Memories."

What friends do is to share stories and, sometimes, to create them. When I think of you, my friends, or of friends from my past, I think most of all about the stories that we have shared or the memories that we have created together.

I often sit in our living room, in silence, with a book in my lap, looking off across the Ohio River into Kentucky. Some might say that I am lazy. I would say that I'm thinking ... just thinking. If pressed, I might admit that what I am thinking about is a friend, the stories of an old friend, most often decades in the past.

The stories that I'm about to tell you are about friends. Some of the stories are truer than others, but they all happened sometimes more and sometimes less the way I will share them with you now. I've changed the names because it seemed the right thing to do.

A number of years ago and very far away I met Ron. He was probably thirty-five or forty at the time and he had a library job, but was so busy with other more fulfilling pursuits that he often seemed to neglect that job. Ron was a painter of pictures, mostly landscapes, the kind that you could hang behind a sofa, and a seller of drugs, mostly marijuana at \$10 per baggie. During one of our increasingly frequent, but still pleasant counseling sessions about getting his work done, Ron suggested that he was considering quitting his job to paint full time. I encouraged that courageous career move, and he quit – opening the possibility of the two of us becoming friends. And so we did.

Ron belonged to a tribe of non-treaty Sioux Indians, meaning, as he was proud to tell me, that, technically, he was at war with the U.S. government. I say technically because this state of hostilities didn't keep Ron from serving a stint in the U.S. Army and a second stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, around the time of the Viet-Nam War.

Ron lived in a large old house on the edge of the campus with his girlfriend and a group of eight to ten others who drifted in and out of the house on an irregular basis. His girlfriend was a 1970s kind of girl, tall and thin with long, straight black hair. She looked like a folk-singer. The others were students, divorcing faculty members who needed a place to "crash," and others of all shapes, sizes, and employment histories. There was

nothing particularly formal about the arrangement. The house was a sort of commune where cooking, shopping, cleaning, and sexual congress were shared on some basis that I never came to fully understand. Ron explained to me once that the bed-hopping required the permission of all involved, so that there would be no repercussions if somebody's girlfriend decided to sleep with someone else's boyfriend, or the other way around. It was the early 1970s. I never knew whether Ron owned the house or rented it or if he was simply the head of the commune by virtue of seniority.

After parting from his day-job, Ron had a routine for his painting in which he would set up his easel and start painting in his kitchen about 9:30 or 10:00 in the evening and paint until morning. At the time, my first wife had started on her college degree and would study until late every night. So, after the children were in bed, I would often walk to Ron's quasi-studio, watch him paint, chat, smoke and drink muddy coffee until midnight or so. I learned that his main goal in life was to see one of his paintings hang at The Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. It has a fancier name than that, but that's what he called it. This is when I heard the stories of life in the military, life on the reservation, and life mining for silver. He explained his theories on the souls of animals. He told me of preparations that he and others of his tribe were making up north for the coming nuclear holocaust. After a while he told me that my family would be welcome to join them in this refuge, because they would need a librarian to save a record of civilization past.

Ron had a personality quirk that I never could determine was an affectation or just a quirk. He would gradually stop talking and slip into the voice of a not very articulate TV-western Indian. His sentences would become more and more brief until about all that would come out was "Hmmmph." He sounded to me like Tonto speaking to the Lone Ranger.

One night, after I had surprised him by telling him that I could play pool, he abruptly laid down his brush and insisted that we walk to a local cowboy bar, the kind with sawdust and peanut shells on the floor and lots of lost souls sitting around drinking cheap beer. So we did and when we got there we ordered a pitcher of beer and waited for one of the two pool tables to clear. Then we started to play as we ordered another pitcher. It was one of those nights when Ron was morphing into an Indian chief. "It's your turn." "Hmmmph." "I think that you just scratched." "Hmmmph."

After we had played for a while, a seedy-looking cowboy who had been there drinking when we came in, got up from his table, staggered over to our pool table with a cue in his hand and pretended that he was about to take a shot. "Hmmmph," said Ron. The cowboy would sit down and then stagger back over every couple of minutes. Well, this continued for ten or fifteen minutes and Ron was becoming angry. I saw him start to shorten his grip on the pool cue, holding it more like a baseball bat. Psychology 101 – where are you when I need you? I walked over to Ron and said, "I'm not very good in a bar fight, but if you hit him, I'm in this with you." I thought that the very idea of getting his one-armed buddy into a bloody bar fight might slow Ron down. Both of us knew that if he swung at the drunken cowboy, there would be mayhem. Then I said, "Let me take care of him."

I sidled over to the cowboy, nice and friendly like (as a cowboy might say), and put my arm around his shoulder. Then I said, “You look like you’re going to be sick, cowboy. Let me walk you back to your table. You’ll be better in a little while.” Believe it or not, that cowboy did what I said and we walked back to his table and he sat down. That was the end of my first almost bar fight.

Ron and I drove up to the reservation one morning, after he put a shovel, axe, and bucket and a couple of rifles in the back of my station wagon. We needed the shovel, axe, and bucket because we were going into the National Forest. I had no idea why we might need the guns. We drove around the reservation and he told me stories of hunting deer in the off-season to feed the families of single mothers and widows. The young men would kill and clean as many deer as they could, then drop them off on the doorsteps of these women who knew what to do with them. It was off-season, but the kids had to have meat to eat. He told me about game wardens who had attempted to stem the practice and how one of them had been buried in the forest.

He took me up a logging road that day, near Brown’s Lake, to show me a place my family might like to camp that summer. When we got out of the car, he took the rifles and asked me to carry one. “If I empty mine, give me this one,” He said. “The grizzlies come down for the winter from further north.” As we walked along the road lined with thick shrubbery, we could hear something walking along next to us on the other side of the bushes. He had explained that a grizzly bear might well stalk you. So it was a bit unnerving. I still don’t know whether it was a bear or a deer. The rifles went back into the car unused.

And so went our days together, including a visit to the home of Ron’s friend up in the mountains in Washington or Idaho. He was living in a trailer with his wife and young son, guarded by the largest dog I had ever seen – a wolf-shepherd mix, Ron explained. That wolf-dog, it seemed to me, had an unnatural and unnecessary interest in keeping an eye on me the whole time we were there. There was a mineshaft in the hillside behind the trailer, and the friend took us inside. He was looking for some advice on where in the shaft he might find more silver. Ron seemed to know, and the miner took notes.

It was a wonderful friendship while it lasted, and when it ended with my move away from Spokane, Ron and I said our goodbyes, hugged, and as I was just about to head for home one last time, he stopped me and said, in his Indian chief voice: “You have been a good friend. If you ever need anyone killed, call me.” I never did have such a need, and I never saw him again.

I’ve been to the Cowboy Hall of Fame, several times since, and each time I looked in vain for one of Ron’s paintings. Perhaps, someday.

Another of my dear friends from those days in Washington State was a teacher of English on the college level, back in the times when colleges had not yet discovered that by purchasing and hanging at their entrance gate a new shingle that said “University” rather than “College,” they could become, at a stroke, more prestigious. I call him a teacher,

rather than professor, because I don't remember his academic rank and he was ABD. That is, he had never finished the dissertation that would have instantly made him more prestigious, too, by allowing him to append Ph.D. to his name. I don't remember how we came to be such good friends, but I've always been grateful that we did.

Richard loved to fish, he loved to teach about political novels, like *All the King's Men* and *Advise and Consent*, and he loved to drink beer. He was, more often than you might have thought, able to combine these loves of his. Sitting in a motorboat with a line overboard, a cold one by his side, and a novel in his hand was probably close to his vision of the beatific afterlife. He taught a class on political novels for master's degree candidates, holding the late afternoon classes in a local bar. At his invitation I would often read the assigned novel and sit in on the conversation and help to pay for the beer.

It wasn't that Richard had not tried to finish his dissertation. He had tried many times, perhaps not hard enough, but he had tried. There was a time when he took his wife and their young daughter up into the mountains well north of Spokane. Camping supplies and typewriter, lots of books, and all of Richard's notes. It was one of those "This is it" kind of moments - no more fooling around. Richard's wife wasn't happy to be entirely removed from civilization, but there they were.

To hear Richard tell the story, all was going very well and he was beginning to make real progress on his task, pounding the typewriter from dawn to dusk. Then one night as the three were nestled in their tent there was a noise outside and Richard went to investigate the noise and scare away whatever creature might be causing it. So, on hands and knees, with a flashlight, dressed only in his underpants, he unzipped the door of the tent and turned on the flashlight. The light was pointed directly at the crotch of a bear hulking above him in one of those scary standing positions you see on the cover of adventure magazines. Richard insisted that it was a grizzly bear. In any case, it was very threatening and he reacted with no delay. He dove back into the tent, handed his wife the flashlight, grabbed the knife that he kept by his side, and sliced a new door in the rear of the tent. He grabbed his daughter under one arm and his typescript under the other, exited the tent through the new backdoor and ran for the car. The bear eventually went away and chose not to further threaten Richard's wife, for which both he and she were grateful. That was the end of the dissertation effort. The marriage lasted not much longer.

Richard and I went on a number of short fishing trips together. He had a mental list of many spots on the rivers leading to the Pacific, where steelhead would run, and just when they would be there. We would take sleeping bags, a stove, an ice chest, a lantern, a tent, and fishing gear. He was not much of a chef, but he always insisted on taking charge of the grocery shopping and the preparation. I remember one particular dinner the night we had arrived before there were any fish to eat. Richard put a large pan on the Coleman stove, fired it up, and dumped in two cans of Campbell's pork and beans. To this he added a big can of little wieners in some kind of barbeque sauce, possibly also by Campbell, but I'm sure that any wieners would do. When I saw him preparing to add a large can of tuna I shouted, "No, No," but in it went. Having driven for four or five hours, and having hiked in to the perfect fishing spot and put up our tents, we were very hungry and there were no leftovers. There was beer, of course.

Richard had taken a liking to my son, Jimmy, then about 11 or 12 years old and had taken him along on a fishing trip or two. From one of those trips, Jimmy had even brought home a steelhead that was big enough that we froze it and took it out for Christmas dinner, with guests.

There came a day when Richard wanted to go fishing again, and Jimmy was available so off they went. The plan was to hike in a long way along the Deschutes River and to camp there overnight and to fish all day. So, Jimmy was loaded down with a backpack with a sleeping bag tied on over the top. It was quite a load for a boy. They drove as close as they could get to the spot Richard had in mind but as they drove the clouds rolled in and it was starting to drizzle. My friend was not one to give up.

Besides persistence, one of Richard's characteristics was his extreme acrophobia, but the spot he had selected for this trip with Jimmy required hiking along a railroad right-of-way, crossing several railroad trestles over the river. These were not bridges intended for driving or walking; they were just railroad tracks and ties. When you looked down, you saw the swirling water. Richard, of course, could not look down. So each time they came to a trestle, Jimmy would walk across, set down his pack, walk back across the bridge, and lead Richard by the hand.

By the time the two of them had reached the fishing spot, it was raining hard with no sign of letting up. Richard decided that it was going to be too wet and cold to stay on the river, but he didn't want to miss a day of fishing altogether, so he found a huge log, put Jimmy under it to stay warm and as dry as possible and covered him with his tent. Richard waded into the river and fished for an hour or two, catching little more than a chill. It was still raining hard, so they agreed to give up on the trip and head back to the car.

Back they went in the downpour with Jimmy in the lead, at each trestle setting down his even heavier rain-soaked pack to walk back for Richard, who was now feeling guilt beyond measure. They eventually made it back to Richard's car and got back home without further difficulty. The next day, Richard called to talk with me. He inquired about Jimmy who was then playing in the basement with his sisters. All was fine, I said. "Well," Richard said, "I just wanted to tell you how brave that boy of yours is."

"How's that?" I asked.

"We walked for miles along the railroad track. He helped me across every trestle and he never complained – not a word, not a whimper. But I knew that he was in pain."

"How'd you know that?" I asked.

"Because he kept shifting that pack from shoulder to shoulder. Brave young man."

"He never said anything," I said. "But I'll let him know. He will be pleased at how brave you thought he was." We said goodbye and hung up.

Later that day, I told Jimmy how brave and strong Richard thought he was.

"How come?" he asked.

“Because you were shifting that heavy backpack back and forth across your shoulders, and you never complained.”

“Dad, we were on the railroad tracks. I was just playing train.” he said, showing me the motions. “You know. Choo-choo, choo-choo.”

There was the time when Richard and his daughter and his Black Labrador puppy went camping with my family so early in the spring that the state campground over in Idaho was still closed, with a wooden bar over the entrance to the road. The hand pump for the well was still working, the outhouses were unlocked, and there were some campsites free of snow, so we parked our cars outside and packed our gear in. We set up our tents, collected firewood, and Richard caught some fish to go along with the hamburger and beans we had brought along. There was of course, lots of beer.

That night it was probably below freezing, and we were all nestled in our sleeping bags ready for sleep when I heard Richard’s daughter from their tent 10 yards away say, “Daddy, I have to pee.” It was pitch black and very cold and Richard was not happy. He tried to talk her into relieving herself just a little way from the tent, but she insisted on the outhouse, a bit of a trek. It may sound a bit cruel, but Pat and I were stifling laughter as we heard Richard getting her into her shoes. He called to me, to ask where I had put the lantern. It was just outside our tent, I told him, and he found it. Then it was, “Light! Damn it! Light.” And finally there was light, and a little more giggling in our tent. And off they went to the outhouse, perhaps 30 yards off. We heard the door slam, and then Richard’s instructions to the little girl, “Okay, go now. Hurry up.” Then we heard the door slam again, as they left the outhouse.

Now, the problem was that Richard had become disoriented. At first we could only tell because the shadows of the trees made by the lantern went first in one direction, then in the other, then back again. More giggling. Then Richard said, “Damn it, we’re lost.” I stopped laughing and shouted “Over here” a couple of times and he found us and his tent, doused the lantern, took off his daughter’s shoes and put her back in her sleeping bag, then went for his own well-earned rest. Then we heard him roar. “Get out of my sleeping bag!” The dog had found a nice warm spot.

When morning came and with a promising sun in the sky, we had a nice breakfast of trout and eggs. The trout -- because Richard had been up and out early.

Richard taught me many things over the years. He taught me how to kill a fresh-caught trout and clean it in a boat. He taught me how to troll for fish on a lake and how to pee over the side of the boat. I think of Richard often and with pleasure: his daughter, his books, the fish, the beer, and the dog.

Lest you think that all of my friends have been male, let me tell you about my friend H  l  ne. She was a wonderful, complex, generous, vivacious and beautiful French woman, a few years my senior. (She is no longer with us.) Her mind worked in ways that I could often not comprehend. If you ever looked under the hood of a Peugeot, you might begin to understand H  l  ne. A Peugeot’s engine has the most god-awful congeries of tubes,

wires, and miscellaneous geegaws that you ever laid eyes on. But when you close the hood and start the engine it runs as smoothly as the finest Kentucky Bourbon. Well that was H  l  ne.

The first time I met her, she came to my office because her boss had recently left the university for other pastures and she needed help, or at least someone to talk with and I was next up the chain of command.

“Mister Myers, I must talk to you about my clerk Suzanne (Let’s call her Suzanne). She drives me crazy and she never does anything right, for seven years, she does nothing but make me crazy. What can I do? You have to help me. Fire her! Please you must fire her!”

“Call me Jim.”

“Okay, Jim.”

“Have you talked with the people in Personnel about this problem?”

“Yes, and they will do nothing! They say I gave her a good evaluation.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, I always give her good evaluations because she cries. Her husband left her with their little girl.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t worry too much for her. That was fifteen years ago, her daughter’s married now, and when she isn’t crying about her husband leaving her, she is crying about her daughter leaving her. She’s driving me crazy! Maybe you have a single friend who likes stupid women? If she got married again maybe she would quit.”

“Did you hire her?” I asked.

“Yes, but only because I learned she was such a bad employee that no one would hire her away from me. I hate that, when someone hires away a perfectly good employee. There should be a rule to prevent that; then I wouldn’t have hired her, in the first place.”

This conversation went on for a while longer and we agreed that H  l  ne would have to start to document her employee’s failings, although I think that we both knew that this was unlikely to happen. I inquired about the progress of the search committee for her new boss, and we made a date for lunch a few weeks into the future, and both of us went back to work.

Some time later, H  l  ne and I met for that lunch; we discovered that we had daughters the same age and that mine might want to go to ballet lessons with hers. We spent innumerable hours after that, looking down from hard bleacher seats, watching the girls dance. We became friends, which made me a likely beneficiary whenever H  l  ne had a crisis.

So, months afterwards, H el ene startled me one morning, bursting into my office.

“Jim. I have to talk with someone, it is imperative, I cannot go on another minute without getting this off my chest, you know, I will just die if you don’t listen to me and understand what has happened.”

“Sit down and tell me, H el ene.”

“Oh, Jim, I have killed my neighbor! I murdered him. He is dead and it is all my fault. Will they arrest me? What do you think? I have a daughter and a husband, why did I do it?”

“Calm down and tell me what happened, H el ene. I know a good lawyer. He can probably get you off in time to see your grandchildren graduate from high school.”

“Stop that Jim. It is not funny!”

“Okay, tell me.”

“ Well, when I got home yesterday afternoon (oh, why did I leave work early!!), there was an ambulance parked in front of the house next door. This old man lives there alone. His wife died from kidney failure two years ago. It was terrible to see him all alone.”

“ H el ene, go on with your story.”

“ Well, the front door was open so I went in. Two guys, technicians, nurses or something were leaning over my neighbor who was on the floor, giving him R&R or whatever you call it. I rushed over and said, ‘Let me help you. What can I do?’ ‘Nothing,’ they said. ‘I must be able to do something! He’s my friend!’ Then one of them said, ‘Go out to the ambulance and bring in the extra oxygen tank!’

“ I thought they might be just trying to get rid of me, but I also thought they might need the oxygen, so I ran outside to the little truck. I climbed in, found the tank, and rushed back into the house. ‘Here it is! Here it is!’ I said and gave it to one of them. “That’s the fire extinguisher, lady!” he said. I ran back out to the truck and came back with the green bottle, but by then my neighbor died, and it’s all my fault. Don’t you see?”

We talked for a few minutes. She calmed down. She was never arrested, of course. Life went on. She would come to see me from time to time about Suzanne, or when she found some treasure in a book that had been given to the library. Dealing with gifts was one of her responsibilities. From time to time she would find money tucked into a book. Once she found a drawing that looked a great deal like a Matisse. It was just an ink drawing of a settee on a scrap of torn paper. I agreed that it looked like a Matisse and asked her to have it authenticated at the museum. A Matisse it was. We offered it back to the donor, who told us to keep it, so we deposited it at the museum. Life went on.

The next and the last time I remember H el ene coming to my office in a state of similar excitement was shortly after she had returned from a national meeting in Chicago. She burst in again huffing something about hoping that there were no cameras in the hallway.

What would she do if her husband found out? What if one of her colleagues had seen her? She was, in brief, in a state.

“ What is it, H el ene? “I asked.

“ Well, Jim, it is the most terrible, embarrassing thing. I might have been arrested. It might have been on TV or in the newspaper. Oh, my god, what would I have done then?”

“ It wasn’t on TV or in the newspaper, was it? I didn’t see anything.”

“ No, but what if?”

“ Sit down and tell me your story, H el ene.”

And this is the story she told.

“ I was in the hotel and I got a very nice room on the twentieth floor. I had to pay extra for it, but it was worth it because my husband was going to be in Chicago for a day, and he could come by and spend a few hours with me, if you know what I mean.”

“ Yes, I understand. That sounds nice.”

“ It was better than nice, Jim. I ordered dinner, a bottle Champagne. It was really very elegant. And I brought a very special negligee, very filmy and thin and (how do you say it?), diaphanous, maybe. He was very interested you know, in a strange place, soft music, French wine, a wonderful meal – and me! I won’t tell you any more, but I’m sure you get the idea.”

“ I do. It must have been very nice.”

“ Well, about 9:00 my husband had to leave to catch a flight home. It was very sad to see him go, but all good things end, don’t they?

“ After he left, I was tidying up my room and decided to put the room service cart out in the hallway. I looked out, very carefully, and there was no one outside so I pushed it and I must have tripped a little bit or pushed it too far because somehow the door clicked shut behind me, with me outside. I heard it just go “CLICK.” I tried to get back in and there I was, almost naked, out in the hallway. I looked down at myself and I wanted to die! I have only two hands and I had three places I wanted to cover up. And I couldn’t even see the back. It was terrible. What could I do?”

“ So, what did you do?”

“ Well, I had to get help somehow and maybe a woman would get off the elevator and help me, so I walked down to the elevator lobby, past about six rooms on either side. There was a mirror there, so I could see the rest of me now. Oh my God, I felt even worse. There wasn’t any house phone, in the lobby. I just stood there, watching the dial above the elevators, going zoom, zoom, back and forth. (*she demonstrated how the dial moved back and forth, with her finger*) I could hear the elevators going whoosh up and down,

but they never stopped, so I stood there and waited for five or ten minutes. It seemed like an hour.”

“ I guess you couldn’t get on and go down to the lobby.”

“ No, I would have seen hundreds of people down there. But finally the elevator stopped and I hoped for a lady but out stepped a Japanese midget. Really, Jim, he was only this tall, (*and she held her hand at about 4 ft. 5*). He was definitely a midget. I tried to explain to him that I needed to use a phone to get someone to come and let me back into my room, but he didn’t seem to understand a word of English. The poor little man looked terrified and I realized what he thought I must be. Well, finally he started running up the hall, past my room. So, I chased him. He got to his room and got out his key, but he fumbled a bit so I caught up with him and caught the door just before he was able to slam it. I was a lot bigger than him so I was able to keep him from shutting the door. I tried to explain to him that I needed to use his phone, but he ran again and locked himself in the bathroom.”

“ I called the desk and explained where I was and that I was locked out of my room, so I waited there for a bellman. While I was waiting the poor little man was crying or praying or something. I couldn’t tell. Eventually the bellman came and walked me back to my room. He tried not to look at me, and seemed very understanding. I tried to explain to him what had happened but he said, “Don’t worry lady. This happens all the time.”

There were other stories and other days with H el ene, many of them offbeat, but none as extreme as these. I don’t know whether her husband ever found out about her adventure on the 20th floor. I moved on and so did time and, as I said, H el ene died some years ago.

These are just a few of the stories about my friends that I have to tell. I’m sure that you have stories too. If you are my friend, you may worry that soon I’ll be telling stories about you, too. But be comforted by the fact that these have all marinated for three decades or more. It’s not likely that I have three decades left. You are probably safe.