

San Antonio, Texas

31 January 2014

Classroom: English II

50s

London's "To Build a Fire"

Theme: Intelligence vs raw instinct

I have thirty minutes before the bell rings...

Yesterday morning, while pumping gas at a convenience store near Harry Wurzbach, a man approached me. I heard him a moment or two earlier ask another man as he pumped gas, if he could, "Spare a dollar or some change." The other man just looked away. When I saw him approach, I tilted my head down, and went peripheral.

"I don't want to disturb you, sir," his gentle voice said. I turned my gaze towards the fleeting numbers on the pump, 18.50, 18.52, 18.79... "Could you spare some change?" Without looking at him I shook my head and gazed at the turning numbers. As if there were something interesting in numbers that I'd never really looked at before.

"Thank you," he said and walked off to stand near the entrance of the convenience store. I placed the hose back in the pump. He was looking my way. I needed to go inside to get the newspaper. 'Will he ask me again?' I wondered. 'What an annoyance. Can't even get to work without some damned beggar.' Walking toward him, I made sure to hit the remote on the beast. I listened to my thoughts. I didn't like them.

A few feet away, I looked him over; his hands were tucked in his pockets. I felt weary, 'Don't get too close,' I thought. 'Drop'em no matter what he pulls out of those pockets. People will understand...homeless beggar.' But his clothes were clean, his shoes new, and he smelled clean. I was three feet away; my senses tightened; urban training sparked the nervous system, 'Don't trust nobody. Never.'

"I am sorry to have disturbed you, sir." He was clean shaven but looking tired. Who isn't? 'Homeless people don't shave.' "You looked so deep in thought," he said with a warm smile. I paused, "What's going on? You homeless?" A hand came out of his pocket. I watched his eyes. His hand raised, pointed to a beat-up pick-up truck parked near a pump. "Ran out of gas, got to get him to school."

"Oh," I replied, feeling the pathetic weight of my judgments. "Gimme a sec," I answered, "Need to use the ATM." He stepped closer. "Two, three bucks ought to do." I paused. "You and your son had breakfast?" Head tilted down, he

looked up at me with curiosity. “Huh?” “Have you both eaten today?” He shook his head. “Be right back.”

Inside the warm store, I got some dough from the machine and picked up my *Times*. Behind the register, a middle-aged man. He seemed nervous; his eyes darting toward the man outside the glass. He had a baseball bat nearby. “What he want? He harassing you? Don’t want that here, man. Illegals!” he said in a deep, beautiful Indian accent. He rung-up the paper, the weight of his judgement in the air.

“No. He just needs help.” I took my change. “What kind help he need?” I stuck my wallet in my pocket. “People help. You know, human shit.” I stepped out into the cold morning and handed the man thirty dollars. “Enough for gas and a meal with your son.”

His face brightened. “Oh, my god, you have blessed me. Blessed me.” He moved towards me, as if to hug me, but read the body language accurately. He extended his hand. “Thank you. You’re my angel.” His hand was strong but cold. His son gazed out the window and smiled and waved towards us. I waved. The man tried to give some of the money back.

“Have breakfast with your son. Real breakfast. No drive-thru crap. Sit with him.” He wanted to shake again. ‘Hand sanitizer,’ I thought, feeling the weight of judgment. I walked toward the beast and glanced back at the boy. He waved again. He looked about eight years old. Nice looking kid.

I got in my car and sat a moment, looking over at them as the man pumped gas. I reflected on myself, on how cynical I have become: the weight of society and culture warping me. Or do I allow it? This is how the heart hardens and goes bad. Listen to its narrative. The eye always sees a color. Heart sees a human.

I did not like myself very much at that moment. I reached for the hand sanitizer and paused. ‘No, let it linger.’ I chided myself. ‘Just a hungry dad trying to get his son to school. How’d I read it so wrong?’ I realized I could have done more, could have said hello to the boy. Imagine if no one had helped his father. What would that young Hispanic boy have learned about our world?

AP Literature and Composition

Classroom test: the tragic/cult/epic Hero in Greek tragedy.

24 October 2014

Cool, gray 58°

Yesterday, I got a ride to the Ford Dealership off Culebra. The beast needed maintenance. I was driven by a Hispanic male, 30 years old or so. He began to speak of many things. I relaxed myself into his moment. Cleared my mind and opened into deep-sift mode. Of late, I have been distant from the tales of strangers. Unlike in the Bury Gardens, when such tales and their telling (into diaries) was all I'd lived for.

The gentleman, in a strong accent, my guess is Coahuila, told of his job as a driver, stocker, jack-of-all-trades, and on. An everyman. Then he spoke of friends who'd gone on to college and how he (the driver) had intended to also attend. But in life, plans get sidetracked. He told of his friend who'd earned his BA in History, intent on being a teacher. He added, "But, he's a grease monkey now."

In his voice there was a quality of measurement – he'd thought about things – a balanced uncertainty about the outcomes of decisions left unmade. He'd tried to convince his friend to stick with his original plan (teaching), but he would not. It seemed to serve the driver to validate the less-than-critical importance of college against the framework of his life.

He has three children; one girl is a month old. He'd smiled proudly speaking of her. Prior to this child, he'd been shopping for a sports car, a super *Charger* with badass wheels. He and his wife had even visited a few dealerships. "Baby was unexpected," he said pensively, smiling to himself as we drove along. "Out of nowhere. Guess I'll get that car in seventeen years or so."

We shared the laugh, knowing how 'way leads on to way.' He went on to say with great pride in his voice, "She's got all my features, ya know, my eyes and nose." I felt the smile in his words. Then he fell silent a moment as the late evening traffic came to a crawl.

"I think you got something far more valuable than a car," I offered. He looked over and nodded, "Right that, bro." He asked me what I did. "Retired military and now just an English composition teacher." He nodded. "I'd planned to go in the military. Blew out my knee in high school football. I was destined for the NFL." His voice faded. I couldn't discern the note of sadness, if for the NFL or the military. It was clear he'd measured all these, sees them as important points in the road that is his life.

On Culebra, and passing under 410, he said, "Ya know, man, how hard it is to get quiet time. A man needs away time. To think and collect himself. Ya

know?” I nodded in agreement, feeling the tiredness that comes with that ‘alone time,’ that I take at 4 in the morning to fall into quiet being. He continued, “Now it seems, I don’t even have control of the remote. My son’s five. He’s got his paws sunk into that too.”

He seemed to be saying there was nothing in his life that he could control or feel, that as a man, belonged to him. His voice registered the idea of a former self, as all men have one, that in later years we look back upon as the truest friend we’ve ever known.

“It all goes so damn fast,” he said, scratching his chin stubble. He continued as if I wasn’t there, like he was just thinking aloud, “Sometimes, I look at that scar on my bad knee and I wonder. I just wonder...” The thought hung and then trailed off. I thought, ‘For someone with little quiet time, this young man with grease beneath his nails has a quality of depth that was magnificent. He just wasn’t living life - he was appreciating it in all its terrible beauty.’

“S’like when my dad calls, he says he never sees me no more. Says he understands I got my own to look after.” In this, his voice was deeply solemn, balanced and framed in an eloquent connection to another being. I heard his father’s voice talking through and in him. I also felt his father’s love in the underneath place of all his words. I was deeply appreciative of the privilege.

“Damn, I get so busy. I don’t even go see my father. My mom died some time back. He’s all alone now.” He paused, nodding to himself. “I wonder about that, what life is like when everything is gone. You know, moved on.” He looked over at me, coffee-colored eyes, hard to the world, but sensitive. A man with a soul. “Ever feel that way?” He invited me into his experience. “Often,” I replied, being fatherless/motherless in this life, but reintroduced into the importance of such figures in the lives of everyone I meet. I lie each time. It’s easier that way.

“Sometimes, when I get home, he’s just parked in the driveway, sitting on the tailgate of his truck, drinking a *Coors*. His hair’s all white now. He told me, ‘Figure I’d better come see you, or I’ll never see my grandkids.’ He continued, “It makes me feel bad, that I don’t make time for my dad. Too wrapped up in stuff.”

We sat in silence at a light. I took in the words of a stranger. I felt as if I were sitting in a confessional and he’d revealed all his disillusionments. An insight that can only visit us when we aren’t too full of ourselves. Then we can hear strangers, measure life, speak true things and share the poetry of how we live.