

THE STORIES

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As with my three previous books, I have been able to rely on my wife, Jill, to comment, edit, polish, and occasionally challenge my writing. Jill is in possession of more patience than I can muster, and my stories are enhanced by her keen eye and editing abilities.

Finally, I will tip my hat to the characters in my stories! These characters are friends of long standing, or they are people I have observed or with whom I have had brief encounters. Each of them is, to a greater or lesser degree, quite real! They have all connected with me in one way or another and there would be no stories without them!

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INTRODUCTION

Romeo's Breakfast is a collection of 16 short stories. Like my previous anthology, Clean Shorts, each story is different, and they are intended to be unrelated to one another. However, since many of the stories are inspired by personal experiences, some long-time friends have suggested possible connections; And they have often been right!

Romeo's Breakfast is arranged, very roughly, in chronological order. The first story, *Keeping Score*, goes back to awkward childhood experiences. It is, perhaps, tainted a bit by the passage of time and the limitations of memory, starting in the early 1960's when I was a seventh grader.

And the last story, *Romeo's Breakfast*, draws on much more recent events during our covid year, 2020. Romeo's Breakfast is the name of the book, and the name of the last story... The "anchor story," in much the same way as *Clean Shorts*, anchored my last anthology, Clean Shorts.

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The cover art includes caricatures of the ROMEO's, with whom I have weathered the covid storm. We have soothed each other over our coffee. We have laughed a lot and have made ourselves an example of how ROMEO's (the acronym to be revealed in the story) can band together and do a little better, during a crisis, than just getting by.

Maybe not everyone is concerned with chronologies! And for readers not so inclined, each story stands alone, and they can be read in any order. Note, though, that two stories are much longer than the others: "*On the Rockies*" and "*Romeo's Breakfast*" ... the last story... the anchor story for this anthology.

Some stories just sort of happened, like "*Cat Story*" ... just a chance encounter one day. Or, "*Dining Alfresco*" which is a mini anthology of chance encounters on the streets and around town. Stories, like "*Silent Nights*" and "*Dough Nuts*" interpret liberally on the absolute truth of some real experiences!

Writing stories that draw on several decades of recollections requires one to fill in the blanks, the forgotten

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details or events, in order to wind up with a complete tale. Like the fisherman whose big fish gets bigger over time, my fiction is well intended, but maybe exaggerated just a tad... because it is just so much fun to do so! And memories of things long ago may be a little fuzzy around the edges. And yet, each story is essentially, and basically, true. Even the most outlandish tales find their way back to their roots... in truth.

If you are of the Baby Boomer generation, or a descendent thereof, these tales will ring a bell for you... for sure!

I hope you enjoy my stories!

Gary Delanoeye

ROMEO'S BREAKFAST

KEEPING SCORE

At age 10, I worked like a sharecropper... farmed out by my Dad to mow lawns, pull weeds and trim bushes at my aunts' apartment buildings. These tasks occupied every Saturday morning. If I went to work early and got home early, I'd get stuck mowing the lawn at home too! When I left to take care of the apartments later, my Dad had me mow our lawn first!

When I was 10, my Dad was in control and had me outfoxed most of the time.

What Dad didn't know was that mowing lawns unleashed torrents of allergic reactions! My nose ran like a shattered fire hydrant. My eyes dripped like I had been pepper-sprayed, and my throat felt like I had gargled a Brillo pad. But I was 10 years old and didn't know anything about allergies. I mowed lawns... I puddled up and sneezed a lot. So what? Besides, my aunts paid me \$20 a month and that was righteous bucks for a 10-year-old kid in 1961.

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On one hot, smoggy weekend in L.A., I returned home from my labors more miserable than usual. Apparently, my Mom and Dad had finally noticed. Over dinner, Dad announced, "You'll be late for school on Monday; we're seeing an allergist to find out what's wrong with you."

Wrong with me? Allergist? "What's an allergist?" I asked?

"A doctor who figures out what makes you sneeze," Mom said.

Well, I did a lot of sneezing, but didn't think much of it!

With some reluctance, my Dad took me to the allergist; an old stout guy with an air of formaldehyde about him. He had me take off my shirt. He drew a vertical line down my back with a marking pen and then drew a series of short lines that crossed it.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"Just getting ready for a skin prick test," answered Dr. Formaldehyde.

Skin prick test? That didn't sound good!

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The doctor put me face down on the examination table. A nurse put drops of different things between the lines on my back and the doctor attacked me with his needles, pricking my skin.

I remained face down on the table for 15 minutes. Then, the doctor returned and studied my back.

“Hmmm... looks like the boy is allergic to walnuts, geraniums and... grass.”

I sat up and looked at the doctor and grinned like a Cheshire cat! “GRASS? I’m allergic to grass? I can’t be mowing lawns anymore... right?”

“That’s right, and on top of that...”

My Dad broke in. “Then he can’t play baseball, right? He loves baseball! Too bad. He never sneezes playing baseball! But... too dangerous! Hey...If he can’t mow lawns, then no baseball! Right?”

“Apparently baseball is OK!” Said the doctor. “It’s dust and pollen that gets kicked up by the mower. No... baseball’s OK it seems.”

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It was a long and silent ride to school. When I got home, my parents were having a drink in the kitchen. My Dad nursed a Manhattan and Mom, a gin and tonic.

“So, what happened at the allergist’s today?” Mom asked.

Dad tried to change the subject. “How about those Dodgers?”

“Let the boy speak already!” Mom commanded. “What makes you sneeze?”

“GRASS,” I said, “and I’m not supposed to mow lawns!”

On Saturday, I lounged on a lawn chair with an icy can of Coke and watched my Dad mow the lawn. It was smoggy and 87 degrees, and I felt OK!

Dad may have forgiven me for my infirmities, but I am sure he never forgot!

Yes, I was a wise guy as a kid, and I am convinced that I inherited this trait from my Dad’s side of the family. Dad saw it too, I am very sure, and deep down may have been a little proud of it too.

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Three years later, Dad wanted to extend our lawn by a few feet. Living on a hillside, on two lots... house on one and garage on the other... meant building a retaining wall and back-filling it with dirt.

Without getting too near the grass I helped Dad build the wall with posts, boards, and cement.

But much to my Dad's dismay, dirt was both scarce and expensive!

And then, at age 13, in the seventh grade, I solved the problem!

One day, while walking to school, there was something different. A big orange skip loader was digging a swimming pool at a house about a mile from home... and that meant dirt!

Maybe I was still trying to get back in my Dad's good graces after my grass victory.

I approached the truck driver.

"Hey up there... !

"Yeah... waddya want kid?"

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“Dirt, sir. Me and my Dad need a load of dirt. Where do you dump it?”

“About 10 miles. Hey... where you live kid?”

“Just a few blocks. You wanna dump a load there?”

“Hey kid, anything that gets me home sooner than later... OK with me. Gimme an address and where to dump.”

“Just one load OK? No charge, right?”

“Got it kid... yeah... free dirt.”

I got home before Mom and Dad, and there it was... a pile right by the side gate, just where I had said. A pile of... rocks!

Even at 13 I knew that “Oh Crap” didn’t even begin to say it all! I was about to become a dead kid for sure. How did I know I was getting big lumps of sandstone and shale? Dad would have me breaking up rocks like a convict until college!

Mom came home first. “Oh Crap!” she said. “YOU are going to have some explaining to do!”

Dinner was eaten in silence. I could sense Dad’s rising anger. He butt-lit three cigarettes in a row and I had never seen him do that before!

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“Gotta go,” I said. “Lotsa homework tonight!”

“SIT,” Dad commanded, and I prepared for the ax to fall.

“What were you thinking? What the hell are we going to do with that goddamn pile of rocks out there?”

I stared at the crumbs on my plate.

“Now I’ve got to figure out how to get rid of that rock pile and I still don’t have any dirt! I’m tellin’ you son, once the lawn’s extended you WILL be mowing it and you can sneeze your brains out for all I care! What am I goin’ to do with that goddamn pile of rocks?”

During this tirade I never looked up. But then, a ridiculous idea came to me, and I just blurted it out.

“We could dig a hole and bury it,” I said.

Dad was already contemplating murder; I just knew it! He lit another cigarette; the veins in his neck throbbed. My brain must have slipped into overdrive; I had seconds to live.

“Look, Dad... we dig a hole in that unused space behind the garage and use that dirt. We fill the hole with those rocks.” And then I held my breath.

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Dad seemed to calm as the idea settled in. The murder in his eyes softened to manslaughter. And then he started to laugh, softly at first, and then a rolling belly laugh that summoned Mom from the kitchen.

“Well kid, you got some work to do. You get your friend Mark to help. I’ll pay you both since the rocks were free. Tell him to bring his own shovel. Now... go do your homework!”



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I got up without a word and slipped off to my room, with a smirky smile of relief, and victory, on my face.

Dad forgave me for the pile of rocks and admitted to Mom that I must be a pretty smart kid... or just a lucky wise guy. Just like with the allergies, Dad forgave, but didn't forget.

Five years later, I had my first car, a 1965 Datsun Bluebird. I painted it purple and pried off the Bluebird emblem. It was now the "Screamin' Grape," and it was almost cool! My friend, Skipper, helped me repair it once when the water pump had blown, and the head cracked. Skipper and I took it apart, neatly laid out all the pieces and got the head re-cast. Then, we put it back together with surgical precision... and had two bolts left over.

Dumbfounded and dejected, we had started to dismantle it again when my Dad appeared.

"Hey boys, looks like you're taking apart everything! How come? What's wrong?"

"Two extra bolts, Dad; THAT'S what's wrong!"

Dad sat down on a box, put his head in his hands and started laughing like a hyena!

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“Like, what’s so goddamn funny?” I said to Dad. “You like seein’ us screw up? Sorry Dad, but me and Skip are kinda bummed right now and you’re busting a gut there laughing at us!”

“Oh my god boys... I am sorry!” Dad said. “You see you did nothing wrong! But I got this little devil sitting on my shoulder here and he says to me, ‘What if someone slipped in a couple of extra bolts? What would those boys do?’”

“What? We didn’t miss anything? You placed those extra bolts; so we’d think we screwed up? Hey... you can stop laughing now!”

“No boys,” Dad said. “I can’t!”



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Looking back at my grass allergy, the pile of rocks, two extra bolts, and so many other memories, Dad and I had always forgiven... but never forgot anything.

And, on balance, I believe Dad and I are even... and I am still laughing!

I think he is still laughing too... Love you, Dad!

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