

THE DAY GOSSIP DIED

- A short story

By Anthony Paul Griffin

Day break...

Robert's body was found at six in the morning, at low tide, "I believe it was two weeks ago, seems so long ago." The Medical Examiner's office has been understaffed since Archie's death. The investigators remain on staff, finding in their initial report, "the body was bruised and swollen, covered in mud, exposed to the elements for two days." There is no Medical Examiner on staff; bodies now sent two counties over because doctors refused to work in our county. Richardson's Mortuary has filled the void, spreading rumors when convenient. In Robert's case, reporting Robert's face "was swollen like a loaf of white bread, after the crust has been removed, then dropped in the water, causing tattering, and swelling." They said his skin appeared pliable, capable of being peeled and then formed into a soft ball – "just like white bread ... like white bread".

Kay Boudreaux's boy, Terrance, found the body. I may be wrong for saying this – "a leopard doesn't change its spots, never does." He was probably on Robert's property looking for something to steal. I suppose my rank guessing is no better than Richardson's practice of sprinkling doubt, and inserting themselves in the story; doubt always seemed to have a greater impact than the last rites Richardson's took pride in administering prior to lowering bodies in the ground. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Why Richardson's didn't just bury bodies, and stay out of everyone's business, seemed too much to ask.

People in this town still believe Mary Lynn was raped because of Richardson's abilities. Mary Lynn's mother and husband both said no rape occurred; Richardson's disagreed. The Medical Examiner Office tried to obtain a handle on the rumor, releasing a statement with permission from Jimmy, Mary Lynn's husband. The Office's press release was countered by a newspaper story – front page –with quotes from unknown sources. “She was raped by a monster” – was what the story read. Archie's son was quickly removed from the football team, followed by Archie losing his job. Dr. Schmidt – the Medical Examiner - fled next, within twenty four hours after the story printed. He understood the wings of rumor were far more powerful than his official report. The good doctor also appreciated that Richardson was the owner of the local radio station, paper and mortuary. We concluded Archie hung himself. No witnesses, not one camera mounted on any of the businesses happened to be working the night of his death, and of course, no autopsy was ever performed on the body. The paper reported that he drove clear across town, mounted the oak in the town square and hung himself. Why he didn't use the oaks in the field adjoining his property? The paper never posed the question, “No need, I guess, no need”. No matter, an autopsy wasn't possible at the time - not with Dr. Schmidt's flight. The Justice of the Peace issued an order two hours after the body was taken down, finding an autopsy wasn't required. He, the Justice of Peace, also the son-in-law of Virgil Richardson, signed the order on day one, two days later he showed up at Archie's home giving his condolences to Archie's widow.

Sand crabs claimed Robert's front side, burrowed deep; splinters from the pier claimed the right rear. Richardson's pulled most of the crabs out, most - not all - “impossible to do so.” The body's condition was a horrible sight. Richardson's covered the ones which remained in place with makeup, then sealed the casket. “I imagine they are still clinging, and eating” – was

overheard at coffee. I didn't want to see the body, just didn't, just couldn't. They said, "Before they closed the casket for good his head remained swollen, twice its normal size,"- a sight I didn't want to see, considering Robert's head was considerable even before the water consuming, the crabs feasting.

The body was held in place by a rope, tied to his right arm; the other end anchored to the pier, both ends knotted by the common reef knot. His other arm remained free, so we heard. Richardson's confirmed as much. You know and I know the debate which followed - whether a reef knot can be made using one hand. Roy, Jonathan, Cassie and Butch demonstrated it could be, using both hands to start the process, their teeth to secure, then pulling, securing further and then tightening with the free hand. Rumor didn't care. Gossip didn't care. They made Robert a victim. I too believe he was a victim, a different type of victim though.

The rope was a general industrial and commercial fishing rope, commonly used to moor vessels. Atlantic Cordage, the manufacturer, doesn't list the rope as a special order rope, a common rope, readily available. The last time I checked our supply there was at least ten rolls lying around; the same rope can be found on every dock, in all directions, for fifty miles. Robert's shop was located at 300 Bay Drive, Dad's at 600 Bay Drive.

Both were Marine Mechanics, repairing small vessels, occasionally a tug or two, but mostly small vessels. The similarities didn't stop there: their skin appeared to medium grit, initially thought to be similar because of their exposure to the sun. Skin which was sandpaper grade, seemingly impenetrable to mosquitoes, bugs, minor nicks; both were broad shouldered men, not at all straight, curving slightly at the end, dipping downward toward a broad and expansive chest, all supported and held up by two muscular stumps, which didn't seem at all real. Incredibly physically strong and imposing men they were - working without winches when

others required the support. Bull-strong, bull-headed men coupled with a “my way or the highway” attitude. Their shops competed against each, but didn’t. Each had their own customers, who never ventured down the road, unless one or the other thought the other could do a better job on a particular project. The shops sat on the western shore of the bay, a mere sixteen feet above sea level. They were not located in any city or town, instead lying in the unincorporated part of the county, while still controlled by the politics of the surrounding towns and cities. The political boundaries didn’t matter - news spread in all directions, faster than the fog which settles over the bay during the spring, the same fog which hid Robert’s body, preventing others from seeing the body secured and latched firmly to the pier.

The newspaper and mortuary lies five miles from the shops, the hospital seven miles away – all due south; the Sheriff Department’s auxiliary offices lies two miles down the road. The dive team travelled no more than a mile and a quarter to untangle Robert’s body and fish him out of the bay.

The fog cleared ...

I was behind the wheel when Dad instructed me to pull into Robert’s drive, again. This was our second time down, having entered earlier in the morning, making the circle, checking, then out. “I have to get something”, were his words, nothing else. During the winter, the sea grasses recede and a bird’s eye view is provided. You can see clear to the water, and see activity on the back side of the shop without leaving the main road. In the spring and summer, outside of calling, the only way you can see the shop is to drive in and around. Dad didn’t call - too simple, meaning it was too much of an imposition to call. I had long passed explaining we could call. He always ignored me, repeating himself if he had to, “No need, just turn in. It will take just a

second.” If I had asked, he probably had the exact costs of placing the call. So I readily obeyed, pulling in and around.

He exited before I could come to a complete stop. I remained in the truck and watched him move towards the dock, pick up a rope and start pulling. The fog formed a backdrop against his figure; haven’t yet burned out, having yet to decide whether she was going to stay for the entire day. Seagulls lined the dock, ignoring his presence, and he theirs. Robert appeared from around the corner, a good thirty - forty five seconds after Dad started collecting the rope – my best guess. I don’t know if he was working on a boat or not, the shop blocked my view. He casually waved in my direction, until he saw what Dad was doing. His pace quickened, his path altered, venturing to his left, almost leaning, turning, curving and altering his course – turning in Dad’s direction. I killed the engine and exited.

Dad and Robert stood to my right, also to the right of the shop, approximately thirty yards away from me, no more than ten yards separated them. One end of the rope was latched to the docking anchor; the other end was held by Dad, gathering and collecting. I didn’t understand exactly what was occurring, not immediately, not until visited by a vision – a vision of their interaction weeks before covered the lenses of my sight. I now understood why Robert leaned, curved and altered his course.

Robert visited us at our shop, needing to borrow some rope. He said he was waiting for his order to come in. “I will get this back to you next week.” Dad instructed him to take the rope bundled against the property line. “Take it, I don’t want it back. Do with it what you please.” The visit was no different than our visiting him over the years, borrowing, lending, advising, and exchanging materials and even equipment part.

“Loosen the other end!”

“What are you doing, Bob?”

“I want my rope back!”

“You’re sure your being here is about that damn rope?”

“You – you – bastard ..!”

“You should know, you ... should know,” were Robert’s words; said in a halting manner - not at all sure - not at all confident. His head jerked up, then down; as if the preceding years weighed too heavily – my head, likewise, mimicked his. Robert stepped back, as if driven back, turning away. He faced the bay, not moving. I assumed he was going to go back on the other side of his shop, continue with his work and ignore Dad’s collecting the worthless rope. The roar of the bay now seemed silent. The sea gulls stayed at a safe distance, they too silenced. The fog collected around Robert’s shoulders, not all comforting; not all reassuring. The only sound was the sound of the shells under Robert’s feet – he was now involuntarily moving his left leg in an uncontrollable manner - backward, forward, upward, downward, in the same manner a mule lifts, shifts and anchors his weight in a fallow field. The word “bastard” remained in the air, intermingling with the fog, weighing, burdening - an imposing weight, an impossible barrier. As the word settled near Robert’s feet, Robert grabbed a steel bar, violently wedging the bar near the anchor, into the knot, locking the rope in place.

“Remove the bar, you ass!”

“Absolutely not, take that shit back!”

“Go to hell!”

They stared. They too grew silent, as if taking cues from the fog, the seagull, the bay. Those were the last words spoken. Robert then gathered the other end of the rope, situated himself between the anchor and Dad, pulling, pulling, pulling - tightening and restricting -

stopping Dad's incessant wrapping and collecting. Dad dug in, pulling, straining, perspiring, as if fighting for his life - moving Robert, the shells, the fog, reversing the Robert's gain, refusing to give another inch. Each adjusted, wrapped the rope around their right wrist, then arm, as if the same, as if one, grunting, not to each other, but an inward, self-contained grunt, channeling their energies. The seagulls now circled overhead, forming a collective coliseum. A battle waged with no more than four, maybe five, feet initially separating them - the rope acting as a leader, absorbing and directing their anger, muffling the sounds which attempted to escape, providing a focus point for my conflicting and confusing thoughts. Robert moved his body forward, wrapping additional rope around his wrist, decreasing the distance he and Dad, regaining territory, drawing Dad closer. The steel bar, and anchor now served practically no purpose - the rope dangled behind Robert's right leg. The distance between he and Dad was no more than two, three feet. Not touching, but within breathing distance.

“Dad, Robert! Come on!!”

My words were ignored. My trespass was not. While running, I could see blood - on the rope, on the ground. I could not distinguish whose blood, it was blood.

“Come on, this is bullshit!”

Those were my last words. My interference was met my Dad's left hand, a severe and punishing backhand, pushing me backward, and away. “Stay out of this”, were the words Dad spoke - after hitting me, not before, as if a warning before striking was against the rules of gladiators. It mattered not, my reaction to his action was an uncontrollable, unpredictable movement - propelled five, six, seven, eight steps backward, then upward, as if lifted on the backs of angels, then downward, as if the angels learned of their mistake, discarding me back to earth, head first, providing a brief look at the sky - followed by an insular thud, a sound for me

only, as if emphasizing my mistake for interfering - a rebounding, reverberating sound, inside my head, causing blue skies, grey skies, then black skies. The sea gulls fluttered within inches of my face, alighting around and above me, laughing, condemning, screaming, assuring my prone position remained in place. The sounds were controlling, cutting off my ability to participate, to see, to interfere. I was then visited by pain, unbearable pain. I grabbed my chest, attempted to breathe, while rolling, rolling – praying – praying – praying I would live. Blue, then grey, then black were the colors – colors which prevented me from telling time, from moving, from realizing at some point in time the distance between Robert and Dad grew to only inches, leaning, touching, sweating, struggling, refusing to give another inch, strength granted to them by God, reserved for steel and machinery, not to be inflicted on another human being.

He then fell – he – Dad.

Fell, dead.

At Robert's feet - dead at the age of fifty three.

When the ambulance arrived, the colors had started reversing themselves, grey - not yet blue - just grey. A vague image of Robert sitting with Dad's head in his lap, rocking, screaming, crying remains imbedded. The rope was no longer around Robert's wrist, remaining in place though, now flaccid, intertwined, interlaced, touching both.

The stern ...

Robert Cartage was a classmate, two months younger. I was born in June, he in August. When we were in elementary and middle school, rumors were rumors. "Rumor has it we are related." His mother, a widower, was still living. Both of my parents were still alive. Word has it Robert's dad died a year before his birth. Thinking back, by middle school Robert looked like Dad, Bob Sisal. Both of my parents provided a mirror - I possessed none of my father's physical

attributes and temperament, looking like a clone of Mother, and some other seed. The one or two times I inquired, my inquiries were normally met with silence. Dad walked away, as if I was a mute, as if he was deaf, as if asking constituted an insult. The one time he did respond he startled me by screaming, "I have always treated you as my child, you are my child - you need to stop asking." My sister, Mary Lynn, looked like both Dad and Mother. Mary Lynn is not the Mary Lynn who was raped, that Mary Lynn moved after Archie's body was discovered, she moved to Florida, married, had three children and prior to her death confessed Archie never touched her. They say pills were the cause of her death.

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"Must have been accident, she was taking pills prior to leaving town."

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"She was use to taking pills, had to be an accident ... had to be ... just had to be."

No one ever said whether her pill consumption was by prescription, whether her addiction followed the lie. No one ever questioned the lie, or the effect of the lie. We still believed what we believed.

My Mary Lynn saw what I saw. She said she asked Mother. "She didn't answer, told me to leave it alone." Mary Lynn said she wasn't leaving it alone, "I am going to do what I have to do." I didn't know what she meant and why it mattered. She looked like both. The time honored game of avoidance would have probably worked if ... I don't know ... if ... if ... just if.

Mary Lynn and Robert came to The Bay Picnic together. Let me be clear – this fact is not a rumor. Richardson's had nothing to do spreading the news, creating the rumor, contradicting anything, nor did anyone else. They were together. Robert exited first, then Mary Lynn. Robert's truck was the only 1963 Chevrolet short-bed pickup in the area. He held her

hand as they walked over from the parking lot to the picnic area, speaking as they walked, then down to the water's edge. This time there was no whispering, no clinging to the wings of rumor - no need - everyone saw – everybody. From the parking lot, through the grass, to the water's edge, we visually documented, stopping what we were doing, watching. Not at all shame with respect to our new genetic makeup – Point Setters we were, pointing in the same direction – stilled, silent, assuring others could see what we saw. Tails straight and upward, heads and noses pointed, leading forward, right legs raised, the other legs firmly anchored in place. We did. We were.

The Bay Picnic is our communal pot-luck. Somewhat like a communal Christmas celebration. Everyone closes their shops; everyone makes time, takes time. A tradition held together by “word of mouths”, every Independence Day. “As long as there is an Independence Day, there will be a picnic.” Those ill, if at all possible, readily checked out of the hospital. Out of town trips are generally cancelled. Grudges are buried for that one day. The Bay Picnic has never cancelled, even when the State closed the bay fifteen years ago. “Sponsored by no one – but by everyone” is the motto. The seafood comes from the bay, always gifted by the area fishermen and boat owners. Finnegan Farms provides the corn, potatoes, beans, fruits and greens. The plates and silverware donated annually. The pots are stored in our shop. The cooks are volunteers - permitted to take every other year off - excused when illness visits, trial and error long ago eliminated those who can't cook.

Mary Lynn and Robert arrived a little before eleven. Dad came back to the grounds at 11:30 a.m. I honestly don't think he saw them or even considered the possibility they were together – not until a little after noon. Until he saw what he saw, absolutely no one said anything to him. By then we became busy bees, sealed lips, diverted eyes – occupied ourselves by

helping, interfering in others' tasks, even if we were in the way. For the first time in the town's existence, we minded our own business.

When Dad saw what he saw, he walked bristly and purposely walked toward Mary Lynn and Robert. Every eye moved with him, watching, pretending not to watch, watching. Almost every eye – Mother slid over from her frying station – now feeling like an eternal path, although only a few feet separated us, reaching and touching my hand with her right hand, then my face, retaining the frying basket in her left, somehow leaning in an opposite direction while shaking the excess oil away. “Look at me. Look at me. Some things are best left alone. Sometimes they're not – left alone. To answer your question – ‘Your Dad is not your Dad and Robert's dad was not his dad.’” Mother wiped her brow, showing little emotion. “I've said it ... Good, good, I said it ... your Dad is Robert's dad” - words spoken while dumping the next batch of fish, moving on, prepping, wrapping, planning, moving on.

“Ma'am?”

“There is no what. I was mad at him and he was mad at me at the time. We both made mistakes, there is no book on life, sometimes we get it right, other times not. All you can do is get up; make adjustments; continue breathing and living. We have tried to remain honest with each other since.” The grease popped, as if acknowledging, having heard too, protesting and attacking Mother's apron, forming a light pattern up her arm, then mine.

Life's splatter played out before her, before us, over the horizon, down towards the water. Mother no longer made eye contact with me, correcting her posture, touching the small of her back – life's residual splatter continued to play out. I watched her; she watched them, sampling the last batch, adding a little salt. Salt is essential for life, an enhancer, a mineral occurring naturally in nature – on that day it seemed to enhance and sustain both the fish and her words.

“My, my, my....”

That is how I knew for sure, even though I always knew – hands, hair, voice, skin – they told; now confirmed, not by rumor, not on the tongues of others, told at The 81st Bay Picnic, amongst two hundred other people pretending not to notice the water’s edge, trying their best to mind their own business, going against the community’s typecast of hearing everything, transferring and enhancing the story, always making themselves a part of the story – but not that day, not that day.

Never, ever, never ...

Never, never did we see any of this coming. The deaths overlapped, the grieving process seemed never ending. Never, ever, never since has anyone mentioned what occurred at the water’s edge.

Robert was taught his skill and profession by Dad. Dad gave him the land in which his shop lay upon. He provided the financing for the shop. Treated him like a son, but not like a son, never, never acknowledging. Life told Robert this was not enough, forcing a contradiction, once forced a contradiction which couldn’t be taken back. The same as he couldn’t breathe life back into Dad, he just couldn’t. As the life escaped from Dad on that day, it also escaped from Robert. Never, ever, never did Robert speak another word; not to me when they loaded Dad’s body into the ambulance, not to Mary Lynn, not to anyone else, even when his Mother admitted him into the hospital for observation. As early as ten years of age he began demanding to be called Robert and not Little Bob. The contradiction seemingly came full circle, engulfing him, silencing him, killing him.

Mary Lynn said that once she touched Robert’s hands she knew. A distinct “W” found in his palm, the same contouring of the wrist, his hands, the color of his skin, the same mole on

the right index finger. “It didn’t matter. I knew. It didn’t matter.” She told me she tried to save him after Dad’s death, but he retreated faster, and faster, to another place. “The more I tried, the more he retreated, giving up – on himself - on us - on everything.” Never, ever, never, were her words spread; not by anyone. Never, ever, never were her words conveniently placed in any report to be talked about over coffee.

Richardson’s buried Robert’s body, bestowed their blessing, and respects to everyone in attendance, while wishing everyone a safe trip back to their families, homes and businesses. The crowd flowed in and around the grave site, unto the road, people inching closer and closer, holding, touching, grieving. “Ashes and ashes, dust to dust,” words repeated as the workers lowered the casket and began covering, burying. Mr. Richardson reached over and around, giving roses to Mary Lynn, Mother and Joyce Carthage, attempting to comfort. His comforting wasn’t needed. Their presence, touching, and meeting over the last week was enough, providing Robert his long-awaited peace. Still waters, still waters, still waters run deep. The dirt on the adjoining grave remained fresh, moistened in part by the recent rains. As the men shoveled and filled Robert’s grave, I grabbed some of the soil from Dad’s grave, tossing it into Robert’s grave - mixing, mingling, throwing mindlessly, not caring what anyone thought, or would say - dirtying, soiling in the same way a two-year-old dirties and soils if placed in a sand box, while remembering Mother’s words – “there is no book on life, sometimes we get it right, other times not. All you can do is get up; make adjustments; continue breathing, and living.” Mother’s words comforted my thoughts; the soils soothed my hands; Robert lying next to his father, our father, Bob Sisal, seemed right.