



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENT MILES

A STORY BY DICK BEESON

UNSTRUNG AMBER BEADS

TOM married at forty. At forty-six he put on his coverall jumpsuit, took a gallon can of red paint, and walked toward Grover Cleveland Grade School. At each street corner he stopped and painted an arrow on the sidewalk pointing left, or right, or going straight ahead—depending on the way to school. It was early September and his kindergarten son David would follow red arrows to school his first day.

Tom and I have been friends since my graduate library school days. He lectured and conversed like a freight train. He has not changed. His students still try to hop on, or flag the engineer to a siding, or derail the locomotive. Tom merely watches their efforts at participation like a disinterested engineer watches a passing landscape.

NOT long ago, with a free day to spend, I invited myself to one of Tom's lectures. Eager for company, he picked me up in a dappled Datsun. Lead grey body, yellow right front fender, one primer-red door and the other a flat green. The front passenger's footwell was full of discarded aluminum pop cans and empty cellophane peanut bags. He is addicted to

floating salted peanuts in colas—what he calls a "Planter's Coke." This Datsun was one of three he had resurrected from salvage yards. All run beautifully.

Tom was dressed in his usual style—what I call "scrubbed thrift-shop." Saturday-bath clean with fashions refurbished by Deseret Industries. Blunt-toed Corfam shoes with pilgrim heels and buckle. Broad belt and broader tie. Knits doubled and polyestered from a decade thrown away. His shirt pocket, split and resewn at both corners, carried two white plastic pocket-liners full of number three pencils with added erasers and clips, a pocket screwdriver, a tire gauge, and foreign language flash cards (I believe they were irregular French verbs at the time).

We headed for Woods Cross, Utah, where he taught an extension class in the philosophical basis of librarianship. He spoke incessantly of how the Greeks had divided reality into measurable physical existants and immeasurable metaphysical subsistants. Like a boy carving, stabbing, and whittling everything with his new jackknife, Tom applied the Greek concept of reality to as much of his world as he could in our forty-minute ride to Woods Cross.

His class, held in a high school, began *in medias res*. Our conversation, which had become Tom's monologue, was his lecture. Is a book real? Does it exist? Which is the real

Editors' Note

This story received an honorable mention in the 1983 D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest.

book—the physical or the metaphysical? Which is cataloged? Are the tools of cataloging physical? Can physical tools measure the metaphysical? He illustrated with a true story in which he and a musician colleague had been approached by behavioral scientists who wanted help with a project. They had been commissioned by certain Church authorities to prove (with the physical tools of the social sciences) that Rock and Roll was Satanic (a metaphysical notion certainly).

The students looked lost, worried, bewildered, and even angry. But Tom's train rolled on. It reminded me of once being on the Rock Island "Rocket Number Eight" from Fairbury to Lincoln when we hit a pick-up truck at a crossing. We were going 75 MPH. I was in the dining car. Nothing was spilled. Not a saucer rattled. A pink carnation swayed in its crystal vase and Number Eight rolled on. Tom then began covering material I had heard on the way up. I stepped into the halls of Woods Cross High School.

I was hungry. A concrete alcove painted with broad enamel bands of bright orange, red, and green offered vending machines. "SNAX" said the large black letters. Eight machines, mostly empty, vandalized or otherwise out-of-order offered my only choices: Hi-land Quality-checked chocolate milk and Clover Club Bar-B-Q Pork Rind Treats. The Clover Club mercifully cheated me.

It was adult education night at the high school. Coming from the cafeteria with the aroma of steamed goulash was the musical equivalent of steamed goulash—"She wore an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeney, yellow, polka-dot bikini"—disco style—with a square dance caller yelling over the lyrics. I was drawn to it like a boy will closely examine dead insects on a windshield. The cafeteria was full of grown-ups square dancing. Western costumes must be expensive because my general impression was that their fancy wardrobes were being bought on lay-away or a piece at a time. Some came in work clothes—blue and white collar. Some wore a western shirt or blouse with wing-tips or nurse's shoes. Yet, others were fully decked out. The caller guided the whooping dancers with rapid garbled instructions I couldn't swear were even English. Everyone was having a great time flagging petticoats and stomping feet. I saw an extra lady, probably the square dance club's secretary-treasurer, coming my way with western hospitality in her walk and "C'mon—You can do it!" in her eye. I took my chocolate milk and escaped.

Down the hallway through a one-way window I saw a class of adults and children learning sign language. The sign on the door said, "Signing for the parents of the newly deaf." I watched, unobserved for over thirty minutes. Parents and children of all ages were sitting knee to knee pulling meaning from one another a word at a time—and by hand. On the green blackboard was written "The best deaf lip-reader will understand only 30 to 40 per cent of any speaker's words."

I walked back to Tom's class. His students looked like sleepy lip-readers. The bell rang and Tom came out with his monologue still running. He broke briefly to ask if I would mind if we visited his mother at a nearby nursing home. I didn't mind.

Back in the mottled Datsun he continued his lecture—substantiated reality and the horizontal traditions of the Renaissance and the Age of Reason.

As we got out of his car at the Silver Threads Nursing Home he walked me briskly down the block in the eager autumn air to buy two York Peppermint Patties at a neighborhood grocery. His mother loved them. His ceaseless philosophical soliloquy continued down the block, through grocery aisles and checkstand and back to the Home. But, talk began to die at the entrance where an old man stook rocking foot-to-foot, his arms held stiffly at his sides, his hands in tight cupping shapes just behind his thighs.

A nurse told Tom that his Mother would neither eat nor speak. The nursing home smell followed us to her private room where she sat at her bedside in an armchair. She was staring at a stain on her synthetic sheepskin bedwarmer.

When she saw Tom she began an immediate dream-chatter. Tom fell absolutely silent. She mistook him for his several brothers, and her dead husband. She spoke of going to a home which she knew had burned to the ground in 1964. As Tom removed the tinfoil from the peppermint wafers and handed them to her she breathed more than ate them.

Tom was concerned. He half ran on tip-toe down the hall to get her an "Orange Crush." Her arthritic, shaking hands could neither grip nor steady the bottle. As Tom lifted the bottle to her lips she tried to chew the orange liquid which spilled freely over her chin and fell to the floor. He sat the bottle down very carefully, unfolded his clean, white handkerchief and laid it gently over the spilled droplets which looked like unstrung amber beads on the floor. He hurried down the hall again and returned with a straw. As her head jerked toward the straw, she bumped it with her gums and it repeatedly submerged into the deeper bottle. Again, down the hall and back with a second straw which he deftly fitted to the first. Success. Swift, hungry, toothless baby-sucking, and an empty bottle fell beside the two foil wrappers in her lap.

Tom remained silent as we drove toward home in the dusk. Woods Cross, South Salt Lake, the Vitro tailings ponds, the Jordan temple, the gray-orange copper mines on the western slopes, and, thirty quiet miles later, the Utah State Prison at Point of the Mountain. Not one word since goodbye to his mother. Watching the penitentiary slip under us at the summit, he cleared his throat and glanced over at me, like asking permission to break the silence.

"My son David is eight now. He bore his testimony in Fast and Testimony meeting last week. His first time. We were proud, but puzzled."

"Why puzzled?" I asked.

"Oh, it was nice to have him stand up—but, he lied. He told a story about me using the priesthood to heal his grandmother. It never happened. I've never even tried. We asked him about it on the way home. His mother asked if he thought all testimonies were made-up. He said he thought the stories were made-up but the testimony parts were real."

DICK BEESON is director of the Orem Public Library.