

I'm here to write about my son, my second son, the boy who went bad and gave us so much trouble. "Sebastian" I'll call him: Sebastian, who resembles his mother with his striking ivory skin and black hair; Sebastian, the beautiful child, the quiet child, who could play for hours building elaborate skyscrapers and giant battleships with chunks of lumber I'd gotten free at a lumber yard for both my sons to use as blocks.

Sebastian loved our trips from Austin to the Brackenridge Park and the Zoo in San Antonio during spring or autumn when the weather in Texas is perfect. We'd pack a picnic lunch to eat under the ancient live oaks, ride the small red train around the park, and go to see the lions, tigers and giraffes, his favorites. One thing Sebastian always refused to try was the elephant ride, even though his older brother Parker would jump right up on an elephant's back and ride sitting in front of me.

"Come on, Sebastian," I'd yell to him. "You don't want to go through life never having ridden an elephant."

"No," he'd shout back and stamp his feet.

I wrote a poem about our elephant-riding disagreement in ten syllable lines. In poems you have the license to alter facts to get at emotional truth:

I thought it worth the risk, our lives perhaps,
to ride the back of the elephant at
the Brackenridge Zoo. What kind of risk? Less

I guessed than crossing a crowded road. All your life you'd recall the feel of wrinkled elephant skin against your sweating hands, you'd recall the lumbering grey waves of muscle moving in the animal's back. All your life, a moving point to return to, a kind of serene eternity of the memory--but the boy pushed with all his small hard might. My son chose to draw back, his hand secure in his mother's hand.

Here, I've introduced you to my boy, but I don't know exactly how to go about putting down the hard things I will need to say. All I can do, reader, is hack away, hack away—an amateur playing a bad game of golf, hitting the ball but never being sure where it's going to land since a golf ball can slice and curve in all sorts of directions and take on a life of its own.

I'd like for this to be a novel, but novels tend to be a long ride. My fingers might grow weary typing; my wrists could ache, my back throb; I might develop car-

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pal tunnel syndrome if I set about to write a long novel, which I'd want to do in one big gulp—fast—because I get just six unpaid weeks off in the summer from my teaching job.

You could do so many other great things in six weeks, like hiking the Allegheny Mountain Trail, or like traveling south of the equator to see Venezuela. That country must have something going for it since our so “honest” Republican and Democratic politicians keep bashing its elected president. Venezuela's a small country compared to ours. What are these American politicians so afraid of—that we might have to wean ourselves from our addiction to foreign oil and gain self-sufficiency by developing wind, solar, and tidal power?

I've never been south of the equator and yearn like any soul for adventure, but with the cost of fuel so high these days, well, it's better to sit put, don't you think? Better to do interior traveling and

ride the submarine of words into the soul to make an offering to the world that might shed some light and help make us all a little wiser and better, hard at times though the journey may turn out to be in these hard economic times.

So I'll stick close to the novel idea for the time being. I call it a novel because the perceptions presented are mine and mine alone, and they are told in story form. What I am trying to share, however, are events that actually happened, but the fact remains these events are seen through my eyes and no other's. Maybe I should call this work a novel-memoir, a "new" kind of memoir that admits that it can't help but engage unconsciously in some fiction-alizing, since my memory, like any other's, is active, engaged in bias, and always reorganizing information from the past.

You can see I am insecure with what I've undertaken in these six weeks. Can I get away with the "crime" of writing? Life is always throwing you a curve, getting in your face and demanding you fix the leak in the roof or help somebody through rough financial or emotional times. I just bought new clothes for two of my grandchildren; they lost nearly everything in an apartment fire. I pulled the carpet out of our bathroom last month because, after the toilet flooded, mold got in the carpet, and, in one night, the smell became like rotting formaldehyde.

I've got a pile of tile sitting in the hallway next to the bathroom waiting for me to cut it and glue it down on the cement. I've got a sack of glue and a special trowel. I even borrowed the tile cutter from my eldest son Parker's girlfriend, but, so far, all this stuff does is sit, get in the way, and gather dust.

Life gets in your face. To write is a crime against practical obligations. It's a crime also because, sure as shootin', some folks are not going to like what you write. Others prefer silence; let the family skeletons stay locked inside a basement vault. Still, I am going to tell you about my wonderful second son Sebastian and his troubled journey.

Right from the time he was a toddler, he had trouble communicating. He would get so angry. This was when he was two and three, after he learned to talk, and I would ask, "Are you sad? Are you mad?" And he would stand in the living room of our Austin house on Ravensdale, shake his head, and grow more frustrated. He couldn't find any words to say what he was feeling. Where Sebastian

seemed to find most comfort was watching Mr. Rogers on PBS educational television. He really believed, when Mr. Rogers looked directly into the camera and spoke with his soft, intimate voice, “You are special,” that the man could see him and was speaking solely to him.

Maybe he didn't want to explain to his father what bothered him. Maybe compared to Mr. Rogers, with my long hair and beard, I looked too big and intimidating. This second child, I figured out

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many years later, was a secretive kid. He loved fireworks so much he tried to keep a secret stash for himself hidden in the bedroom

closet. He was crazy about this ice cream shop called “Nothing Strikes Back” on Guadalupe (“the drag”), next to the University of Texas in Austin.

The store was decorated with hippie posters, old marijuana paraphernalia, and black paint on the walls. You sat down at a black table on black chairs lit by ultraviolet lights. Sebastian actually cried one night in 1979 when he was eight and we couldn't find Nothing Strikes Back. We had walked up and down Guadalupe searching closely for the place, but it had closed its doors.

“Change happens,” I said to him. “Even ice cream shops are mortal.”

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