

A Fork in the Road

"I'm bored."

These are the two most dangerous words a child in my parent's house can say. Inevitably their utterance leads an unsympathetic adult to offer helpful suggestions such as cleaning your room, raking leaves or doing dishes. At my grandmother's these words can result in kneeling in the dirt pulling weeds around thorny rose bushes or mucking out stalls in the barn.

These are the hazards of forgetting yourself in my family. What I did not expect was for these words to drastically change the direction my life would take. No great epiphany. No near-death experience. No moral dilemma ending in a great life lesson. Just two simple words spoken by a forgetful nine-year-old boy.

It was a typically miserable gray day on the top of the hill in San Bruno. Rarely a day went by when the coastal fog didn't creep over from the western to eastern side of the mountain and hover over us like a sopping wet blanket. The California sunshine seemed to be reserved only for those living in the valley below us who inconsiderately played Frisbee in the parks, or sailed their boats on the bay in plain view of the less fortunate. However, this day the weather was equal in its cruelty and poured chilled liquid misery on everyone in the San Francisco suburbs.

I groused around the house unable to find even any mischief with which to entertain myself. Even the television offered no escape from the gloom. Maybe it was the fierce mood I was in or the absence of parents that made me forget myself, but as I flopped myself sullenly into the living room chair across from my aunt who lay on the couch reading I spoke the cursed words.

"I'm bored."

My aunt was not the stereotypical prototype. Her hair was not graying. She did not wear thick glasses or smell like a mixture of muscle cream and heavy perfume. She did not pinch the round cheeks of children and comment on how much they'd grown. She was a nineteen year old college student whose care I'd been thrust into that day. Her hair was raven dark and colored with streaks of blue, yellow and red on one side. She wore no glasses, nor had any offending smells. I was certain she detested children, cherub cheeked or otherwise.

When she lowered her book, which had been raised like a shield between her pleasure and my presence, I realized my folly and wished I could take the words back. I tried to take them back, but my mouth refused to cooperate.

"Why don't you read?" she asked.

I didn't say anything for a moment as I absorbed what she asked me. It was not the labor intensive suggestion I was expecting. But after some thought it did sound like work. After all, I only read in school or when I needed to finish homework.

"Read what?" I asked. "I'm not in school!"

"A book." She tilted hers at me. "These things with words in them. Don't you have books?"

“Those are baby books,” I told her indignantly. I hadn’t read any of those books since I was first learning to read and they had been passed to my younger brother, Kevin.

She sighed and lifted her imposing six-foot frame off the couch. “Get your shoes on.”

“Where are we going?” I asked suspiciously.

“Out.” She may have only been nineteen, but she had little patience for non-sense and the way she said “out” was the way every other woman in my family said it. It may as well been “Shut up and do what you’re told.”

At first I feared she might actually be taking me to school. She took the same route I did on my bike. But a few grateful turns later found us in front of the public library. I followed her from the parking lot, through the cold rain and into the inviting warmth of the library. I had not been to a library since a kindergarten field trip and had never given another thought to returning since. I looked around as I followed my aunt through the maze of texts. Two stories of books! I had never seen so many in one place before! There was also a smell I could not describe then – or even now. But I found it pleasing and oddly inviting. The labyrinth did not deter my aunt and she walked with winding purpose through the rows until she reached her destination.

“Here we go,” she said, motioning down a long row of books. She pulled one down and handed it to me.

My aunt and I had one thing in common. Horses. We both loved them. For my part, most of my young life I wanted to be a jockey even though my height and weight were rapidly approaching the point of impossibility. So when I looked at the book in my hands I felt a spark of interest kindle inside me. Though the cover was old and worn, it was solid and intact. It had that *smell*. On the cover was a picture of a rearing black horse with a boy near him, crouched as if ready to dodge a flying hoof. The title read simply, “The Black Stallion’ by Walter Farley.”

I turned it over and read the back. A young boy, shipwrecked with a wild stallion he befriends and after being rescued rides in the race of the century with the help of a retired trainer and mentor. “Cool,” I said with pleasure. I started looking at the other books in the row. There must have been nearly twenty by Farley. Most of them were about the adventures of the black stallion and the boy. Some were about other horses. It was one of these which caught my eye.

“The Island Stallion Races.” On the cover was a jockey riding a giant flame-colored horse neck and neck with two others, its tail and mane whipping in the wind.

“I’ll take this one!”

After going through the arduous process of getting a library card, I took my new prize home where I devoured every word. Before this my reading ability had been used for function. Learning to read with Dick and Jane. Reading in school. Reading street signs. But this... this was something else. Remote Caribbean islands; hidden valleys of wild horses; secret conquistador fortresses; horse racing and mysterious strangers. Even space ships! I had never read anything like it.

Cold, rainy days became a blessing. No one bothered me to go outside when the weather was sour. My thirst for reading was unquenchable and I endeavored to read everything I could put my hands on. I read every Farley book twice over – some five or six times. Every trip to the store ended with me begging for a book. When I couldn’t get

to the library or store I pulled my mother's books from the shelves. Sidney Sheldon; Robert Ludlum; Peter Benchley; Dick Francis; Stephen King and V.C. Andrews. During a summer month at my grandparents, I consumed my grandfather's entire Louis L'Amour collection. Most of these books were wildly inappropriate, but all were completely fascinating.

My mind had been opened up to different times and new places. Even new universes and realities. All of them were filled with love, hate, bravery, cowardice, honor, betrayal, power-mad villains and flawed heroes. Within a year my view of the entire world had changed.

What I didn't know at the time and wouldn't realize for many years was my discovery of reading for pleasure changed the course of my life as well. A son of hard working, blue collar immigrants, I always assumed I'd follow the same road. I assumed this with neither pleasure, nor apprehension. It was just the way it was. And I did enjoy spending days with my dad at a construction site, or sitting in my grand dad's shop watching him machine some metal knob or part to the nth degree of accuracy. But I had no passion for it. I had planned as long as I can remember – even in my jockey fantasy days – on learning my trade in the Navy because I wanted to serve the country which had given so much to my family. There I would probably learn machine repair or welding.

Now I wanted to write. About what, I didn't know or care. But for the first time I saw there was more than one road before me and I could turn in any direction I wished. My interest in the Navy started to wane, but not from lack of desire. I just didn't see the point if I couldn't also do what I loved. Then a trip to the recruiter revealed the Navy had photojournalists and combat reporters. I tried to join the Marine Corps when I was seventeen after watching "Full Metal Jacket." I want to get in "the shit" and start my writing career. These were the people whose stories I wanted to tell. But my mother had more sense and refused to allow it. So on my eighteenth birthday I enlisted in the Navy where I spent twenty years as a journalist, traveling the world and talking to people from every imaginable background and telling their amazing tales with my modest voice.

My relationship with my aunt grew stronger as well. We spent hours talking about the books we read. As I grew older our relationship changed from the traditional aunt-nephew to one of close friends and confidants.

I owe more than my love of reading to my aunt and a 1940s author named Walter Farley. The interest and passion they sparked in me led me to discover so much about the world. I did not know what a conquistador was. I wasn't even sure if I was saying it right. My next trip to the library after that first found me in the history section reading about Spain's brutal colonization of South America. Every book opened up new part of the world to me and led to my own writing career where I discovered first hand other cultures; history; real-life tragedies; acts of inspiration and valor as well as terrible depravities - the best and worst people can be.

I've also seen in the seemingly unending multitudes of writings in the world the boundless inventiveness and imagination of the human mind and for that I will always be grateful. Not a single time since that rainy afternoon when my aunt took a nine-year-old boy to the library have I uttered the words "I'm bored."