

THE MEDDLER

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The old shack was four miles out of town across the hot blow-sand desert, a ramshackle collection of boards, corrugated metal, plywood and baling wire, studded with old hubcaps and ancient metal signs advertising Coke, Pepsi, Seven-Up, Moxie, Michelin Tires, and various brands of soap flakes and the like.

I parked the Volkswagen bus on one of the few patches not strewn with rotting two-by-fours, rotting saw horses, galvanized tubs, piles of simmering tires, beer bottles and cans, hoping not to get a flat. I carefully picked a path through this vast minefield of debris noting the skeleton of a huge Christmas tree, tinsel still dripping, broken balls still depending from its now denuded branches. A museum piece of an old truck, the bed loaded with junk, one rear tire dangerously low, was angled in the yard beneath a sprawling screw bean mesquite.

A wooden Ivory soapbox passes as a front step up to the dilapidated door. Scars in the wood testify to its being used as a sticking place for a knife-throwing contest.

The ancient screen door frame, complete with orange rusted hinges and a few intact screws hanging from the hinge plates, leaned against the clapboards, partly obscured a cracked pane in the window.

Tucking my clipboard and dossier under my left arm, I knocked gingerly on the peeling varnish. A gecko scurried over the toe of my shoe. There followed the asthmatic bark of a dog and a steady shuffling on the other side of the door. After some delay a latch clanked, the knob turned jerkily and the door opened a crack. A wizened face, richly stubbled and rough as a plowed field, peered a wary single eye at me.

“Yes?” he cackled, “What can I do for you, sonny?”

“Are you Mr. James Montoya, sir?” I asked officiously.

“That I am, sonny, but I don’t know if I’m a ‘sir’. What are you called?”

“I’m Craig Fontenot from the Riverside County Library Foundation.” I reached to shake his hand. He reached a spindly arm terminating in a sheaf of thin fingers that gripped my hand like a vise and shook.

“You must have the wrong Mr. James Montoya, sonny. I can’t even read,” he confessed without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

“Call me Craig, Mr. Montoya,” I urged.

“Craig it is, sonny,” he chuckled.

“Is Ms Jocelyn Brown of Fort Wayne, Indiana, your daughter, sir?”

The door swung wider at that and the old man led me into a space that served as the living-room.

“Well, sonny, er Craig, if that is what your prefer, I don’t know about the Ms, but I do have a daughter up there by that name.” He squinted his right eye to nearly shut as he said it. The television mumbled to itself somewhere deep in the bowels of the shack, throwing flicking shadows bouncing on one of the back walls.

“Sit down and take a load off, boy.” Montoya pushed a couple of pillows and a sweater off the Pleistocene couch onto the floor. I settled myself into the surprisingly comfortable old cushions.

“Cup of Joe? I’ve got a fresh pot on?” he offered

“Yes. Thank you, Mr. Montoya. Two sugars, no cream please.”

The old man shuffled off to what must have seemed to him like a kitchen. There followed a clacking of plates and cups like a little overture with a crash and a tinkling of glass as a crescendo. He returned with two cups, handing one to me and sipping the other

before he put it down on the coffee table and plopped down into an overstuffed chair. The spoon in my coffee was standing nearly straight up in the black liquid. There was clearly no sugar, nor cream, in the mix. I set the steaming cup on a wooden barrel upon which was stenciled OATS, now trying to pass as an end-table.

He eased his old frame into a lumpy over-stuffed chair, to the loud yelping of a cat, which left a trail of hair on its madcap exit from the room. "Damn it, Gato, that's my chair," he scolded after the mangy feline.

A few flies rose like a squad of tiny helicopters on a reconnaissance mission. They did some fancy aerial maneuvers, and then settled on the crumbling tasseled shade of a tarnished bronze art nouveau lamp the belonged in a museum somewhere. Montoya reached out with a flyswatter and flicked two at the same time that must have been mating on his armrest. He artfully picked up both tiny corpses and deposited them into a wide-mouthed Mason quart jar I had not noticed waiting on the floor beside the chair. It was a little over half full. "Every man needs a hobby," he chuckled gnomishly.

I surveyed the austerity of the old gentleman's digs. The clutter was truly impressive, but otherwise the place looked fairly clean, except for recent sand blown in under the door and collected the window sills.

An odd thing occurred to me. There was not a newspaper, magazine, or book visible anywhere, no framed proverbs on the wall. Well, that was not entirely the case. Upon further study, a lump on top of an orange crate across the room, turned out to be a Bible. Next to it was a shoebox full of unopened envelopes.

"Your daughter wrote us a recent letter," I said, brushing a fly from my forehead. "She's very concerned about you, Mr. Montoya."

"It's *Mr. James Montoya*, to *you* lad," he said soberly, waiting a moment to let the blank look on my face smolder as I wondered if I had offended him. He laughed heartily and added, "I'm just *screwin'* with you Craig."

He sipped his dark brew with a wry look. "So, Craig," he inquired, "what did me darling daughter say about her old man?"

"She said she really loves you, Mr. Montoya, and she's concerned that you have worked so hard in your life for so long that you have missed many of the joys."

"No one gets to enjoy them all, my boy, but I have enjoyed my share. I began working with my parents in the lettuce fields. We moved with every season all over the west. Migrant workers, you know? I never went to school, but I learned to speak English pretty good playing basketball with the gringo kids whenever I could. It helped my parents a lot. They never really learned English, so I was their translator til they died. I've worked all of my life, Craig. Never learned to read or write, but then I never needed to. I learned to fake like I was reading pretty good, so I kept jobs and got friends to tell me what I needed to know. Street signs I learned by the shapes of the letters in a certain order, but I don't know what they actually say, just what they mean. I have never had a lot of money, but I have had everything I needed, and some of what I wanted. Never got spoiled, I'll tell you that, but I have been happy."

"Mr. Montoya," I said, "I brought Jocelyn's letter with me. Would you like me to read it to you?"

The old man scratched the stubble on his furrowed face, looked up at an old piñata of a bull hanging from a strand of twine from the ceiling in a far corner. A black widow was busy stringing a trap for the squadron from the ceiling to the string.

“Read to me, gringo boy,” he said.

Dear Mr. Fontenot,

A year ago, while visiting my father in Indio, California, I happened to hear of the good work of the Riverside Library Foundation. I understand it is a non-profit organization that provides books to people who love to read, but are not close to a library, or are unable to get to one, like shut-ins and the like. I have also been told you have an adult education program to teach adults to read.

My father has always been the hardest working man on the planet. He was born in the Coachella Valley to illegal alien parents. He married in his twenties, and when he was finally able to get a house of his own, he took in our elderly parents and cared for them without ceasing until they passed away.

He is a wonderful man, selfless and loving, and throughout his life he has always had a sense of humor, even in the worst adversity. He lives alone now, spends all of his time watching television. I have tried to get him to come live with me, but he loves his freedom and lives there as he pleases.

My father’s sacrifices made it possible for me to go to college. I find great joy in reading, but life never gave my father the time nor the opportunity to learn to read or write. In his waning years I know he would get great pleasure if he only could read.

Is there anything you can do to enter him in a program that would teach him to read and write?

Respectfully,

Jocelyn Brown

“Waning years?” he protested, “I haven’t even finished waxing yet,” He made a motion like he was waxing his car with a wry smile, “The impudent upstart!” he said in mock derision, laughing heartily at his own joke.

“I’m sure we can teach you how to read and write, Mr. Montoya. Your daughter would be very pleased if you would enter our program. You would not have to go anywhere to do it. We’d send someone out here to your home to teach you. What do you say?”

“I can’t afford to pay...” Montoya said.

“There is no charge to you, Mr. Montoya. This program is well-supported and free to those who want to take advantage of it.”

The old man was tapping the end of his rough nose with a bony finger.

“What the hell, let’s give it try,” he said, “but don’t tell my daughter until we can see if I can learn, okay? Who knows how much of my brain is left after 75 years?” He was chuckling again.

That’s how it began. Life had been hard for the old man, but he still had a lot of his brain power left. He quickly learned his ABCs, reacting with boyish joy to the learning process as flash cards were held up by his teacher. The basic mechanics, it turned out, had been picked up by a kind of osmosis from just living. He knew, for instance, that words are names of actions and things, connected by smaller words. Just speaking made that clear. He instinctively knew that sentences started at the left and read to the right by watching other people read. He easily recognized the difference between capital letters and lower case and that each sentence began with a capital and ended with

period. He knew that each letter had a sound and that linked together they made words in writing just like they did in speaking. His teachers used the Spaulding method of and drilled him on sounds and letter-forms. He was an eager and diligent student.

Soon he was reading simple things, children's books, signs, words on his phone and electricity bills.

As the months flew by he turned off the television and concentrated on finding things to read: cereal boxes, instruction manuals for appliances, even the old Bible, but the way they strung the words together seemed wrong to him somehow. People didn't speak like that, did they?

He turned the television back on for awhile and found there was also a lot to read on the screen, especially during the commercials, but it wasn't the same for him. He went back to the printed page.

His small stack of books had already been read. He was eating his way through anything he could find. Old Montoya called the Foundation and they brought over Gary Paulsen books, Maurice Sendak books, Beverly Cleary books, Will Hobbs books, and a myriad of other adolescent authors. He devoured them like candy. He asked for a challenge and soon he was reading Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Faulkner. He found Shakespeare and Donne, Blake and Bacon. He read Proust, Shelley, Keats, Vonnegut, Malamud, Hillerman, Malamud, Louis L'Amour, Melville, Churchill, Rickenbacher, Lawrence, Fitzgerald, Twain, Bierce, Balzac, Wilde, Alexie, Sartre, Kipling, Dickens, Dickinson, and a host of others. His appetite was insatiable.

Within the year he had read every book they brought him and had begun getting books from his daughter in the mail. He got a library card and began to ransack the stacks in Indio and Palm Desert. He robbed the Bookmobile when it came to the local Indian Reservation. When asked for books back he refused. "I have to have them near me," he said. "They're my friends now." The orange crate was now buried in unopened overdue book notices.

The television had not been on in a month. He read in the morning. He read all through the day. He read until he was exhausted and fell asleep with a book fluttering like a captured bird in his grip.

For the first six months I called in on Mr. Montoya every couple of weeks, writing reports on his phenomenal progress, writing Jocelyn about the wonder of her father's intellectual journey. As time passed my visits became less frequent. I felt that the Foundation's goals had been met with success beyond my wildest dream. Here was a case where a former old migrant worker, suffering from the banality of illiteracy, had had his life enriched by what the organization had been able to provide for him.

Ancient Mr. Montoya had become the poster boy for literacy.

I would visit him one last time, and then move on to other needful people, secure in the fact that what I did for a living made a difference.

This day, a year and four months after my first visit, I knocked on the now familiar door and waited for quite some time. No answer. I gripped the knob and turned it, but the door was bolted from within. I moved the old screen door aside and peered in through the cracked glass. The entire window was blocked by books stacked so high I could not see into the house.

The window around the other side of the shack was likewise blocked by books, but I was able to jimmy up the sill. A stack of books crashed over as I pushed them out of the way to climb into the room. The entire house was stacked full of books from floor to ceiling, except for corridors just big enough to sidle through, threaded between bound towers of print.

I turned a corner in the maze of hardbacks and came to the wide spot in which Mr. Montoya lay unconscious on his tattered couch in a surrounded by menacing stacks of books. Four large volumes were in his lap and his head was lolled to one side. The old man appeared to weigh less than 90 pounds.

I frantically searched until found the telephone nearly hidden by paperbacks and dialed 911 and heard operator dispatch a crew of paramedics.

Extricating the frail old gentleman from his prison of books was not an easy task. Books had to be stacked in the narrow aisles between other stacks in order to get the stretcher in an out of the house.

As I walked into the hospital room the following morning, I was shocked at what I saw. Mr. Montoya looked like a tiny skeleton, his toes pushing up two tents in the sheet and thin blanket. An oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. Steam coated the inside of the plastic hood. IV tubes ran from his wrists to bags hanging next to the bed. His daughter has holding a sheaf of thin fingers ending in claw-like nails.

“What did the doctor say?” I asked Jocelyn.

Stress had ravaged her face. “He says my father is suffering from malnutrition. He’s starved himself nearly to death.”

“Did he say whether he did it on pur ...” I began, but stopped, feeling the question was a bit heartless.

“Doctor Parkinson thinks he just quit eating. He has no idea why,” she said wiping a tear with a Kleenex.

“Is he going to be all right?” I asked.

“He’ll be in the hospital until they can fatten him up, but the prognosis is good, the doctor said.”

“Thank God,” I said, patting her shoulder.

After a week Montoya began to ask for books. Jocelyn got him some magazines which he devoured with enthusiasm, saying little.

Eventually the old man got well enough to go home. He was anxious to get back to his printed friends, stacked all over his home. What they decided not to tell him was that they had moved a lot of the old man’s precious books to a shed in the back yard, others to an abandoned travel trailer the old man had out back in the yard.

When Mr. Montoya opened his front door it was clear from his expression that he was not happy with what they had done. He became belligerent and angry. Joscelyn stayed for a week, putting up with the old man’s ill temper as she cooked and cleaned and made sure her father was eating properly. She put him on a reading schedule after he hand confessed he believed he had overdone his reading. “I might have gotten a little carried away,” he said. “I had a whole lifetime of reading to do, don’t you see?”

He paused and looked at all of the wonderful books he had, now on shelves made of cinderblocks and planks. He pointed to them, “Darling, if I’m not alive to read them, a lot of books are going to unread. I promise, darling. I’ll take care of myself from now on.”

She quit doing everything for him and watched. He showed balance and skill in reordering his life. Happy with the good she had done, she called a cab, kissed him goodbye and caught a flight from Palm Springs to Phoenix and on to Fort Wayne.

The old man did well for quite some time. I called him weekly on the telephone and dropped in at odd times to make sure he was okay. I noticed there were more books than when we had weeded them out into storage, but there seemed to be nothing to worry about. Mr. Montoya seemed well fed and healthy. I eased off his surveillance.

There were several hundred other people to attend to in the program and I soon busied myself with administration and a new book procurement program. Mr. Montoya would call me occasionally, asking him if I had a copy of this book or that. Often I was able to oblige the old man.

Two months later the phone rang on my desk. It was Jocelyn. She had not heard from her father in a week and was worried. Could I go out to the old shack and check up on him?

“Of course, I’ll go see him this morning. I miss seeing your father too,” I said sincerely.

My alarms went off when, for the second time, I knocked and heard no movement from within. Panic began to gnaw at my stomach as I jimmied the window as before, but this time the books wouldn’t budge. I went to the back door and desperately tried to kick it in. The door would not open.

Police and paramedics were also unable to find a way into the shack, so a crew of construction workers was summoned. Using pry bars they were able to muscle their way into the house with a half hour. Deep within the solid block of books that the house had become, crushed beneath fallen stacks of books, was found the inert body of Mr. Montoya, the poster boy for literacy. He was carried out into the red glow and long shadows of the setting sun. One casualty of the recover was a rescuer named Pumpelli, who was seriously injured by Volume 3 of the Oxford English Dictionary.

I watched sadly as the coroner slid Mr. Montoya’s body into the coroner’s wagon. My mind was abuzz with irony. My foot brushed against something on the ground. It was a book.

Reaching down I read the gold lettered spine. It read, “AN IDIOT’S GUIDE TO HEAVY READING”.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

The idea for this story came from the passing of a real person, a Native American of the Cahuilla Band of Indians. I do not remember his first name, but his last was Kitano. The old man lived on the Torres-Martinez Indian Reservation near Indio, California in the 1970s, just down the street from tribal headquarters, across from the old school and agency house where Pow-Wows and celebrations were held. His yard was full of old cars and when he died his body was found in the shack by relatives who had to wend their way through corridors of newspapers piled to the ceiling.

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