

BIG RED

STEVE SCHLOZMAN

You said, that October,
In the tall dry grass by the orchard
When you chose to be free,
“Again someday, maybe ten years.”

- Gary Snyder, *December at Yase*

I called the Ford Hatchback with the Kansas plates “Big Red.”

It was a silly joke, one that would make sense only to me. I had a red Schwinn bike well before my voice dropped. It had one of those bright red banana seats that you never see anymore but that were everywhere back when my parents had tied a bow on it and given it to me for my 8th birthday.

No helmets back then, or much of anything, really, in the way of protection. Just the certainty that it would take two, maybe three rotations on the pedals and soon the bangs would blow off of my forehead and I’d go shooting down the street and I wouldn’t stop until I shoved my left foot backwards on the pedals, skidding to a stop and imagining myself Eval Knievel.

I called my bike Big Red because it struck me as a majestic horse for the suburban subdivision that was despite its mundane surroundings a genuine corral in my imagination when I was old enough to have watched a few Westerns. It could not have occurred to me that there are not really any horses that particular tint of red. I actually knew nothing about horses. I was an upper-middle class kid, son of a doctor, living the dream of America as it retreated in haste from the lack of conventions that had taunted the status quo of the 1960’s. My mom actually had a sign in her window announcing to the neighborhood that she was an officially designated “Block Mother”, meaning kids could find safe haven and a glass of milk simply by ringing our doorbell.

These matter, all of these memories, because they selfishly guided my behavior when I fell truly in love for the first time. I’m not talking about a

crush, or even a bawdy affair, though there were of course plenty of those. This was different. This was what I had been waiting for. I was born to fall in love, made clear to me by the same romantic notions that led me to unironically refer to my Schwinn bike with the name of a fictional and unlikely stallion. I regularly undertook the hero's journey. Those crushes, that bike, the beat up Ford that followed as I got older...my coming of age...it all happened quickly and uneventfully. I was forever dreaming of love and family but unaware and untethered by any real understanding of how crisp and delicate true heart-ache could feel.

And so it was that on a hot day in July I found myself happy, relieved, and with great and noble purpose as I began at the age of 24 my trek home from California. I was driving Big Red with Beth in the passenger seat, and we were going up and up and eventually over the mountains of eastern California to meet my family, who were waiting with anticipation some 2000 miles across the country. I was triumphant, a man of the world, returning home from the frontier with both the gold and the girl.

Rickie Lee Jones was on the cassette and Beth was telling me, again, because I never tired of the story, about her mom and her mom's boyfriend Eli dropping their hot air balloon onto fields in the San Juaquin valley, stealing watermelons and almonds or maybe apricots, and then taking again to the sky, stoned out of their minds and delighting in their groovy version of Bonnie and Clyde. These were not the stories of the suburbs where I had been raised, not even in the realm of possibility. I had imagined adventures on a bike that I fancied a horse, but Beth had been reared in a communal home in Pasadena. Her mother, I was told, had from time to time announced to her children that she and Eli intended to make love before driving her children to school.

With balloons and free love to buoy me over the peaks of California, I urged my little car onward as she leaned bravely into the ascent. I recall shifting from 4th to 3rd and sometimes even to 2nd gear, just to manage the mountain pass, as if my Ford Escort Hatchback could sense the gravity of what was to come. Big Red was carrying one person deeply in love, and another who had begun her misgivings but had either not consciously come to this conclusion or had made the merciful decision to keep it all to herself for the duration of the road trip.

Perhaps this was the reason the car stopped running. Big Red could take the charade no further. She sighed, flashed her engine light, and stubbornly refused to go on. We rolled to a stop just off of the road at the end of an exit for a tiny hillside town whose name I have forgotten but whose

weeping willow next to the highway is imprinted like a sepia photo in the recesses of my mind.

I recall that I had with me my copy of John Gardner's *Grendel*, and Grendel's mother was a real piece of work. In fact, I realize now that this whole thing, every minute of my life until then, had been about mothers, but not in a bad or cliched way. There was my Block Mother mom in Kansas, the balloon-pilot produce thief in Southern California, and the moldy maternal beast who lived deep in an undersea cave and sent her son to make happy meals of Norsemen as they stumbled around their ale halls. Despite their differences, all of these mom's held the same maternal instincts, all exerting their love onto their children. The magnetism of that love created for me a level of ongoing and naïve comfort. I was as certain as the day was long that Beth would be the mother to *my* children. I would gladly surrender control to her, and this...this passivity...*this* was my undoing.

I sat under the willow tree and opened *Grendel* to the folded down page because Beth told me she intended to pay for the repairs to my car by winning a few hands of blackjack. She had learned from her misanthrope father how to count cards (she was, after all, a math teacher) and she thought the little casino connected to the Safeway just up the hill was the ideal mark for a petite young woman to take home some winnings.

"We have my parents' credit card," I reminded her, but she pointed to the obvious:

"It's your *parents'* card. Let's do this on our own. Just you and me."

You look back on things and you wonder. If I had gone with her, or perhaps simply not mentioned my parents' credit card...would those choices have mattered? I am completely certain that some sad and relieved part of her already knew, already understood that we were finished. But if I had broken for just a second from my role as the worshipping observer, then maybe just a bit of doubt would have tripped her back in my direction. Water under the bridge, I know, but still...

All 5 foot 4 inches of Beth turned and walked up the path towards the Safeway and its unnamed casino. I sat comfortably under the willow tree, a piece of grass between my teeth, and gazed at the uncomplicated horizon.

There was wind that day. It was a hot desert breeze, not an ounce of moisture in the air, my eyes dry from dust and shade. Five minutes went by, then ten, and I was starting to doze when a shotgun blast shook me from my nap.

I stumbled to my feet and saw just up the hill and in front of the sliding glass supermarket doors a heavy set woman with beet-red hair holding a shotgun. She had her hair fixed up in an elongated bun, and this gave the ominous impression that her scalp was in fact home to a red-tinted beehive. She loaded another round into the chamber and shook the firearm back into place with a click that meant business. Beth was making her way down the path, the slightest of smiles on her face. The women with the beehive fired again into the air, and Beth refused to run, actually took her time, despite the obscenity-clad threats from the woman with the shotgun not more than 15 yards to her back.

“Time for us to go,” is what Beth said to me.

She had a bundle of cash in each hand. Until then, I had been certain that she was a girl I could choose to admire for all of my life, but her walking away, not running, while the red-headed woman behind her fired those double-barrels into the air? Beth wasn't just the one for me at that moment. She was the *only one there would ever be*. Nobody else would do.

Big Red died shortly after our drive across half of America. Beth told me just after that trip to meet my parents that we were done, and I bet that Hatchback knew better than anyone that Beth and I were not meant to be.

But if I close my eyes and surrender, I can feel the few last minutes of that marvelous dream. I am shifting from 4th to 3rd and sometimes even to 2nd gear, just to get up and over those ignorant and soaring peaks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Schlozman is an associate professor psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Vermont Medical School, and the chief of the child psychiatry service at the University of Vermont Medical Center. In addition to teaching and practicing medicine, he has taught courses on horror films and neurobiology, coming of age stories and movies, and the depiction of health and physicians in popular culture. He is also a novelist and short fiction writer, with two published novels and a number of short stories.