

WHY I NO LONGER SMOKE

Suzanne Lawrence, Scottsdale Community College
Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

I arrived in Arizona an 18-year-old cigarette smoker, without much of a clue, but an open mind. I don't know how old Skip was then, though the math would be easy to figure. I do know he was 14-years-old when he was in the accident that made him a quadriplegic. That is an interesting number because it was 14 years later, when he was 28, that he died. An even split for the experiences of his life this turn.

As I began my freshman year at Arizona State University, I was financially encouraged to find a federal work-study job. I applied for many disheartening positions with words like "administrative" and "resources" in the job title, and one vague position of "driver" that required only a driver's license, and I had one of those. Of all the applications I suffered through, repeating my important information like a nutritional label, I received only one response. I was to become a professional golf cart operator for the government. I worked early mornings at Disability Resources for almost a semester before meeting Skip.

Dead friends are the hardest to write about because you are always afraid their mothers will read what you have written and be shocked and angry through the holidays that you portrayed their lost child as a real person. And the holidays are tough enough on them already. So with all due respect to Skip's mom, Lana, I'm going to come out and say it, Skip was a pot dealer. I learned this just before I left for Christmas break. I wanted to take some AZ bud home to my friends in Illinois, but was having problems finding a supplier.

One afternoon I happened into our office, and there I met Skip for the first time. He was what is known as a "Power Ranger" among the wheelchair-bound, meaning that his chair was electric and not manually propelled. He had a long ponytail that hung down to his seat and a smile that divided his face and activated his dimples. With immediate confidence in me, he offered his retail services to fill my needs. I would later learn that for Skip, dealing pot was more of a pharmaceutical service. Marijuana is a fine natural substitute for many drugs, including painkillers and blood pressure meds that have undesirable side effects. Skip even went so far as to purchase the tax stamps available only in the City of Tempe that made the sale of marijuana legal.

Here is a little story to illustrate the need of such drug for people with severe physical disabilities. Skip wound up with a stray cat named Tristan, but we all called her Bitch Kitty. At night if not properly medicated, Skip's body would spaz out, the muscles jerking uncontrollably. In response, the kitten Bitch Kitty would attack Skip's bare legs, which in nervous reaction would kick. In the morning Skip would wake up with his legs shredded, having felt nothing of the previous night's assault. And these spaz attacks could occur at anytime, making Skip appear as if he was astraddle a bronco instead of a motorized wheel chair. He would buck and jump mercilessly. He once told me that after his accident he had a girlfriend that used to enjoy making love to him because she knew exactly where to hit him to get a vibrational response. Skip enjoyed life.

I had a year to the day with Skip before he surprised everyone with his grand exit. During that time, I worked with him daily. His candid insights helped me to deal with and grant comfort to the many temporary and permanently disabled people I drove around ASU's sprawling campus. Without a trace of regret Skip related the healing process after his accident, the special schools and kind nurses who would take the newly disabled children out for ice cream, forcing them to order and struggle with feeding themselves. He showed me pictures of the tall, muscular football player he had been weeks before he flipped his uncle's farm truck. He told stories of stealing his father's sports cars and driving them haphazardly around winding roads in the Black Hills of South Dakota, newly drunk and too young to be doing any of these things. He calmly explained how he was driving slowly down a flat piece of road, completely sober, when he was in the accident that disabled him. He even was able to show me how it was meant to be, convincing me that if it had never happened he would be a completely different person now, one crippled with ego and sexually transmitted diseases. As it was, anyone who took the time to glance down and acknowledge Skip knew the faith and courage of humankind. The guy had so many friends that his funeral was standing room only. I guess we all kind of hope for that.

Early on in my year of Skip, he managed to buy a home without the government putting a lien on it by taking out a loan under an alias. Skip's real name was Ernest Renaldo; you can see why "Skip" stuck as a nickname. It was one of the many examples of how he took the opportunity of his fortune and used it to his advantage. Skip did not miss any of the challenges or joys of life due to his disability. When I met him he was working on his Masters in history, he loved to teach. I think the plaque on the willow tree ASU planted in his honor says something like that. I'm sure he is pleased, though he favored Canary Island pines.

It was tradition that after work the crew would all go to Skip's house to watch *The Simpson's* and have a brew. We lived in the same neighborhood, just west of campus, among the many rental homes, chicken joints and music stores. A common route took us by Tops Liquor store, I would handle our selections and he would pay for them. We would roll slowly home, my bike making broad lazy circles around his wheelchair, the handles of which were heavy with plastic sacks full of beer. And we would talk about important things, life, love, service and duty. Skip was constantly encouraging people to better themselves. At his urging, I started a retirement fund and attended all my teacher's office hours. He was also always on my ass about smoking, and ultimately he was the one who persuaded me to quit.

This wouldn't be a story about how Skip died, except that the circumstances are so well thought out that it almost seemed planned, as if he chose the time and the company.

In early December Skip encouraged his friends to make bonds with each other outside of him, reminding us he wouldn't be around for long. None of us wanted to believe this, the guy had already swindled death once. I think he had a much healthier view of the inevitable, he was not afraid of dying.

Then he began to circulate the book *Illusions* by Richard Each. This was common, as Skip was an avid reader and shared his passions openly with anyone who was receptive. My copy of the book sat in my room until Christmas Eve, which was

the first night I got any sleep after Skip died. Until then I had been crying and drinking vodka to keep from shaking. I read half the book and fell into an amazingly coherent sleep full of bright flashes of understanding, and yes, I do know how cheesy that sounds. The thing is that dreams are so much more feelings than sensory experiences that this is the only way I can describe that night. The next day the sun was out, a huge Christmas rose had bloomed in the garden and I was finished weeping.

The third week in December Skip enticed me with a wager, betting a sack of pot for me, to a month's worth of neck massages for him, that I could not quit smoking cigarettes for one month, starting January 1. I took the bet.

It was only a night or two later that I was at his house, surrounded by many friends, watching the Blue Angels on the Learning Channel. For some reason I was compelled to give Skip a huge kiss when I walked in, he just had this glitter of joy in his eye, I couldn't resist. A few people had eaten mushrooms, the kind that make things sparkle, and Pink Floyd was playing in the background. I did not know then, but Skip had taken a massive dose of Baclofen, a blood pressure drug, to help reduce spazzing while he enjoyed his mushrooms. I sat down and had a beer, and probably a bong, and everything was happy and I felt safe in this haven in the big city. It was during the interlude between the songs "Time" and "Breathe" when things started to go wrong with Skip, he started spazzing hard, jerking back and forth in his chair as if someone had him by the front of his shirt and was shaking him back and forth. The background singer was a howling lady with a male voiceover repeating "I'm not afraid of death, I'm not afraid of dying..." Skip's caregiver put him in bed, and we tried everything that usually worked. Ultimately we did a quick clean up and scattered. I hopped on my bike and rode the three blocks to my house, knowing that I did not need to complicate the situation with my underage drinking.

Before I had reached my house I could hear the sirens. I spent the night sitting on my back porch, audibly tracking the ambulance through the streets to the hospital, smoking. I still thought everything would be fine, these things happened occasionally. The next day I went up to my grandma's to help her prepare for the holidays, it was winter break, probably the 18th or 19th of December. I was finally updated by a phone message from Skip's caregiver and best friend since grade school. It was tearful and terrified, saying to come down to the hospital, because if things did not improve in the next day or so, they were going to turn off the life support. Apparently, Skip was much weaker internally than any of us had guessed, he had been ill often that fall. I grabbed a history book and my best friend and I went to stand vigil. What we were watching for is not clear, perhaps it is that moment when life ceases to exist in a physical body, or maybe we just wanted some reassurance for our own mortality.

Skip died for the second time in 28 years, this time completely, on December 22, the darkest day, nearly four years ago. The weather was amazing that week, with magnificent clouds and the sun bursting through at intervals. The colors were steely gray and peaches and everything in between. Skip loved weather, and I thought how weather must have loved him. I don't know how many hours of the Weather Channel I endured just to be in his company. There was crying and singing and a huge party of family and friends, and just enough time left before I had to make good on my bet to smoke through the funeral and services. I haven't smoked since. Now when I do something good for myself I think of Skip and know he approves.