

## “Boonie”

Being the “New kid” was a new role for me. I was raised on a ranch near Alturas, in Modoc County, California. My great grandparents were some of the first families to settle in Modoc. I seemed to be related to everyone and have cousins under every rock.

When I was seven, my father developed Parkinson’s disease and we had to sell the ranch and move into town. Since my dad could no longer do his carpenter business or guide hunting parties my mother had to take on various jobs to support us. She checked groceries by day and waited cocktails by night. I thought it was so cool that her tip jar would grow precipitously every morning so I never lacked for candy or a new comic book on the way home from school. I liked being in town where I could be with my friends. My bike could take me from one end of Alturas to the other in less than 20 minutes, or half an hour if I stopped to spit over the Pit River Bridge or stop for a chocolate dip at the Frosty.

My dad died when I was ten. Since we lived about a block from the bowling alley, I got a job setting pins for a dime a line. Mom started dating. Mostly men she met at the bars. She’d date them for a while then ask me if I’d like to have this man be my father. When I’d say “no”, she would move on and find another. It became obvious that that she wasn’t looking for a husband as much as she was looking for a father for me. After a couple of potential “dad’s”, she brought home Don. Don was a cowboy who worked on a ranch over the Warner Mountains near Cedarville. Don would take me fishing and hunting on the weekends he wasn’t too hung over. He was funny and open and had life in him. When mom asked me I said yes. They drove to Reno a couple of weekends later and I had my new dad.

Don hadn’t always been a cowboy and he couldn’t support a wife with a fourteen year old kid on the \$125 a month he got for wrangling cows in the high desert of Modoc. Don had once been a logger in the little town of Chester, California, and since the money was better cutting down trees, we moved to Chester.

Tom was about my age and my new next door neighbor on Lassen Avenue. I’d hear him or occasionally glimpse him through the fence that separated his house from the red stained log house we were renting. I was trying to adjust to not having friends or cousins to visit and figuring out what to do with my summer time. After a couple of weeks I ventured to say “Hi” to Tom through the fence. Tom was tall like me but thinner and wiry. His face, like his body, was all sharp angles. He had fairly bad acne and seemed a little weird but was easy to smile and laugh. Sometimes as we were getting to know each other he would make strange hissing sounds by sucking air in through his teeth, hunch his shoulders and do a thumbs up gesture. He

would look at me as if seeking some kind of approval. I pretty much ignored these and he soon stopped.

Tom had a bike and in a couple of minutes we could be out of town and up the paved road toward Lassen Park, or Drakesbad, or any of hundreds of logging roads around Lake Almanor. We would often ride up the juniper Lake road until it ran out of pavement. We'd rest for a bit at the little campground at Benner Creek, then turn around and coast all the way back down the hill to home. Sometimes we would see other kids at the swimming hole just out of town but Tom never wanted to stop. It soon came to me that I was Tom's only friend. Sometimes when we would pass other kids I would hear them call out, "Hey Boonie", but Tom never acknowledged them and we would peddle on, intent on our venture of the day.

As the summer passed I focused on discovering this new world. Tom's dad told me one day how grateful he was that I had "befriended" Tom. I thought that a little strange but didn't think much of it. I met some of the other town kids at the Wesleyan Methodist Church mom had decided we would attend. Just before school was to start, Mom and Don bought a house on the other side of town, right across from the Jr. Sr. High School. I was busy settling into the new house and getting my room set up. Tom would ride his bike over but we didn't have much time to play. We rode our bikes out to the dump a couple of times to throw rocks at the black birds. Then it was time for school.

In Alturas I was used to knowing nearly everybody at school, except for the new kids. Now I was the new kid. I barely knew some of the kids from church plus my friend Tom. At school I found that Tom was not "Tom", but was "Boonie". And Boonie was the weird kid. Other kids would come by and make the noise of sucking air through their teeth and sticking their thumbs out and Tom, er, Boonie, would return the gesture. It was easy to see the other kids were teasing Tom in that cruel way endemic to adolescents, and that teasing was Tom's only way of relating to the other kids.

Tom and I had only one class together, but for the first few weeks would seek each other out between classes and lunch. Tom would ride with me to my house after school before he sped off towards his home. I would hear kids calling "Boonie" sometimes as he peddled down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.

The dance began about the second week of school. Some kids started calling me "Boonie's friend," and doing that weird sucking sound with their thumbs out expecting me to mimic Tom's response. When I didn't the bumping started, my locker slammed shut before I could exchange my books, sometimes a kick to the shin, but the worst was gym class.

PE was shared with the grade ahead of us. These were freshmen. Our class was still Jr. High. I had never had to "dress down" before, let alone shower with other kids. This was the height of

vulnerability. The major athletic event during PE wasn't the flag football, or soccer, it was the gauntlet of snapping towels one faced coming out of the shower. Tom was a particular target of Wes, and I soon became another. As Tom never fought back it was accepted that neither would I. Now, I came to understand that part of the dance was to establish who I was and where I fit in the pack. Because of my association with Tom I was already at the bottom and if I stayed there my life would be insufferable. My first chance came playing flag football. Across the line from me was Wes. Wes was a fairly big kid with greasy black hair. He snarled that he was going to kick my ass and when the ball was hiked I got a fist to the side of my neck. "next it's your face" Wes hissed. At the next hike I caught Wes with a right elbow. I was aiming for his nose but I caught him in the eye instead.

As rumors go, word spread that I had beaten Wes up on the football field, and my life changed. There were no more bumps or slammed lockers. If anything, most of the other kids just stopped paying much attention to me at all. I waited for Wes to retaliate but it never came. Wes did, however, turn up his torment of Tom.

I had been playing the trumpet since I was about eight in the Alturas Elementary School band, so I checked into joining the Chester Jr. Sr. High band and found I was advanced to the point of being able to challenge for first chair. Next to me was another new kid, Butch from McCloud. Butch played well also and we shared the two top seats in the trumpet section. Mr. Welch was glad to have us and gave us separate trumpet duet pieces to practice. We had to practice after school. I would see Tom swing around on his bike by the band room then head on home.

Butch and I developed a friendship and gradually I stopped spending time with Tom. I became more involved with other kids in church also and it just became easier to not be around Tom all that much. I even found myself referring to Tom as "Boonie" sometimes when I was talking with my new friends.

The snows started in mid-November and one afternoon I heard someone say that Wes was going to beat up Boonie after school. I still sat near Tom in Social Studies and asked him if he had heard the rumor. Tom just shrugged his shoulders. I told Tom that he was bigger and much stronger than Wes and to fight back. I told him to get mad and just pound the shit out of him.

When the final bell rang I hurried out the door to the parking lot by the gym where I knew Tom parked his bike. There was already a small crowd and there was Tom with his bike. Wes was keeping Tom from progressing by holding the handlebars. Wes reached across and slapped Tom across the face. Tom's face turned white then red where Wes' hand had struck. Tom just stood there holding his bike. Snow was starting to fall in cold wet flakes. Wes jerked Tom's bike out of his grip and threw it into the snow, then took a swing catching Tom high on the

head. I yelled "Get him Tom" as loud as I could. Wes then got Tom in a headlock but couldn't get Tom to the ground. Then Tom started fighting back. In a split second Tom was on top of Wes and was pounding Wes' face with flying fists and screaming a wild hurting animal sound mixed with crying. Then Mr. Adamson was pulling Tom off Wes and it was over.

Both Wes and Tom were suspended for a week. I overheard Wes saying how he had slipped in the snow which was the only reason Boonie got on top of him. Wes wore the bruises Tom had given him for several weeks. After Christmas break Wes did not return to school. I heard his father sent him to live with his mother or some relatives down in the valley.

Tom came by my house one afternoon just after school got out for the summer. He had built himself a scooter out of some kind of lawnmower engine. It looked to be held together by bailing wire and seemed to be capable of going 50 miles per hour. I had never seen Tom so happy. My last memory of Tom is hearing his laugh as he barreled down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue heading towards home, his elbows and knees sticking out to the sides and his wild hair fighting to keep up.

Tom moved away at the end of the summer. I heard his father had gotten a job up in Oregon as a butcher.

When we gathered for our ten year reunion I asked if anyone had heard what happened to Tom. Some didn't remember his name but when I said "Boonie" they remembered the "weird kid." No one knew for certain. I choose to think Tom went on to be happy and loved by someone who could sooth the pains from that small town in Northern California, and I wished I had told him I was sorry.