

## **The Days Went By**

by Bryan Mammel

When I was young, I did stupid things.

I don't think I knew it at the time, maybe because I was young. Maybe because we all did stupid things.

Our group of friends tended to be outcasts, or at least we liked living at the fringes: skaters, musicians, artists, philosophers, and poets. College students, trying on the poses and postures of who we wanted to be. Except, we hadn't figured that out either.

The stoop was our hangout spot, ideal for its proximity to the essentials: cheap coffee, cheap food, and cheap beer. The small, unadorned strip mall at the corner of University and Moon boasted four floundering businesses and a mostly-paved parking lot. Tufts of grass grew through cracks in the concrete, drying out and dying in the hot Texas summers. We littered the steps in front of Zookas Burritos and Jo On the Go Coffee with bicycles and skateboards, slouching in an array of cutoff jean shorts, tattered pearl-snaps, tie dye, and Chacos.

Giving those steps a name made the place ours.

As stoop kids, we were mostly decent students, but prone to skip a lecture for a swim at the river's headwaters or a game of shuffleboard and cheap whiskey. Afterparties were more common than study groups. We wrote papers and made poetry, but spent more time at Showdown for \$1 Lone Star happy hour. We rode bikes in large groups and sometimes slowed traffic or didn't stop at stop signs. We got busted for trying to "recycle" lumber from a construction site for a planned treehouse. We had backyard bb gun competitions and shot cans off each other's heads. We pierced ears with needles and dared each other into new tattoos and sang full-throated to our favorite punk band, Buzz n Bangs, before wandering off to afterparty campfires to play folk songs and old country tunes and look at the stars until morning started the game all over.

When we gathered at the stoop, we felt that we had carved out our own place in the universe. We felt special.

Sometimes this feeling veered towards self-righteousness, like we knew something the rest of the world didn't. Being young, we thought that individuality meant defying socially constructed categories. We weren't solidly punk, hipster, hippie, redneck or anything really, just a loose amalgamation of counterculture in an age of irony pretending we had the universe all figured out.

But John was different.



Short and gregarious with curly hair that fizzled over his ears and a shaggy beard to match, John moved through the stoop like a whimsical creature from another planet. John rarely wore shoes. He worked at Jo's, serving coffee and smiles throughout his shift. He gave hugs freely, like a candy-riddled toddler, in a red and white striped shirt and cutoffs. John was someone who liked people. Truly. Strangers, friends, and family were all equally susceptible to an almost uncomfortably genuine squeeze.

"Follow your heart." he'd say.

And he meant it. Genuinely. Somehow it didn't feel cliché or dismissive or ironic coming from John. Somehow it felt like what you should do: follow your heart.

"Do you think I should be a music major even though there's no money in music?"

"Follow your heart."

"What shoes look better with this outfit?"

"Follow your heart."

He loved the messiness of people's personal lives, loved hearing others' fears and worries, and loved being at the sticky, chaotic center of our human drama.

"Yeah, but what about how she cheated on me and then moved to another state?"

"Follow your heart."

And so we would.

The first time I met John was the Tuesday before my wife left for San Francisco.

Weeks earlier, she had started sleeping with someone from the stoop who lived in the apartment complex behind ours. I remember chain-smoking on the back porch and staring up at those new apartments--Sanctuary Lofts-- and wondering how I had ended up here, so low and unholy. Wondering which window she was behind and wondering how love could twist two people into unrecognizable shapes.

The summer before that, at a crossroads in our marriage and searching for something that might save it, we bought an old yellow school bus and renovated it with student loan money, traveling with friends in the summers. Less joy and drugs than Kerouac, more Pepsi and Camel Lights.

The yellow bus didn't offer salvation.

After she left, stoop kids helped me smash wedding gifts in the dry creek bed behind the apartment. They helped me shoot fireworks out of the back of the bus using a bungee cord slingshot. Sometimes you could find a couple of us dancing on top of the apartment building during a thunderstorm, waving flags and hurling dares at the lightning. It wasn't therapy, but it was cheap.

So that Tuesday, I hated that she was leaving and hated the mess our life had become. I hated that we had upgraded to a two-bedroom apartment and hated that I now couldn't afford it on my own. And so I hated that John was in our apartment.

He talked incessantly. He opened curtains and bubbled at the seams. His curly hair bounced joyously. He seemed to float through the rooms.

"This is nice!"

"I have a lot of art, is that okay?"

"Does it get good light?"

"What'd you say the rent was again?"

\*

The day John moved in, he showed up with a broken foot. I hauled boxes and bed frames, and he bummed cigarettes and unpacked pottery. He'd point at paintings and pictures with the fervor of a French auteur, and I'd hammer nails into walls and tilt left or right until things were level.

Slowly at first, but eventually with surprising totality, John made the apartment his own. He burned patchouli and put clay sculpted heads in the kitchen window. He hung an Italian PRIDE flag on the front porch. Strange art made by friends covered the walls. Plants grew from pots and clippings took root in glass jars. Music filled the leaden silence I'd come to call home.

The piano was the only thing that couldn't be erased; it was the same piano I'd learned to play on at the age of three. But John remade that too. He hosted bean nights, where musicians would bring instruments and a song in return for a dinner of beans and rice. I'd play the piano for hours for the first time since abandoning the church where I had gotten my musical start and for the first time with people who played for no other purpose than to get lost in the music itself.

“The days went by like paper in the wind.  
Everything changed. Then changed again.”<sup>1</sup>

We launched a block party, invited bands, printed posters, got our hands on a PA. The bus served as a stage backdrop and as a green room. The parking lot filled with stoop kids, curious passersby, and those who had been lured by the promise of free beer.

After the party, amid the empty cans and broken plastic cups, John and I sat in lawn chairs and watched frat boys atop the neighboring chapter house conduct a shirtless pushup contest.

At least we weren't them, we thought.

The night he died, I went to bed early.

College was closing behind me. The evening was one of many in the dregs of summer. One of those Texas nights where everything, cicada shells and withered grass, is stuck on its axis. Freedom had grown dull, so I'd left the bar. I was ready to move on to

the next phase of my life: a bigger city, a career, chasing music dreams, the spotlight and the stage.

I remember waking up to the sound of a friend's moped. To voices heedless and eager laughing through the yard as he and John strolled into the house, easy as daylight.



I remember waking up again in the pitch black as the screen door screamed shut for a second time. I remember looking out the window as tail lights took John back out into the night.

The news report was terse, concise, everything that a news report should be: *Police in San Marcos say 26-year-old John Patrick Fox was pronounced dead after falling from campus tower.*

But the news came later. Memory is slow, dawdling. News stories force the mind to piece memory back together after all the king's men have left and written their reports. Memory resists and remembers according to its own cadence.

The morning of casual check-ins: "Anybody catch John this morning?"

"Did you guys see him at the stoop?"

The blasé lunchtime responses: "He's probably at the river?"

"Maybe he ended up in Austin?"

"He probably isn't even awake yet."

"Y'all know how John is. He'll turn up."

By afternoon, memory found me in another city at my girlfriend's apartment, already trying to move on, to grow up, to forget, to let John wander back to the stoop like he always did.

Memory found me checking my messages, seeing the missed calls, the unread messages.

Knowing.

Driving back to San Marcos.  
Is it dusk now?  
Dark?  
Or can I simply not see?  
What door am I walking through?  
Who's arms are holding me up?  
Where is my friend?

Later, we tied red ribbons to our bikes and rode through the streets to the river, like each of us had done so often before. We stepped down into ancient waters, undeserving, trespassing.

And when we came up again, we were no longer the same.



Bryan Mammel teaches high school English and Journalism in central Texas. He is a father of two, a birder, a nature enthusiast, a hiker, and a hooper. Before teaching, Bryan traveled the country as a touring musician, playing keyboards and synthesizers for a variety of studio projects. Reading and writing have always been his anchor. This is his first foray into publishing his own writing.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lyrics from “To Find a Friend” by Tom Petty from *Wallflower* 1994