

Times...
They Are A
Changin'

Richard W. Kelly

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Thank You

Thank you to my loving wife for not only being much of the inspiration for the words on the paper, but for reading and editing and putting up with me generally being busy with my craft.

In the Beginning

Time has a strange effect on people. I swear everything that happened in my life happened so long past, but the memories make it feel as if it is still happening today. The emotions of a time so long ago still resonate in my gut. As hard as I have held onto them, they must still be real in this moment.

I speak of the memories that you fight for. The ones that in the end you cannot imagine how they will disappear with you. I feel like I am at the end of a dream and half waking up. I can feel the world flooding at me and I am doing everything I can to hold on, but my fingers are slipping, the memories are failing. There is this hollow feeling all around, an empty canister where I just can't seem to find my footing.

But what fun is the end of the story without the beginning? I would be amiss to think you care about my fading life without a proper explanation of how I built it.

I could start in the forties with conception, but even

now I do not like to think of my parents that way. We will just say that shortly after the allies declared victory there was a baby boom. The generation that I belong was so appropriately named and I was one of millions. I was the result of a celebration. A celebration that consisted of two people happy that their lives were not taken from them in a War that threatened to change the world.

With evil vanquished and America the victor and now supreme power of the world, I entered what we call life somewhere around nine months later. My father was a gruff straightforward man, who was largely molded into what he was because of the war. The man marched across Europe with a platoon that put their lives into each other's hands. He had no patience for anything but trust as he had given his to his platoon for the year or so he was over there.

Because of those experiences he was very by the book. I had little room for my own youthful exploration. Sure, when I was out with friends or alone I could do whatever I wanted, but if my father was around there was no way but his. I never faulted him for that. I understood at a young age that my father had seen horrific things and survived them. I took away that I had a father that wanted the best for me and he would stand to see me make the wrong move. Although, the lack of freedom made me want to spend as little time under his watch as possible, but I didn't dislike him for it.

My mother was a bit of a scatterbrain. She loved me very much and adored my father as if he were her creator. She was never one to be a parent, more of a friend. The only times she pushed me into a decision that was not my own was at the command of my father.

"Get his hand out of that fence, the horses will bite him." Loud and determined words from my father's lips to my mother's obedient ears.

"Get back, Bobby. You'll lose a finger!" She slapped my hand deterring me from touching the horses. It was for the best. We were watching a group of men break wild stallions.

I do not know why we were there. I do not remember even when it was, really. All I can recall from that one scene in my life was realizing that my father thought that misshapen falling over fence somehow separated us from imminent danger. As long as all my body parts stayed on our side of the wood we were safe, but one finger past the borderline and it was savagery.

I wonder how much of that was his experience during the war. Sitting in a tent just a few yards away from enemies in their own tents. Somehow those flaps of canvas meant that they were out of harm's way.

I remember looking up at my mother and all her innocence towering over me. She nodded in an appreciation that I was not feeding my appendages to the horses. That nod felt so ridiculous to me. How could she not see the insanity that the fence was some kind of safety net. There was a wild horse on the other side that did not understand what that fence was supposed to represent. If the men breaking the horse lost control it would tear through the rotting wood without a thought.

It made me realize how devoted my mother was to my father. It wouldn't surprise me if she followed him into oncoming traffic. But, at that age I didn't think it was a bad thing. I didn't have some kind of emotional scarring because

my mother accepted my father's advice like it was biblical. I saw it as a love and devotion they shared. A love that I wanted to one day have for myself.

I guess it is important to point out that my father's love for my mother was just as strong. It was different, it was somewhat in the vein of a protector, but it was just as real and just as deep as hers.

One of my earliest memories was waiting for my grandmother to pick me up in the hospital. I must have been three or four, so there is not much left of the memory. It is almost like looking at still pictures from the past it is so vague. We stood in the waiting room, hand in hand while we watched my grandmother half jog into the hospital.

I don't recall the words that were said when my father told his mother-in-law that her daughter was in surgery. What I recall was the waver in his voice, the fear in his eyes. He was facing a possibility of a world without his wife and it was the only thing I ever witnessed that scared him.

I am not sure if it is common, but because of them I grew up feeling like I was special. Like I was a part of a family that not everyone had. Don't get me wrong this was not the age of divorce or free love or consensual non-monogamy. But, I always felt that my parents shared a love and connection that was missing in most of the adult relationships I witnessed.

But, in many ways their strong connection to one another made me feel I was an outsider. I was an only child and all my desires and passions revolved around belonging. I wanted so much to be with someone so that I was not alone and they were not alone. I wanted to be an us rather than a me.

Back in My Day

Childhood in fifties America was an experience that I doubt any other generation has had the pleasure of feeling. It was a time when the adults, although young, had proven themselves in war. Their parents had also proven themselves in war. And because of those things the country they lived in ruled the world.

The booming American economy drove all the excesses of victory to the American household. Movies, cars, music, sports... We were at the birth of an age of entertainment. But it was widely not intended for children. Children were expected to find their own entertainment while the adults lounged in the luxury of their new domain.

I ran with a small group of friends. There was Harry, Joe, Will, and me. The four of us spent most of our summers in the forests of east Texas. Hot and sticky summers spent before the commonality of air conditioning. It was my first experience where I felt like I was a part of a group. Harry

and Joe were brothers. The summer I was twelve, Harry was twelve, and Joe was eight. Will was two years older than me and Harry, but his maturity did little to point this out.

I remember feeling like we were a foursome that could never be separated, but I just didn't understand life yet. I can still smell the spruce out where our fort was hidden in the Davey Crockett Forest. I would come over the hill to see our shelter we built around an existing tree to the sounds of my friends greeting me.

"Bobby." Joe would say calling out to the rest.

"Bobby Bobby." Harry or Will would say.

The last of the group would start low and quiet, building a crescendo of open o's. "Boooooooooooby!"

I would wave as I walked down the slope to our little fortress against the world.

Joe was typically outside the fort digging around in the dirt. It was just one of the many quirks he had that brought attention to the fact that he was younger than the rest of us. Harry and Will would be inside typically playing a fictional baseball game with baseball cards.

"Mickey Mantle belts one into deep right field." Harry tried to give a northern accent to match the radio broadcast he listened to.

"Gus Bell leaps, but the ball is out of reach!" Will finished the call.

"Poor Cincinnati Redlegs." I said entering the small, dark room.

Our fort was sort of a big wooden teepee. We had found some old twelve-foot fence slats and nailed them to the tree in a circle. Then we covered the openings between the slats with blankets and quilts and whatever else our

parents wouldn't kill us for stealing.

I took my seat on the only grass patch left in the fort while Harry finished making the Mickey Mantle baseball card run the imaginary bases. "Thought we could go down to the pond today." I was looking for something fun to do that didn't involve wasting the day away at our fort.

Will questioned as he wrapped a couple strings around the baseball cards. "The one by the church or the one by the graveyard?"

"I was thinking the one between that other church and graveyard. You know, down where the creek does that U-turn?" The suggestion was a bit absurd. We only made it that far away from home a couple times, but I was up for an adventure.

Harry still using his New York voice chimed in, "If we are going to swim why not the pond over the hill. Its only two minutes from here."

I would not be turned down, "You want to risk running into the Hellfire Chaps while we are swimming? What if they steal our clothes? What if they decide to drown us?" The Hellfire Chaps were a gang of older kids that we always tried to avoid, but in reality, they didn't even exist. Some inside joke at school that turned into a legend.

"You are right." Will replied. He was terrified of the group of kids. He had sworn he saw them chasing us once or twice. Harry let out an exasperated groan as he knew there was no rebuttal for the Hellfire Chaps when Will was concerned.

We all stood up and Will called out to his brother, "Joe, come on. We're going swimming." We headed down the side of the creek looking for the pond that I had the

strange urge to spend the day at.

It was a long walk filled with awkward jumps across slippery rocks and fallen trees. As children it felt like we traversed miles upon miles, but looking back it was probably less than a couple of kilometers. But, it was away from the farm community we lived in due to the winding roads leaving no way to reach this area by car without a twenty mile joyride.

Sometime around midafternoon we reached the bend in the creek that signified we were reaching our destination. To anyone from any other town they would not have seen any difference in this little boggy pond and the one near our fort, but we knew that we had gone on a quest to find this place.

As young and innocent as we were, we all stripped to our tighty-whities and jumped into the pond. I don't recall what we played, submarine or Marco Polo most likely. But we spent hours splashing around.

After a while I got out and laid down by a tree soaking up some of the late day sunlight. I could see the tiny church off in the distance and the little cemetery next to it. There seemed to be a graveyard every time you found a new church. They only had a dozen or so families in each one, both the parishioners and the residents of the graves.

As I listened to my small group of friends call out what kind of splash they would make when it was their turn to jump back into the pond, I noticed a little girl kneeling at a headstone. She had her head bowed and she was letting flowers fall from her hands.

The sight was mesmerizing. Even from the immense distance that I was, I could feel the heartache in the girl's soul. There was an extreme loss that she was dealing with and I

wanted nothing more than to make that feeling go away.

I tried to wipe as much of the dirty pond water off me as I could. I slowly put my clothes back on while keeping an eye on the girl, I did not want her to leave. Once I had returned to my proper dress, I looked back at my friends who were still playing in the water. "I need to go check something out. I'll see you tomorrow if I'm not back before you head home."

They did not seem to notice and as the night started to descend, they didn't come looking for me. As much as I felt like I was a part of a tightly knit group, I was really just alone with some friends. It was no matter. My life would start in earnest that day.

I hopped through the tall grasses and weeds moving away from the pond and towards the girl that I had this strange connection with. As I made my way closer the feelings of her loss become clearer. I could not make it out into words as to what actually happened, but my gut knew that it was a personal pain.

I eventually stepped into the graveyard, pushing open a little wooden gate that protected the outside world from the dead inside, another pointless symbol that only protected those who believed it to be security. I walked firmly and determined until I reached the girl. She was close to my age and weeping on her knees at a headstone that was not as old as the rest of them.

Unsure of what to say or how to console a person I knelt down beside her. "Who were they?" I looked down at the dirt trying to be respectful.

The girl gasped in shock. She had been so focused on her pain that she had no idea I had sat down next to her.

“I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes and rose to her feet in an awkward posture as her joints had stiffened from her long-time kneeling. “It was my...” She paused and looked at me suddenly annoyed.

Her change in emotion threw me for a loop. I could feel the heat in her ears as the sadness took a backseat to something more temporary, something that was very in the moment. It wasn’t anger, or was it?

She kicked a bit of the dirt, that had not yet been resodded, at me. “What do you want? Why are you talking to me?”

The twelve-year-old me wanted to say ‘screw you’. I wanted to run back to my friends and forget this little girl that was being so rude, but the connection I was feeling with her emotions wouldn’t let me be so juvenile. “I’m sorry. I saw you crying. I wanted...”

She tried to interrupt me, “I wasn’t crying!”

But, I continued, “to help.”

She suddenly realized that I was not being a bratty child. I was not going to pick on her and make fun of her. She fell to her butt with a thud and sobbed into her hands. “My baby brother.” The words were jumbled and soggy, but I understood nonetheless.

I did not understand what it meant to have a sibling. I never had that connection, but I understood family and belonging and I assumed that the connection with a sibling was a strong one. I had seen Will stick up for his annoying younger brother time and time again. When there was no reason for any of us to put up with his little kid games and songs, Will would always make sure that Joe was not hurt. It was a type of companionship that I could only compare with

my parents.

The girl had been through a lot. I could feel it and I could now see it. I wanted nothing but to help her. "I don't have a brother. And I'm sorry you lost yours." It was a pathetic attempt at compassion, but she did not know any better. She sobbed and lunged at me, holding me tighter than I was accustomed. Her warm wet tears soaking into my shirt made the cool wetness of the pond I had just left seem like a different world. I held her. And that was it.

Young Love

Her name was Brenda and she lived another half mile south of the church. Her father owned the feed store back in the big town of Groveton, Texas. There was maybe a thousand people in the town, but for us that was big city living.

As usual her mother hadn't worked since the end of the war and spent her time taking care of the kids. Her baby brother, Wallace, had only been with them for a few months when he suddenly died in his sleep. His death was hardest on Brenda. She did not know how to cope with such a loss while her parents were much more desensitized from losses during the war and general the bruises of life.

By the time I met Brenda her brother had been gone longer than he was alive. But I never questioned her pain or her attachment. I always just wanted to help her turn those feelings of loss into memories of fondness.

That was the last summer that I spent much time with

Harry, Will and Joe. I spent most of my days trying to find ways to get down to Brenda's neck of the woods and it was only so many times that I could convince the boys to make the trek back down to that little pond. Even the mention of the Hellfire Chaps only worked a few more times.

That summer was just the beginning. I spent a lot of time with Brenda, walking though the fields, playing games like horseshoes and hopscotch. It was a pretty innocent time. To the point that I met her family sometime that fall and there was no expectation that I had any ulterior motives.

We were trying to figure out how to climb the church so we could see the view from its steeple, but as we tried to find a way up the structure we were met with thunder and rain. She took my hand and drug me through the fields back to her house where we were able to hide from the rain.

I remember walking into her front porch which had screens all around it making it a makeshift room. We were soaked and she was concerned that we would get yelled at for getting the wood floors wet, so she stripped down to her undergarments and threw on a pair of shorts and an oversized undershirt.

She did it without thinking as if we were both toddlers and everything was fine. I tried to play it off the same way, but I was nearing thirteen years old and it was the first time I saw a girl in nothing but her panties and bra. Just the short amount of time I was exposed to the sight I realized that what I was interested in was not just a friendship. The girl excited me, attracted me, made me want to see what else life had to offer.

I remember staring at her after she had redressed. She looked up blushing a bit, knowing that I had been staring,

but she leaned over and grabbed another pair of shorts and undershirt. She held them out and waited a minute before she got impatient. “Go on! Switch into these so we don’t make a mess in the house.”

I snapped out of my daydream and quickly followed directions trying my best to not show my embarrassment of disrobing in her presence. But it was a quick moment and we were inside.

She burst through the screen door heading through the main living area. She waved at the woman on the couch as she headed directly to the hallway, “Hi mom. I brought a friend over.”

She skipped through her small house heading to her room when she froze. She looked up at a large man who was blocking our way in the hall.

Trailing behind, I stood right behind her as I waited for her to introduce me to who I could only imagine was her father. There was an anxiety that held in the air as the two stood there in each other’s paths. “Sorry sir. It was raining out and I thought I would bring my friend home to play in the house.” She said this with her head down and a sense of shame in her voice.

“Where did you meet?” The large man’s deep voice rumbled my gut a bit.

“At the church.” She answered.

“Our church?”

“Yes, the Chapel of the Virgin Birth. Daddy, his name is Bobby.” She responded with a bit more excitement.

Her father gave me a half smile, “Go along then.”

She slid beside him down the hallway to her room while I gave the man a quick wave and attempted to follow

Brenda. We turned the corner into her room. It was a plain room with very little decoration. She had a set of dolls in the corner, a white desk that matched her small bed. It felt like the room of a temporary resident.

“Sorry. I thought my dad would be at the feed shop. I wouldn’t have brought you here if...”

I cut her off, “It’s fine.” We sat down on the hard wood floor as she grabbed some jacks and a ball. “He seems kind of stern, but so’s my old man.” I was digging for something. The encounter was odd, I felt it, but I did not know why.

“He’s not always that nice.” She stated it simply as if that explained it all. And I let it go. Afterall, I had realized that I really liked this girl, met her parents, and found her in an odd mood over the course of ten minutes. It was a lot for my young mind to take in at once.