

Brady Dennis' 300-word Story

After the sky fell

The few drivers on this dark, lonely stretch of the Suncoast Parkway in Pasco County pull up to the toll booth, hand their dollars to Lloyd Blair and then speed away. None of them knows why the old man sits here, night after night, working the graveyard shift.

Well, here's why:

Because years ago, on a freezing winter night at a party in Queens, N.Y., he met a woman named Millie.

Because he fell in love with her brown hair and wide eyes and 100-watt smile.

Because they got married, moved to Staten Island, had a son and worked for decades in Manhattan; she as an accountant, he as a banker.

Because it had been their dream to retire to Florida, and so they saved all their lives to make it possible.

Because, just as they began to talk of leaving New York and heading south, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and they spent their time and money traveling to New Jersey, San Diego and Mexico in search of a cure.

Because, in the end, they came to Florida anyway.

Because they finally bought a house in Spring Hill, although she was too weak that day to get out of the car.

Because she died nine days later on Jan. 5, 2002, a day "the whole sky fell," he says.

Because, after she was gone, he found himself alone and \$100,000 in debt.

And so he took a job collecting tolls. The drivers who pass by see a smiling 71-year-old man with blue eyes and a gray mustache who tells each of them, "Have a great night!"

They don't know the rest of Lloyd Blair's story, or that he keeps Millie's picture in his shirt pocket, just under his name tag, just over his heart.

The end is the beginning

He's already cleared out his office, attended the farewell party, listened to the speeches, said his goodbyes.

His three kids have grown and moved on. His gray hairs keep multiplying.

And now, five decades of work are behind him. He's delivered newspapers, sold furs in a farmers market, manned a grocery store register, helped customers in a clothing store, taught middle school English, endured medical school, attended to the sick and dying.

Only a day ago, he was in charge of 200 employees at the Pasco County Health Department. Then he woke up as a 66-year-old man with no job, no obligations, no meetings, no more need for neckties.

What does a man do on the first day of the rest of his life?

This man, on this day, gets up with the sunrise, puts on coffee and reads the morning paper. He packs a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and slips on his hiking shoes. He drives east into Hernando County. He takes a walk in the woods with his wife.

And out there among the Spanish moss and the saw palmettos and the haunting cypress trees, he talks about his plans. He wants to write plays and short stories, maybe some poetry. He wants to take his wife to Spain. He hopes for a few grandchildren to spoil.

He wonders if he'll be happy, if he'll find a purpose. He decides he will. "I'll evolve," he says.

It's a Thursday morning. The air is warm. The sun is shining.

He listens to the leaves crunch underfoot. He breathes in the fresh air. He gazes at a lake. He takes his time.

Out here, with nothing but the forest and the future ahead, he understands that there are endings and beginnings.

And sometimes, they look just the same.

Looking for a laugh

Nigel Davis has had plenty of unfunny days.

A father shot. A mother taken by cancer. A childhood in Brooklyn.

He served in the Persian Gulf War, worked in a mail room and waited tables at a Mexican restaurant where he hated singing *Happy Birthday* to customers.

He's sung in a jazz band and had his heart broken after moving 1,000 miles for a woman.

But always, he's been able to make people laugh. More than anything, he wants to do it for a living. Ask him why, and he says, earnestly, "For those few minutes, they aren't thinking about anything bad."

Tonight, on amateur night at the comedy club, he had five minutes to make the people laugh. He joked about pimps and did an impression of his uncle. None of it brought down the house.

Under the spotlight, with 200 mostly quiet faces staring back from the darkness, his jokes ran dry and his confidence wore thin. Five minutes, and it was over.

They clapped when he walked off stage, just not as loud as they'd clapped when he arrived.

Now he's outside, pacing the parking lot, too embarrassed to walk back through the door but too full of pride to walk away.

He calls his fiancée on his cell phone.

"I bombed," he tells her. "Yeah, I'm serious. I couldn't concentrate. I missed you."

After they talk, he paces again, alone with his thoughts. He can hear the roars of the audience inside, laughing for someone else.

Another month, on another amateur night, he'll have another chance. Until then, it's back to leasing apartments for a living.

Nigel Davis slips into his car and heads home to the woman who loves him, even on the unfunny nights.

For the first time

She wears pink socks with hearts on them and a shirt that reads, "When things get tough, I go to Grandma's."

He wears faded blue jeans and sneakers, has tattoos on his arms and braces on his teeth.

She's pretty in a no-makeup sort of way. He's handsome in an unmade bed sort of way.

She attends an arts school, spends her days painting, writing, dancing. He dropped out of school in ninth grade, has no job and spends a lot of time skateboarding.

"I'm a loser," he says.

But judging by her smile, by the way she kisses him and hugs him and rests her head on his shoulder as they wait for the late-night bus back to Jacksonville, she disagrees.

They've been together since November, almost nine months, longer than either of them has dated anyone else. They like the same music - Nirvana, the Used, From Autumn to Ashes. They like the same restaurant - Famous Amos.

His mom loves her.

Her mom hates him.

Which makes her like him that much more.

They came from Jacksonville to visit her father in Clearwater. They lounged at the beach, spent a day at Busch Gardens. And now, at 10:30 on a muggy Friday night, they are sitting on the floor of the Greyhound bus station in downtown Tampa.

Around them, other travelers chat on cell phones and slouch in metal chairs, looking bored as they wait for buses to places like Bradenton and Birmingham, Miami and Memphis, Nashville and New Orleans.

The boy and girl pay attention only to each other.

She is 16. He is 17.

They don't have cars. They don't have much money. They don't have the limitless freedom for which teenagers yearn.

But in this dingy bus station, they have something the rest of us probably had once but lost:

First love.

City Dreams

Off a two-lane stretch of blacktop, west of Palm Beach and east of nowhere, an old tractor cuts its way through a sugarcane field.

The soul behind the wheel belongs to Keith Davis, born and raised in the small farming town of Pahokee. He shares a cramped five-bedroom house with six other people - his father, a city worker; his older brother, a construction worker; and his brother's wife and three children.

His mother died five years ago from breast cancer.

Keith's home, the only one he's ever known, sits at the edge of the family's 22.85 acres of sugarcane. The Davis men take turns working the field and sell their small yearly crop to a mammoth sugar company in Palm Beach.

The growing season has ended, but the work continues. Keith steers the family's rusted International Harvester 1066 through the fields, cultivating row after row, preparing for next season.

To the west, Lake Okeechobee stretches out like an ocean. To the east, a far-away summer storm is approaching - dark clouds, lightning bolts, the smell of rain.

In the gold light of late afternoon, Keith rumbles up and down the rows slowly, deliberately. He has no other work these days.

Since graduating from Pahokee Senior High School, he's mowed ditches for the city, cut meat in Belle Glade, worked as a security guard and put in a stint with the USDA.

Now he's searching, both for a new job and an escape from Pahokee. The farm boy longs for the city.

"I wanna move away from this town," he says. "Ain't nothin' here for fun. Ain't no girls here."

He wants to move to Orlando, start a family, become a mechanic. He says this a day before his 23rd birthday.

And then he climbs back on the tractor, cranks its roaring engine and heads out to the endless rows of cane.

A cross for Carlos

Thousands of drivers pass over the cross every day. They never see it.

It stands under the westbound lanes of the Gandy Bridge, clinging to the edge of Pinellas County.

It rises out of the sandy soil near the seawall and catches the light of sunrise and sunset. But mostly it dwells in the cool, dark, lonely shade.

It stands where a boy once stood, after midnight, 18 and full of life.

He was an only child, a senior in high school, a B student who loved '60s music and dreamed of enlisting in the military.

He studied martial arts. He had a tattoo on his back and a girlfriend named Heather. His friends described him as outgoing, athletic and generous.

He fell in the water that night.

No one had been drinking, they said, just horsing around and exploring the catwalk. A friend named Marc dived in after him, but the current pulled them apart.

The friend swam back to shore. A crabber found the boy's body a day later.

Some time after the tears and the funeral, someone erected the cross.

It has faded with time. The white paint is chipping. The edges are worn.

But the messages remain, more than 70 of them scribbled on every surface, written in black and blue ink by teenagers wrestling with the death of one of their own.

"Too many memories. I will remember them all. You keep eating ice cream. I'll take care of Homer," wrote Kelly C.

"I'll see you later, #70. Love ya like a brother," wrote James.

It has been five years now. The boy is gone. His friends are grown.

But the cross still stands, marked with his name in large letters:

Carlos Monti.