

David Eakin
1943-2017

Selected Short Stories
and Essays



November 7, 2016

Here is my Cousin Kathy helping to stack our wood last Friday, and here we are 70 years ago pulled along the gravel driveway of her family home, a home where I was always welcome.



The property was bought by her nephew Phil, when my aunt and uncle were both gone. I have many good memories of the place:

croquet games on the front lawn dotted with tree stumps that took a generation to remove, sleeping in the woods



behind the house, exploring the dilapidated chicken coops where my Uncle Walt stored glass tubing for his business, the dogs – Judy, the collie, who barked at everyone who turned in to that long driveway, and Fudge, a little, brown mutt, who amazed us all by climbing several feet up into a nest of vines during the heat of the day – gardens that grew and shrunk each year according to the time and effort my aunt and uncle

could devote to them, and many family gatherings with food and beer and hard played volleyball games, and much, much more. I was a child and a young adult, I loved the place and the people.

Kathy reported that Phil and his family have moved and will be putting the house up for sale. She and her brother plan one last visit to walk the property. I won't be joining them. It is in the past, part of me but long gone.

Thanks for the picture, Kathy.

November 5, 2015

Here is a post addressed to a friend who attended Woodstock School in India during some of the years I was there. She is a novelist, and I am reading one of her books which is set in an Indian hill station modeled on the town where Woodstock is located. The picture is lifted from our 1962 yearbook:



Betsy, I'm enjoying reading "Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes." Thanks for the trip back to 1960's India.

Your Mrs. Laird wasn't a unique figure in India – western, single, in her fifties, surviving on wit and charm, I've forgotten the name of my own "Mrs. Laird," but I have a vivid memory of her. She was a small, Jewish woman from some Eastern European country scratching out a living as a dance instructor. My parents hired her to teach me to dance, ballroom dancing. She had been in a motorcycle accident and was missing several digits on her left hand, and while

dancing held a handkerchief in that hand. I'm sure that my parents hoped the dance lessons would improve my social skills. (I know, it's ironic that Woodstock didn't permit dancing.)

Unfortunately, I was born with a handicap; I have no sense of rhythm. I was the little kid on the swing who had to be continually pushed.

I'm sure my Delhi dance teacher was as good a liar as she was an instructor. At the end of each session she always said that I had made much progress. If so, my wife and daughters will certainly attest to my regression over the years.

My one opportunity to demonstrate my dance skills in Delhi was with Julia Beers on a movie night at Ambassador Galbraith's residence. Julia and I were called on to demonstrate the new dance – the twist. And, reluctantly, we did.

Let me say that I don't remember anyone being unkind. Certainly not the ambassador. But there was much laughter and no encores were requested.

Julia Beers? I believe she was at Woodstock; but she never spoke to me again.

June 17, 2016 · Kullu Valley

The boy was hit just before we arrived. He lay on the side of the road. I was 18 or 19 at the time and I could see that he was dead – no blood or obvious trauma, but his face was drained of color and he was very still in the clear mid-morning light. Three young American men, their driver, a Pakistani, and a local man, perhaps the boy's father, stood by the car. It was as if they were waiting for something to happen, for an ambulance to come wailing up or at least for a policeman to appear and take charge.

My parents and I were on a fishing holiday, up from Karachi where my father was a US information officer, part of the imperial American enterprise. My parents had flown me out to visit during my summer break from college. We were on our way up this wide, alluvial valley to where the river rushed down through the mountains and the fishing was reported to be good.

There was no traffic on that straight road, not a car or a bus, no bicyclists or carts or people on foot, just men working in the fields a ways off. Nine of us stood on the side of the road not knowing what to do – the two Pakistani drivers, the Pakistani man who had been with the boy, the three young American men, my father and mother and me. One of the American men said, "He just stepped out in front of us, like a chicken." He sounded annoyed.

Someone pointed out that the men in the fields were gathering and beginning to move toward us. They had their tools in their hands. I distinctly remember sickles.

My father said, "I think we should get on the road." And we got in the car with our driver and drove off leaving the others. I'm not sure there was any danger to us or to those we left behind. But it was a good place not to be right then.

As we drove on my father said to my mother, "They were spooks." I had to ask what he meant. The three American men were with the CIA.

What happened then? I don't know. I suspect they came to some accommodation with the dead boy's relatives. Perhaps a sum was agreed upon in compensation for the boy's life. Perhaps not. If my father knew, he never told me.

Years later the area became very dangerous. The Taliban hid out there. Our government sent over drones to watch and to kill.

As it happened in that summer of 1963, my family and I continued up to a government rest house on the river, one of many the British established when they ruled greater India. My father engaged a fishing guide, a local man who had been mauled by a bear in his youth. Half his face was scar tissue. He was a small, agile, good natured man, and we caught fish with his help, although I can't bring up an actual image of the fish. I do have a picture in my mind of my father with a five-day beard and a big, happy grin.

This wasn't the last time I fished with my father, but it was one of the last, and one I still remember. At least I remember the circumstances, not actually catching the fish or if we ate them or how big they were. My father went on to assignments in Vietnam, and language training in Washington, and back to Vietnam, while I went on to marry, to finish college, spend two years in the US Army, struggle to start a career, raise my own children.

When the Vietnam War ended, my father came home, divorced my mother and married a Vietnamese woman. My mother lived in the same house with my wife and me and our children. We had little contact with my father while my mother was still alive. After she died we saw more of each other, but our relationship was strained. Both my parents have been dead a long time now. I can't fact check the Kullu story with them. I did Google Kullu Valley. It really is there.

Recently I came across a letter from my father bemoaning the fact that we didn't fish together any more. I don't remember answering it or responding in any way.

November 19, 2016 The Fortune Teller

Here are my three high school yearbooks.

When I was a boy my parents sent me to a boarding school run by Christian missionaries located high in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was a lovely place – the school buildings, dormitories, and staff residences were scattered over a steep, wooded hillside that overlooked the Indian plains. In the spring the understory was full of flowers and in the summer, while heat baked central India, it was cool. We students were off during the winter when it snowed. The staff was an enthusiastic lot, fairly young, concerned for our welfare and immersed in the adventure of being in India.



We were only thirty in my graduating class – a mixed group of missionary families, diplomats' children, a few Indian nationals and others. Since we lived together, ate and played and went to class together, we developed strong, life-long bonds. Even those of us who only spent a few years have kept in touch, visited, attended reunions. A classmate who lives some distance in Pennsylvania has made the trip to visit me a couple of times, and when we visited our daughter in Denver, a classmate had us all out to dinner.

A few miles from the school, an easy walk along a gravel road, is the town of Mussoorie. And on Saturday mornings, if we were not being punished for some infraction of the rules, we were allowed to walk into town to sample its delights, which were many – ice cold sofa, (beer if you dared to buy it), deep fried candy, a movie house, a Chinese restaurant, a

barber who included a marvelous massage with every haircut, and a variety of wandering hucksters who were just selling stuff. To this day a Tibetan prayer horn hangs in my foyer bought from one of those fellows.

On one occasion I walked into town with two of my dorm mates hoping to rendezvous with a group of girls. Before we could find the girls, a man stepped up to us and, addressing me, said, and said it with absolute conviction, "You're going to marry a girl named Margaret." And if I would pay him a small consideration, he would tell me more. As it happened, one of our classmates was named Margaret, and I considered her a good friend, but she was definitely not my girlfriend. Another classmate was.

Now I was, and am, a fortune teller non-believer, and I felt quite sure I smelled a scam. So I said to the fortune teller, "There's a girl in town. I'll describe her to you. Find her and tell her she is going to marry a guy named Dave. I'll pay you." "No!" He said with an air of dignity and finality. "You are going to marry Margaret!" and walked off. I was a little shaken and never forgot it. All my life I've kept a wary eye out for Margarets. But I think I'm safe now. Fifty years ago I married a girl named Tess, and I've been happy ever since. Margaret? Oh, I'm still friends with Margaret. She lives with her family in Florida. We visit on Facebook. Hi, Margaret!

On Hitchhiking

People don't hitchhike any more. Fifty years ago, it was pretty common. I hitchhiked back and forth to college, some 400 miles. When I took a break from college, I hitchhiked across the country and half way back. I took the long way, going down along the East Coast to Florida with a visit with a cousin. I had that sense of adventure and freedom Huck and

Jim had on the Mississippi. My cousin's husband in Florida gave me an old quilt coat and I remember at least one night wearing that coat, curled up in the woods. I carried a fish fine and a hook, but I never had occasion to catch fish.

Then west to Louisiana and Texas where I visited other cousins. on to LA where I visited an old girlfriend, newly married, and up to San Francisco where I got a job for a while in a printer's shop. And then the draft board suggested if I wasn't in college any more, I might like to spend a couple years in the US Army. So I started hitchhiking back home to return to college.

I had luck as a hitchhiker, or at least I had luck until I didn't. People driving long distances picked me up, almost exclusively men, truckers, a very few couples. I was only propositioned once, and it was obvious that I was so taken aback that the guy said to me, "Nobody has ever asked you before, have they?" "No," I said, "and as far as I'm concerned, no one has asked me now." He let me off at the first stop.

Drivers wanted to talk, to tell me their stories, or they wanted me to talk. Once in Louisiana, a very young couple stopped. I prepared to climb in the back, but they said no, sit up front with them. Those were the days of bench seats. They had the radio loud and every third song was the Beatles' "I Wanna Hold Your Hand." I saw that the woman, a girl really, had a ring and some cheap Florida souvenirs. I asked if they were just married, and they said yes, but didn't elaborate. I doubt that they were much older than I was. I couldn't resist asking, "Did you run off?" No, they were just driving home after their honeymoon. I rode several hundred miles with them, close quarters in the front seat, and that's about all they said, although the girl showed me her souvenirs. It was obvious the radio and a third party gave them the distance they needed. Eventually they stopped at a restaurant that was a

little more expensive than my budget allowed, and I hitchhiked on. An older, black man in a beat up pickup stopped. He didn't have much to say to me either. After all, it was the deep south in the 60's.

My hitchhiking luck ran out on my way home when two young men in a stolen car picked me up somewhere in the middle of the Texas panhandle. Of course, I didn't know the car was stolen or that they had walked out of a detention center somewhere. I knew that when we drove by a young woman hanging clothes and the wind wrapped her thin dress tight against her body, the two guys whistled and had some pretty rude things to suggest.

About the time the sun was setting and we had crossed the border into Oklahoma, the driver pulled off on to an obscure dirt road, ostensibly to take a leak. We passed a couple houses, and then the woods closed in and they stopped the car. We all got out and they made it plain they were going to take my suitcase and any valuables I might have. I ran for the woods.

The road was slightly elevated there, and I could just barely see through the woods in the fading light, but not well enough to see the old barbed wire fence. I was down within 20 feet of the car, and they were on me. The bigger of the two took me by my shirt and hit me once, hard in the face. My nose gushed blood. They tied my hands and feet, and my feet to my hands, behind my back, and left me just below the road. I managed to untie myself enough to crawl up the embankment on my belly, up to the road. Later I found a piece of red flint in my breast pocket which I treasured and kept as a good luck charm, until I lost it.

I hopped up the road a ways, and then the rope on my feet loosened enough for me to slip off a shoe and step out of the rope. I bent down, picked up the shoe and walked a half mile to the nearest house. I knocked, kicking, and two boys

came to the door. I explained I had been robbed and needed to call the police. They disappeared into the house and two women came to the door. Of course, I didn't look my best, bloody, my pants ripped where I hit the barbed wire fence, filthy from crawling up to the road. They let me in and said I could use the phone. I asked if they could please untie my hands. They did, but said they would call the police and sent me in to watch TV with the boys who were absorbed in some violent crime show. I wasn't at all of interest to them. One woman confessed later that she had a hammer behind her back the whole time.

The cops showed up pretty quickly, and on our ride to town, Miami, Oklahoma, I learned that they had already caught my assailants. They were at the jail. The stolen car was probably a giveaway. I remember the cops as being stereotypically big, white guys, heavy set in uniforms that strained to contain their bulk. They wanted me to identify the two. "Yes," I said, "they're the ones." "Which one hit you?" asked the cop in charge. "That one," I indicated. The cop said, "Look, he's handcuffed. You want to take him in that cell and work him over?" I said no, I didn't want to do that. They looked pretty down. The smaller of the two was wearing one of my shirts.

It was a Friday night, and they wanted me to stay around so I could identify the two in court. They gave me a bunk in a large holding cell located in the top floor of the municipal building. I had a chance to clean up and change clothes. Sometime after midnight the cell began to fill up with drunks. In the morning, I looked over and saw that one man appeared to be having an epileptic seizure. I called the officer on duty, and he acted annoyed. "Oh, that Indian always does that, he's okay." He was okay, but I was still a little worried. Later I saw that officer romancing one of the female prisoners whom he had let out of her cell. Later I talked to the "Indian" when he woke up. He confirmed that

he was a Friday night regular and was okay. They released him that morning.

I had had enough of jail and asked to be set free. "I'll see," said the jailer and wandered off. "I'll see!" I thought, "I'm not a prisoner." But of course I was. They freed me in the afternoon, and I took the cheapest room the local hotel had to offer. When I asked Monday morning, I was told I wasn't needed in court. So I took the first available bus back to Jersey.

When I got home, I discovered that my grandmother and aunts and uncles knew about my adventure and were concerned. I hadn't called, I never talked to reporters, I never called not wanting to alarm anyone, but the story had been picked up by the wire services and printed in the local papers. My name was misspelled and most of the facts were wrong, but they guessed it was me.

So that was the end of my hitchhiking career. The next year, my parents gave me a used car. I drove it across country, sold it in San Francisco, and flew to the Philippines where I met Tess. I never hitchhiked again. I never spent another night in jail.

July 10, 2016

Tess and I took a road trip recently - 334 miles west and 50 years into our past. We visited the town and the college where we first lived as a married couple - Grove City College in rural northwest Pennsylvania. I had spent my freshman year there, so I knew the lay of the land before Tess joined me.

My first year, when I was living in a dorm, the college decided to integrate. After all, it was the 60s. Leroy Johnson was assigned to be my roommate. I suspect it was because the administration knew I had lived for several years on the Indian subcontinent with a lot of brown people and I

probably wouldn't mind. Of course, I didn't mind. And as the college accepted a Thai student, a Korean student, a Japanese student, and even another Black student, they all gravitated into my dormitory. If the college admitted any brown female students, I don't remember. None were assigned to me.

I wasn't happy at GCC, so when my parents offered me the opportunity to join my mother in the Philippines I gladly accepted, drove my used VW to the West Coast, sold it in San Francisco, and got on a plane. Kata, the Japanese student, asked if I would give him a ride to LA to visit the family who had hosted him as a high school exchange student. I was happy to have the company until he began to serenade me with a loud, off tune "Jesus loves me" that continued all across the country. When I met Kata's host family, white, middle-class people, I was surprised that they called him Keith, a name they presumably gave him because they found "Kata" too difficult. But at that point Kata-Keith disappeared from my life.

When Tess and I lived there, the college covered about a city block with stone buildings and expansive lawns. We found that the campus had tastefully expanded with new stone buildings and even more lawns. The old wooden pedestrian bridge across wolf creek, from which I once gigged frogs, had been replaced by a romantic, arched stone bridge. The old hotel adjacent to the campus, where I had once bell-hopped and washed dishes, was in disrepair and in the process of being converted to a senior citizen residence.

Our original first home, a little cabin, had been gobbled up by the expanding campus. We remember looking for a bigger apartment and having a distraught landlord slam the door in our faces.

We did eventually find a one room, third floor attic apartment in a hulking, ancient building. The rent was

reasonable, but I had to stoke the coal fired boiler. The whole town heated with coal, and during the winter a fine dust crept into the homes and dorms.

In 50 years the building hadn't changed, still hulking and dower. We remembered "forgetting" a wedding present behind a knee wall in that apartment. It was an oil done by the teenage daughter of one of my mother's friends - a sailing ship in full sail, its pendants and flags gallantly flying into the wind. Tess wanted to knock at the door and see if it was still there. I said no, it's probably hanging proudly on one of the downstairs living room walls.

The college summer staff and especially the alumni association staff were pleasant and accommodating. My father's parents both graduated from GCC, Grandfather in 1910 and Grandmother in 1909. Grandfather went on to get his PhD and was ordained a Presbyterian minister. Grandmother went on to have his four children in pretty quick succession. But then Grandfather divorced Grandmother, married his lover, and dribbled his life away writing mostly forgotten Christian tracts and books. The family was an inconvenience, and he deposited them in a small, South Jersey town, Norma, NJ, which had recently been established by Jewish immigrants. (Strange, but true.)

One of the few memories of my Grandfather is of a visit he paid my parents. He sat ramrod straight in our living room with his head against the wall. He left a grease stain on the wallpaper that never came out.

The tuition at GCC is cheap, real cheap. But I would never recommend sending a child there. I remember my biology professor harboring strong doubts about the theory of evolution, and I suspect the professors still do. And I'm pretty sure Wednesday chapel services are still required. But even if evolution is taught as gospel and chapel is optional, that new bridge over Wolf Creek is a little high for giggling frogs.

As we drove out of town, we noticed Trump lawn signs - not a lot, but I suspect that as November approaches they will sprout like mushrooms on a cool, damp day.

(The picture is of Tess and me taken in a Grove City studio.)



November 22, 2015 · Refugees

Munir came to me for a job shortly after 9/11. His American Dream was beginning to unravel. He lost his job as a limo driver ferrying people to and from Newark International Airport. Traffic fell off after the attack, and I suspect some riders were leery of riding with a brown man with a strange accent. In addition, his wife experienced a traumatic robbery at the convenience store where she worked. She found it impossible to return.

I don't know what mechanism brought Munir and his wife from Pakistan to the United States. Most probably some family members who were already here petitioned for his

entry, just as Tess and I petitioned to have her brother immigrate.

Whatever the case, he came to me for a job, I was doing well and had dreams of doing better. I could use another worker. My main technician, an African-American man, had been with the company for years and was absolutely dependable. I was proud that he had bought his house while working for me. The second, a younger, white man, came from a troubled background – foster parents, some time in a youth detention center. He was quick to learn and I found him dependable and honest.

Munir was eager to do well, but he had little skill with basic tools and he was shy and unsure of himself with the customers.

Munir didn't eat lunch with us. Once when the rest of us came back early, Munir wasn't in the office. In a few minutes, one of my workers came to me with a puzzled, half smile and reported that Munir had laid out his rug and was praying.

During the month of Ramadan, Munir fasted and his energy flagged a little in the late afternoon. I'm not religious, but I strongly believe in religious freedom. Praying and fasting were his business.

Eventually Munir and I came to an agreement that the job wasn't for him. I think he was relieved to go. I'm sure he had family and community resources.

I saw him one last time. One of the men and I happened to drive past the small, Plainfield mosque, and there he was on the sidewalk. We waved and he waved back and flashed a broad smile.

So what's the point? Simple. We have a powerful weapon here in America, our American Dream. We should not surrender it in this world of war and terror.

June 10, 2016- Lab Rat

Being in a trial of a new cancer drug is somewhat analogous to being a lab rat. The technicians draw my blood every week, occasionally they want a urine specimen, and every so often they run my body through a scan or two. At first I thought some of those tests might help to adjust my medication, but the dosage hasn't changed and the doctors confess that most of the information gleaned from these tests is to satisfy the requirements of the study. (Not that I'm not grateful, but...)

This week they required a biopsy of a tumor in my lung, a tumor adjacent to my aorta. Sure, I said, why not. We'll go through your back, they said, just a thick, long needle, lots of drugs, all you'll feel is a little pressure. Okay, I said. Sign here, they said. (You really don't have a choice.)

The doctor was as good as her word. I was a little surprised by all the people and all the equipment when they wheeled me into the operating room, but I guess they were ready to do open heart surgery if need be. Nevertheless, I didn't feel a thing, not even pressure, and after two hours in the recovery room waiting to see if I was okay, they gave me back my clothes and released me, cautioning me to go to the nearest emergency room if my lung should deflate. After a subway ride and an hour and a half bus ride, a very late lunch at a Thai restaurant, and a stop to vote, Tess and I went home – my lung more or less intact.

The staff, the doctors, the anesthesiologist, the nurses, the orderlies, were all very nice, upbeat people, the kind of people you wouldn't mind having over for dinner. And the next day I got a call from a pleasant woman who asked how I was doing. I told her the truth, that I was doing pretty well. And then I said, "I think you cured my cancer." She let it pass. I could tell she didn't know what to say. (Next week the dissection.)

February 8, 2017 -

Over a year ago I reported my condition – lung cancer – and my acceptance into a trial of a promising new drug. The trial has now run its course, and after a year of slow decline, we have to move on to a more traditional drug.

I appreciated having had the year. It gave me two weeks at the shore with my family, a trip to Denver to see my daughter's new house, time with long-term and trusted friends, time reminiscing with my cousins, the joy of being with children and grandchildren and seeing them blossom, and of course the joy of a continuing life with Tess – 50 years and counting.

What I didn't fully realize was how much my possibilities were shrinking, the shortening distances I could walk, the projects I thought I could get to. There are old family photographs and letters I began to sort through, that now I'll never get to, and projects with the garden and boats that I will never complete. My life has been circumscribed by a cane and the plastic tether of an oxygen line.

This new drug (Tarceva) may well buy me a little time, but it won't reset the clock.

So my advice to all you, my friends, is yes do those trips to India, enjoy those cruises, but make time for those little projects, enjoy walks, delight in your freedoms.

Gone to Ten

Yes, it was right there,
not a decade ago.

He filled my cupped hands
from the overflowing hose.

And I poured the water . . .
the strands of his hair
swimming across his
forehead, his eyes blinking.

We laughed, face to face.

Yes, it was right there,
in the warmth of the summer sun.

He's gone now.

Gone to ten.

But it was right there,
on the grass.

I'm sure of it.

2013