

After the sky fell

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
Published January 28, 2005

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.

Editor's note: 300 Words presents glimpses of everyday life that often go unnoticed.

One hour at a time

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
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He missed Cheyenne's first steps.

Missed her first Thanksgiving. First Christmas. First tooth.

Just the other day, he missed her learning how to slurp spaghetti.

He hasn't held her in six months, hasn't watched her play with her favorite toy shopping cart. He hasn't heard her cry in the middle of the night or giggle in her crib beside the bed he shared with his wife, Cheyenne's mother.

"I've missed everything," he says.

He has measured his daughter's life in hourlong visits, twice a week. They meet in this drab concrete block room, separated always by a thick sheet of glass. She usually wears pink; he always wears orange.

Looking at her feels like looking through the window at a pot of gold, he says. Beautiful and priceless, but always out of reach.

Thomas Herold, 29, has only himself to blame.

He has tangled with the law for years – burglary, marijuana, weapons charges. In October, a year after a massive raid in Pasco County, he was convicted in federal court of conspiring to distribute cocaine.

The world will forever know him as a criminal. But when Cheyenne looks through the window, she sees the man who makes her laugh with his funny faces. She sees the man who presses his lips against the glass, trying in vain to kiss hers.

This morning, at 8:30, the father will stand before a judge and learn his fate. At best, he thinks, he'll get 10 years in prison. At worst, he could get life.

Either way, he'll wake up three weeks from now in some distant federal penitentiary, far from home and far from Cheyenne's deep brown eyes. It will be March 31.

Her first birthday.

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Looking for a laugh

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
Published March 25, 2005

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.

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The man in the mirror

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
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He's standing there in front of the mirror, dressed in more pink than he's ever worn in his life. He's 17, a senior at Lakewood High School in St. Petersburg.

Josh King can't stop staring into that mirror. The seconds pass. He poses. He pauses.

The boy stares out at the man. The man stares back at the boy.

And there they are.

The man in him paid for this tuxedo - pink shirt, pink socks, pink shoes - with the money he earned mowing lawns. The man paid for his haircut and the tickets to tonight's prom. The man is paying for dinner.

The man in him helps look after his younger brothers. The man will graduate later this month and yearns to escape Florida. He's the one who will head to college in Virginia. He's the one who will study business, then find a job, find a wife, find his way in the world.

And then there is the boy in Josh King.

He's the one who still has baseball trophies on his dresser and a Porsche poster on his wall.

He's the one who feels nervous tonight, the one who will feel a shiver creep down his neck when he picks up his date - a girl he thought was out of his league.

The boy in him will forget to open the car door for her. He will play his music too loud and be too shy to say much during dinner.

The boy in him still doesn't know how to tie a tie. So his father shows him. And as the father slips the tie from his neck and puts it on his son's, he smiles and says, "This is a classic moment."

They both look at the mirror, knowing how soon the boy will disappear.

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The man in the mask

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
Published October 17, 2005

Inside the locker room, the drifter drifts to sleep.

He pays no attention to the country music blaring outside, or the bulls pacing restlessly, or the bullriders swaggering in too-tight Wranglers.

They call him Stretch, a wild man, a bullfighter, the American kind, who paints his face clown-like and dresses in red and throws himself willingly into the path of angry beasts who have just bucked cowboys to the ground.

When he was 14, the road called, and Stretch answered. He ran away from home and landed at an Oklahoma rodeo and has lived a hundred lifetimes since.

He's slept at truck stops, on the shoulder of highways, in the dirt beside livestock. He's drunk his share of Jack Daniels. He's been tattooed a half-dozen times in a half-dozen cities, dipped enough Copenhagen to roof a house with the tin cans. He's been arrested for fighting. He found a girlfriend in Utah named Kasey.

He's stared down a thousand bulls in a thousand nowhere towns from Tennessee to Texas, Montana to Mississippi. The bulls have knocked out his front teeth and broken his arms, ribs, ankles, tailbone, collarbone and kneecap. They've given him more concussions and stitches and joy than he can measure.

"I live kind of different," Stretch says, smiling toothlessly.

Back in Kansas, the family never understood. His dad's a lawyer, his sister a dentist. His brothers turned out normal, too.

But Stretch, well, he lives kind of different. He owns two bags of clothes and probably won't ever own much else, except this: "I'll have a lot of good stories."

And maybe that's enough.

Maybe, unlike so many people, he has found the place he belongs, in the ring with the other untamed souls, kicking up dust and mud.

The drifter opens his eyes.

Showtime.

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First day

By BRADY DENNIS, Times Staff Writer
Published December 24, 2005

Outside, it's dreary and raining. The rush hour traffic inches along, a slow procession of drivers staring ahead blankly, wishing they were home.

Inside Labor and Delivery Room 15, the television brings news of a plane accident in Chicago. A winter storm blankets the Northeast. A boy has been murdered in a Tampa park. A local soldier has died in Iraq.

Already David and Anastasia are wondering how they will protect their firstborn from the world outside this hospital room. They worry, as only parents can, how they will handle all that lies ahead.

In the day's few quiet moments - between contractions and nurses checking blood pressure and doctors asking questions - they talk about the daughter who is about to arrive.

Will she know right from wrong? Will she turn out shy? Patient? Compassionate? Will she have blue eyes like her father? Will she grow taller than her mother?

Will she tell them about her first kiss?

Will she fall in love, the way they did? Will she have her heart broken, the way they did? Will she have a child of her own someday and worry, the way they are now?

They wonder all this before they have ever laid eyes on her. They have heard only the sound of her heartbeat, and that was enough.

And then the clock ticks past 7 p.m., and the thoughts of the world and its perils slip away. The months of waiting, the days of wondering, the hours of labor - it all fades.

In that moment, there is only this:

One final, painful push.

A baby girl, 6 pounds, 14 ounces, flawless.

Her first cry, innocent and primal.

A mother's weary smile.

A father's eyes filled with tears.

A family beginning.

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