



2nd
Place

SHORT-STORY
CONTEST WINNER

Cecil— The Music Man

By Jason J. Elmore

Before kids walked through metal detectors,
before kids wore baggy, sagging clothes,
before thumbs busily glided across
smartphone screens in the hallways, before
so much loss of innocence, in the rural places
like Wexford County, children gathered in one-room
schoolhouses that dotted the rolling hills, forested
lands, and country roads.

Outside, fresh air abounded. Trees hung their canopies reaching out over dirt roads. The children came to school much less concerned about their fashion and social media success. They held no ideas of what their grandchildren and great-grandchildren would look like strolling the halls of bigger and busier schools nearly a century later. To them, the world was still big and would likely remain so forever.

On a late spring day in 1938 in Slagle Township with summer nearing and the buds bursting on the oaks and maples outside, 31 children ranging in age gathered in their small schoolhouse. They brought their books in old leather bags, worn sacks, or tied together with a strap. Their clothes lacked logos, images of teen idols or rap artists, or offensive and lewd suggestions. They wore plaid flannel shirts, simple dresses with stockings, pants hung by suspenders, and basic shoes that still somehow did the trick for all purposes without today's gadgets.

The schoolmarm, unflatteringly dressed, worked the classroom unworried about the politics in Lansing or the teachers' unions. Instead, she went from desk to desk checking on her students. The sun shone through the windows and specks of dust gingerly floated in and out through the rays. The room had a dusty smell of chalk, but blowing inside slightly was the smell of the season. Cursive lessons were written across the board up front.

Many of the kids were busy working on their studies. One rested his head on his crossed arms on the desk, exhausted from tilling the ground over the weekend on the farm. A few boys hid their messing around behind the teacher's back as she helped some of the girls in the front row.

Faintly, a Buick sedan was heard pulling off 38 Mile Road into the gravel and grass in front of the schoolhouse. The kids stopped what they were doing and lifted their heads in unison like prairie dogs. They heard the brakes squeak on that old simple car followed by the opening and closing of its heavy door. They exchanged smiles and burst together in a surge of energy and moved to the windows. They were looking for him.

The moment of anticipation was still, but short. "There he is!" yelled one girl. Then came the signature calling card of his arrival. Two feet bearing black leather shoes tied tightly, black socks, and dress trousers crumpling downward from gravity in the opposite direction of the feet that were waddling through the air.

The kids cheered. Would he make it all the way around this time on his hands? They ran from one window to the next. Kids fought to see outside. How far was he going to make it?

Cecil, the music teacher, was outside, upside down, walking on his hands. White dress shirt. A simple tie dangled down across his face. He was a tall, thin man who

always had a smile. He was always the entertainer. Some days, he made it only a little way around. Some days, he made it halfway. Rare was it he made it even two-thirds. Regardless, it was for the kids and they loved it.

This time, his feet came down as he turned the corner near the back of the schoolhouse. As he fell and landed on his backside, the kids cheered. They always cheered no matter how far he made it. He always sat there for just a second, taking his bow from the ground with a smile. Always the entertainer. This is how my grandfather, the music teacher who went from schoolhouse to schoolhouse throughout the week, often announced his arrival to the kids.

I had heard these stories from my father and uncles for years. Cecil would end up marrying Mary, a teacher in one of the schoolhouses. Hers was in Selma Township near Pleasant Lake. He had not yet become the principal of the rural schoolhouses. He had not become the superintendent or moved to Lansing to represent educators. The stories of Cecil that came to me from my father were often short and simple. Whereas grandpa was too humble to share them himself, my father usually heard them second- or third-hand.

This telling of the story took place in the summer of 2012, 74 years after it happened, told to me in vivid color by a stranger as if it had happened only a week prior.

That summer, I had decided to take my stab at politics by running for Wexford County prosecutor. At middle age, after practicing law around the world in the U.S. Army JAG Corps and driving all over northern Michigan as a small-town defense attorney, it was time to try something new. I needed to do something else. In the realities of overhead, billable hours, account receivables, and the other trappings of the practice of law, I needed to remember why I chose this profession. I needed to uncover the image of Atticus Finch I once held but seemed buried under the nearly 20 years of nonfiction.

While I lost by the narrowest of margins, less than .05 percent, through my faith and for several other reasons, I considered it a victory. The victory came in the form of nuggets I gleaned along the trail.

One such nugget came when I celebrated my birthday that June with an older couple on a small farm west of Manton. I knocked just as the husband was bringing



out the homemade chocolate birthday cake for his wife after their quiet dinner together. Photos of children and grandchildren unable to share the moment cluttered the walls. When I said it was also my birthday, with such genuine hospitality, they invited me and together we blew out the candles, ate cake, and shared coffee. The other special moment came from my visit with Margaret in Slagle Township out by Harrietta.

I spent much of that summer driving all over the county along mapped-out routes in our green Chrysler Town and Country minivan. The smell of stale Cheerios, crumbs, spilled beverages, and kid indigenous to the soccer mom and dad was a constant companion. I drove up and down expressways, highways, neighborhood streets, dirt roads, and two tracks zig-zagging the county hunting for the red pins that dotted my iPhone screen, leading me to places I never knew existed, even in my own backyard. I ate packed lunches in the summer heat along roads, in all-but-forgotten township cemeteries lost in time, or deserted parking lots along trickling rivers. My summer was a blur of handshakes, meetings, talks, and knocking on the doors of strangers.

On this one day in July as my family was sitting down for dinner at home, I was going to visit one more house. It was a beautiful summer day in western Wexford County. The air was hot. The hidden insects buzzed out their summer songs. I pulled off the dirt road into the gravel and grass drive of a very plain and unassuming home. It led to a small, aging house that was accompanied by a leaning, unpainted barn and a weathered shed.

When I got out of the minivan, I turned down the radio but left the engine and air conditioning running. One more house. I would give the same pitch I had given already nearly 2,000 times that summer. I would smile sincerely and shake a hand. Then I would give the resident my brochure. I would say nothing about my opponent, choosing to focus only on who I was and what I could bring to the position. I would hope whoever lived in the home would cast a vote for me. Then I would get back into the minivan and text my wife that I was heading home for the evening. At least that is what I thought.

The stories that brought us to that couch with the musty book on her lap were those of Cecil and the impression he made on the children back then.

I knocked on the side door. No one answered. I knocked again. Still no answer. I looked around and thought that maybe no one lived there. The drive was not well worn. There was still a television antenna running up the side of house and beyond the roof. Just then, the interior door creaked open and an elderly woman emerged.

She was accompanied by her dog and cat, who were clearly her very close friends and roommates. She was simply dressed in old yet likely comfortable clothing. She was hunched over just a bit. She greeted me with a welcoming and experienced smile. The screen door remained between us as I introduced myself, apologized for interrupting her, and began to tell her who I was and why I deserved her vote. After I said my last name, she seemed to pause and it was obvious that I had her attention.

“Elmore?” she asked.

“Yes, Jason Elmore,” I responded.

She thought for a moment and I could see her mind was thumbing through the index of her life. “Are you any relation to Cecil Elmore?” she inquired.

“Yes, ma’am; Cecil was my grandfather,” I replied with a smile.

Cecil’s name had already come up several times throughout my tour of the county. There were several voters who had spent most of their lives in Wexford County or had at least grown up here and returned to retire and spend their last days where their first had occurred so many miles before.

“Well, then, come inside,” she insisted, giving me no option. “Thank you,” I said, and followed her inside.

The interior was modest. It was like walking back in time. The home seemed to have a 1950s smell. She clearly had an objective, and it had nothing to do with my reason for being there.

The pets seemed to accept me. Margaret led me into the living room, which was a bit cluttered with her years of living. She was on a hunt. Instead of clicking on a computer, opening folders, and dragging files, she moved a few things from a stack, moved some others to the couch, and in seconds pulled out her 1938 yearbook for her one-room schoolhouse. Quicker than my assistant clicking and dragging a mouse through electronic files, she found what it was she wanted. Still standing there, with the book resting on the arm of the tattered couch and without



any struggle, she flipped through the pages of her youth, stopped, and with frail fingers pointed to a face in black and white. It was the face of a young Cecil. His hair was still dark and his skin smooth, but that smile was ageless and beaming.

Margaret directed me to sit and began to detail stories about that particular year so long ago. She became a storyteller. She pointed out her best friend, then a boyfriend, then her husband who passed several years ago. She recounted who married whom and the friends who had since passed away.

The stories that brought us to that couch with the musty book on her lap were those of Cecil and the impression he made on the children back then. She spoke about his smile, the electricity he generated in the single-room school, how he brought the first real record player she had seen to school, and, of course, his hand-walking feats around the building.

As we ended our visit, Margaret did something so simple, yet touching. Without thinking and with unsteady hands, she tore two pages from that old yearbook and presented them to me. These were the two pages that showed my grandfather standing with the kids outside on the steps he would waddle by on his hands, feet up in the air, past the windows to which the children would rush and watch him go by.

“You take these, dear.”

In humble awe and very touched, I thanked her. It was a moment with such sincerity, any polite “I can’t take these” would not have been right and only rude. A simple “thank you” sufficed.

As we moved back to the kitchen and toward the door, Margaret asked me my wife’s favorite color. I paused, as it seemed unusual and out of nowhere. I turned around, still under the sway of the torn pages in my hand. I regrouped.

“Blue,” I responded.

“Here, take these home to her. I make them. It keeps me busy. Now you better get home before you miss your dinner.”



It was a plastic grocery bag from a store, and inside was a stack of washcloths and kitchen towels, all handmade. Bright, basic colors. Touching.

As I left and walked back to the minivan, which was still running, I realized I had been there for nearly an hour. I opened the door, sat inside, and closed the door. The minivan had become quite cool thanks to the AC. I looked down at the plat map that had been on the floor and discovered that in this unassuming home lived the largest property owner in the township, mostly leased farm land and sprawling forest. I smiled and knew I did not want to forget that moment.

As the AC blew its chilly air and the voice on the radio clattered on, the distractions of life disappeared. My life came into focus...into the moment. I looked at the black-and-white photo into the eyes of my grandfather, who had passed away nearly three decades before, and knew that his passion to entertain, serve, and have a unique influence sowed its seed in me long ago. It was sitting on his lap as he played piano and talked about life and his passion for it that nudged me down my own path. I then realized the objective I had sought down this campaign trail.

How does a small-town lawyer—or anyone, for that matter—know if his or her life is a success? Smile. I knew at that silent moment my benchmark would be waiting at some unexpected and blessed moment down some future road like this one. Should one of my children or grandchildren ever be shared a story detailed with such warmth and color about my life having had such an effect on someone as Cecil had on Margaret’s, then my life and work will have been a success.

I placed the old torn-out photos onto the passenger seat already covered in maps and my campaign brochures with my face on the front hawking the reasons to vote for me. I turned away, set the dish towels down, grabbed my phone, and texted my wife, Alicia.

“En route; have great story; makes whole stressful summer worth it; don’t eat without me. Love you and the kids.” ■



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