

“I now consider the day describe below as one of my best days ever. It marks the definitive decision in my slightly-rebellious-leaning youth to pursue a life of integrity and purity. A life my parents (earthy and heavenly) could be proud of. ”

Telton W Hall

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Mullets, Maltballs, and The Boardshorts

By: Telton Hall

The boardshorts were dark. They had dark black velvet in the shape of Hawaiian style flowers on a dark green material that shimmered in the sun. I used to think I should have stolen the Fox boardshorts I bought as a decoy. They were about the same price but not quite as attention grabbing as the ones I had on beneath my underwear. I liked the flowered ones more. I thought I liked a lot of things then. My brother bought his shorts first. The store manager scowled and barely responded to my small talk about the “Crusty Demons of Dirt” video that was playing as my shaky fingers struggled to pull out a hundred dollar bill for my decoy pants.

My fingers have always been shaky. When I am playing a card trick during “family time,” trying to weld rusty plows and panel horse fences, or when the seams of shoplifted pants are rubbing against my hips. The decoy shorts didn’t work.

The first time I got caught shoplifting it was by my mother. I wasn’t old enough to be in school yet, but I was old enough to know that we couldn’t afford the candy covered malt balls that are so popular around Easter time. I suspect it’s not really considered stealing to pick a piece of candy, which has fallen out of its bin, off a supermarket floor. But at that age, the worst thing I had done was sneak into the pantry with a spoon and a jar of Jet-Puffed Marshmallow Cream my mom said was “only for cooking Christmas candy.” These little malt candies are usually light blue, pink or yellow. This one was dark blue. I am pretty sure it was dark; I only had a minute to pick it off the aisle before it was nothing more than part of a slightly pudgier than normal hand. I knew I had to get outside before the specks of dirt on my sweet little jewel melted right into the candy crust. I should have waited. A crunchy little jewel is still a jewel. I made my getaway. Three running steps and I stood facing the automatic door. I stifled a squeal when my mom came up behind me, pushing the cart. I tried to play it cool, but my hands were shaking. I eyed the large white arrow on the ground, knowing that all I had to do was jump on it and the door would open. It beckoned to me; pointed the way to freedom. I weighed the odds, turned, and asked my mom for permission to go

to the car. A million “nothings” would not have convinced that posse of a woman that I didn’t have something in my hand. Not even a decoy would have saved me.

The wheels on her shopping cart slowly rolled to a stop against a crate of Corn Flakes. My heart felt sad for what I had done. My face pouted, hoping for sympathy. My mind tried to figure out some way of protecting the single dollar bill, the only holdings of my yellow Velcro wallet. My eyes watched the wheels of the cart.

I don’t know many thirty-five year olds that wear Airwalks, but the store manager at the mall did. He followed me and my brother to the door. I didn’t look to see if the boardshorts were visible when he asked me to lift up my shirt. I didn’t pout. My heart stiffened, my mind raced with things to say but my mouth didn’t move very much during that hour of my life. The shorts must not have been visible. The manager asked me if I had a pair of green Hurley’s on. I looked him in the eye, opened my mouth and nodded. It was the summer before my senior year of high school. I was the star basketball player, an Honor Roll student, a former class president, a hard worker, and a “natural leader.” The store manager led me to the dressing room where I took off the shorts. Every customer watched me walk in empty handed, and every customer saw the shimmer of green I handed to the manager when I came out. My brother’s jaw muscles had been clenched in confusion. At this point they quit working. “Sorry” I said to him as I followed the Airwalks to the supply room to wait for the police officer to arrive.

“But everybody at school has one,” I complained to my mom. I looked up at the barber, my face pleading for some support. His forehead wrinkled, his left eyebrow raised and I knew he thought I was crazy. I was in elementary school and I guess I hadn’t considered that my mom saw the 4th grade class photo before I did, but she knew that I didn’t want to get a mullet hair cut because it was the “in thing.” I told her that the other kids had mullets, that the guy in the “haircut magazine” had one, but I never told her why I wanted one. The Robertson boys had mullets. They had drinking parties, they had dirt-bikes, they had girlfriends who wore tube tops, they had fun; they had mullets.

I had thrown a tantrum after my mom told me I would have to pay for the malt ball. I screamed. I pouted. I jumped up and down on the white arrow. The door danced as the other costumers left out the “ENTER” side. My temper only got worse and by the time I was in the 4th grade one barber had already told me he wouldn’t cut my hair if I didn’t calm down and listen to my mother.

I can still see all the old ladies, curlers in hair, and dryers folded down over their heads looking up from magazines and shaking their heads as my mom tried to reason with me. She gave in “three quarters of an inch,” the barber left a half and I looked decent going to school. It never crossed my mind that my mother never went to the salon for herself. When I climbed up the shoe racks at Payless and screamed “I want Nikes,” it never once occurred to me that she never bought new shoes for herself. When she said she couldn’t believe that such a handsome man as my father had married a plain girl like her I didn’t believe she really thought that. But I didn’t believe she would cry the first

time I told her she was the most beautiful mom in the world, either. I thought I had done something wrong.

She would always stay calm with me. Even when she got mad and yelled it was a controlled, precise, demanding yell. I never worried unless she went silent, or worse, when she cried.

My brother's questions about what I had done went silent when we watched a black and white me grabbed the shorts from the rack, almost as an afterthought, and head for the dressing room. I sat on a box in the "supply room," watched the screen and waited for me to come out of the dressing room without the shorts. The manager must have re-recorded my theft because it played over and over again. The other five screens continued eyeing the store. This one was devoted totally to me; it patiently waited to show my performance to the cop. I was so busy keeping my knees from banging against each other that I couldn't support myself. The box below me crumbled under my weight. I didn't bother getting up.

"Son, the kid is a knothed." I knew my dad was right. I knew I wanted to have people trust me and consider me responsible. I knew that Danny wasn't and didn't care. But he had a mullet and a motorcycle. My dad and I didn't speak for several minutes as he concentrated on stretching the barbed wire. I stood back in case the wire snapped and watched him wince from pain each time he cranked.

I thought of the bad broncs and bulls the man before me had ridden in his day. I knew his parents had not wanted him to rodeo. My mom told me his parents had never gone to a rodeo to watch him. When he won the Utah College Rodeo All-Around Cowboy as a sophomore my mom and the rodeo team cheered from where all the contestants were standing in the arena. He scanned the crowd. Dropped his chin for a moment; then told the announcer standing beside him that he was really tickled and honored. After that year he married my mom and gave up rodeo. Started working construction. Started a family. I knew that years of construction had worn out his shoulder and blew out his back. I also knew that the years of rodeo were hard on his body. I wondered if his worn down body came more from the broncs he'd ridden or the ones he never had a chance to ride. I wondered, if I ever got over wanting to be a rebellious kid, if I would one day grow up to be half the man he was.

I had been working on the ranch even more than usual for several weeks. I had been working with my dad because I was grounded from Danny. Through my Wranglers, I rubbed the road rash I had on my hip. It was from a wreck Danny and I had the day before on his motorcycle. I had walked around the house in my bathrobe for the rest of the day hoping my mom wouldn't think of any clothing-necessary chores to do. But now I was wondering when I was going to be able to sneak away again and if road rash stings when you go skinny dipping. Later that evening, when I heard a two-stroke engine outside, I tried mouthing off to my mom and then running out the kitchen door. My mom was washing dishes at the sink. I was as tall as she was; I yelled to the back of her head that I was thirteen, and I could do what the heck I wanted. My dad was on the other side of the kitchen and I was two steps from the door. "He's an old broke down

cowboy that can't hardly move," I thought as I jumped for the door. My knees buckled forward when his boot kicked me from behind. My head would have hit the doorknob but he caught my shoulder. He told me to never speak to my mother that way and then asked if my knees or back were hurt. I didn't go swimming that night, but the next morning I went out to the blind turn on the road to the swimming hole. Danny was in the hospital. I picked up what was left of his motorcycle and promised myself I would be a better child. Try and work hard like my dad; be calm like my mother. We started building a go-cart when Danny was still walking on crutches.

The policeman took out his hand cuffs but never put them on. I asked if I could walk in front of him to his office. It was a futile attempt at saving my dignity. He pointed toward the door down the hall on the left, and everybody watched as he stayed two steps behind my brother and me until we were in the cubby hole, mini police office that was reserved for thieves like me. Crammed between a Dillard's and a Radio Shack there was only enough room for three chairs and a desk. Just enough room to give someone a criminal record.

If I hadn't been so tan at the time you would have thought I was an icesculpture sitting in the plain wooden chair. The officer walked to the other side of the desk and slid the one book in the room off the shelf with a slight shower of dust. Three large specks defied gravity and seemed to enjoy when the officer turned pages from what I hoped was not the Book of Life. I would have smashed them against the wall if a fly-swatter would have been handy. Last name. First name. Middle initial. Parents. Address. Phone number. "Mr. and Mrs. Hall this is Officer....," he was leaving a message. "I would have told them," I said, "I know how to face the consequences of my mistakes." The man across the desk didn't smile but I could see in his eyes that he believed me as he explained something about state policy and then banished me from the mall for a year. The Airwalk man had the privilege to ban me from his store for life but he said that I could come back after the year. A month or so later I wrote the store a letter of apology, but I've never gone back.

I knew how many girls he had kissed that spring break. I knew if I'd be less concerned with decency and respect, I could have been ahead of him by five, but I didn't know Danny had shoplifted the pants until we were out in the car. "I thought you just bought the shirt," I asked him. "So does the sales clerk, little thing I like to call a decoy" he laughed. Danny had to have his arm nearly replaced when he got in a drunk driving accident. I needed my arm for basketball, I didn't drink, and I could see I didn't want to end up where Danny was heading. I quit hanging out with him for a while. I decided in my mind I was going to change, find fun in less dangerous activities, break fewer commandments, and add several years to my parent's lives. Three weeks later I was with Danny again at the mall. I tried to talk Danny into stealing the boardshorts but he wouldn't shop lift from that store. I decided that I would have to do it on my own. My parents would live long enough. They would always be poor. I had found away to get anything I wanted, thrill included. The boardshorts were my first, and only, attempt at

shoplifting. It never crossed my mind that I stood on a banana at the crest of the slimy slope to the art of stealing - first clothes before moving on to cars or four-wheelers. It never crossed my mind that Danny knew something about the supply room that I didn't know.

My mother sat on the bed. Her guilt and sorrow ran along the outside of her hands, dripped down her arms and shook the house when they splashed onto the carpet. It was pink carpet back then. It was pink except for the Hawaiian flower shaped pool between her feet. The guilt had tuned that spot dark. When I recall this memory I wish it was an out of body experience. I would like to know where my siblings were that had heard the officer's message on the answering machine. Where was my younger brother? Did he tell the whole house or did he go to his room and pray for me? Did they feel the house shake? Or was it my dad and me alone? As my father stood he didn't arch backward out of pain like he always did. He stood like a man who had been whipped. He did not straighten all the way to his full stature, just enough to let me see his face. Whipped but never beaten, never giving up, never. Ankles bent forward. Knees gave backward. Hip flexors flexed and I slumped into the chair. I closed my eyes but the dam broke and my own river of self disappointment ran over. I was dark inside and then all lights went out. My eyes stayed closed. My mind slumped with my body and slept in my head. "We've tried so..." my mother's voice cracked, flowed down to the carpet, and drowned in the Hawaiian flower shaped puddle at her feet. My heart cringed. It twisted. And then, my heart changed. The moon shines very bright in little mountain towns and I suppose that it was shining that night, but when I looked up the only light I saw was in my parents eyes.

My parents have been remodeling since I left for college. The carpet in their room is blue now. There are no dark flowers. There never will be.