

ESSAY

Gomez' last swim

BY JAN BOLLING
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Gomez was found five days after he died, seated on the driver's side of his old '73 Chevy pick up with a Busch tallboy between his thighs. They figure he died happy. "They" being the folks that knew him. I never met him until after he was dead and that was by accident. I was hunting jade for the first time on a Big Sur beach when I stumbled on his funeral. The folks I was visiting in California used to live in those Big Sur hills and canyons, lived as a part of that tribe of dirt-poor old hippies, pot-growers, hermits and miscreants. Gomez was one of them, and if you were one of them, when you die your ashes are placed in a fast-running creek near Jade Beach and the wake begins.

I didn't know a think about rock hunting or jade, so Tamlin, Jeff and their kids taught me as we went along. We found green jade and black jade and an assortment of pretty rocks. Jade is formed of jadeite or nephrite that has been pressed between tectonic plates. Serpentine is a sort of proto-jade. Black jade (which I didn't know existed) sometimes has a white webbing called rind that will come off if it is sanded or tumbled but is tenacious otherwise. Kinda like life. I think about stuff like that these days.

I'm 48 years old with late stage cancer complaining about losing the dubious rewards of middle age — the smug years, the years when you know you're good, have the skills to prove it and the health to enjoy it. Pisser. Spent my whole life wasting only to find my body has already looted my pension fund. From 48 to 65 in just 8 months — me, the guy walking an 8 inch wide block wall 30 feet high guiding a cement bucket holding tons of concrete; the guy whose ankles the other longshoremen held while I dangled upside down off the side of a 7 stack container barge, loosening comealongs and dropping retaining chains into Anchorage Bay. And now I can't count on my legs to have enough strength to support my next step. Pisser. Mortality and me. Brer Rabbit and the Tar baby — that black stuff seems to stick to everything. Kinda like death.

Anger might be a great motivator but it isn't living. So I notice life. Life is a lot less

personal than I thought. It doesn't really "belong" to any one person. Pisser.

It was nearing late afternoon as we left the "secret" jade field. I wobbled over the boulders as people were starting to congregate at the beach access. Beat-up pick-ups and older SUVs emptied. There were a few seagull-voiced children, a baker's dozen of incredibly well-adjusted adolescents distinguishable only by age from their parents — the same hippies, pot growers, hermits and miscreants mentioned earlier. Someone built an altar of gladiolis, sunflowers, and lilies next to the creek. Congas were set up on the sand. The drummers were young surfers who looked better than they played, but then again, things were just starting. A plastic gallon bottle of Kessler's ("smooth as silk") rotgut began making the rounds. There was also a handful of folks I imagined were peers of Gomez; men whose age could be mid-50s or much, much older, with sun and drug engraved wrinkles, deep tans, white-to-gray hair and beards, tattered clothes, and without exception all missing front teeth, giving the impression of brotherhood involving a powerful thirst maintained over decades. Scruffy looking folks who would look comfortable under a bridge or in any hobo camp — odd to see them socializing with children and the younger folk of the group. Everyone except the surfers wore baseball caps.

An older bald and hearty man who still had his front teeth — a man pointed out to me as the unofficial mayor of this community — took a couple belts and started the proceedings.

"The first time I met Gomez," he said, "it was night and Gomez had a campfire with seven cardboard cartons of wine next to him. He offered, and it seemed to be the neighborly thing to do to take him up on it, and by the time we finished those seven cartons we were good friends. Turns out he had more stashed in the bushes, and then we started the serious drinking and we became really good friends."

Was it significant no one else offered a testimonial? I don't know. My friends who consider themselves part of this tribe once said that like the folks in some

neighborhoods of New York City, these people would help you out even if they didn't like you, simply because you were a neighbor and needed help. Jeff described the first time he met the community: "I was a medic in Big Sur responding to an over-the-side call (240 feet drop from a cliff). One person was already dead when we slid down the talus to them, and the other not so good. All of a sudden there were these wild men and women all around us on ropes lowering medical equipment and tying off the vehicle I was upside down trying to give medical care to the survivor. My partner, an ex-cop, says 'what's this,' the fucking Hell's Angels? I said, "I think they're the fire department." For me, it was love at first sight. Maybe that was it. Maybe the mayor summed up the man but the folks were there to celebrate the life.

Gomez's ashes had been placed in a decanter bottle. Perhaps the lack of a screw top was an indication of the occasion. Human ashes are something I know something about and there didn't seem to be enough to account for a full-grown man. It may be that five-day gap between dying and being found rendered him somewhat... Perhaps he was a very small man, and maybe his tissues were so saturated with alcohol that he combusted more completely from burning at a higher temperature. It is true, you know, that the color of the deceased's ashes indicates how hot the crematorium oven was running that night. Gomez' ashes were the whitest white I've ever seen — a titanium white.

The mayor took the decanter bottle and waded knee deep into the creek. In coming down the steep canyon the water had picked up whitewater velocity creating foaming eddies behind his knees. He uncorked the decanter and poured Gomez' ashes into the water. Gomez' last swim. And the water grabbed Gomez like the dream of a high school quarterback and ran for the Pacific. Gomez stretched out in the current like a titanium javelin, taller than he could possible have been in life, a white anaconda with a date to shed its skin at a tectonic plate, perhaps becoming white rind on black jade.

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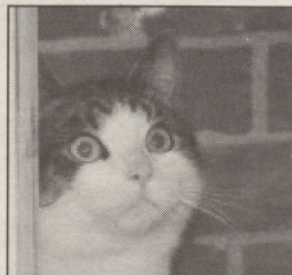
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