

THIS GIRL'S LIFE

(An excerpt)

BY: Kerrie Houston

“...Only the wind pauses to cry and then goes its transient way, as restless as the souls of the dead. We long to chance a vision of the earth, to note its swoop and grandeur, to ponder the nuances of its prayers, to rhapsodize its sorrows in terms as limitless as the skies. But we must shield our eulogies with the absurd and hide our admiration in the mind's shyest chamber. We are afraid to show our hearts and pour out our song of love, and thanks, and tenderness....”

--Darrell Bob Houston, King of the Midnight Blue

SEATTLE, WA

Back in 1969, when Wallingford was a sleepy neighborhood and 45th a virtual side street, our family was headed west on 45th, bound for Dick's Hamburgers. We looked like the typical Seattle family: a father, five children piled in the back of an old station wagon, a dog, a mother with a curler-covered head wrapped in a red bandanna—all returning from a day of swimming at the Arboretum. My little brother, Bobby, was telling jokes and we were all carrying on as if in celebration of family life.

As we approached the intersection of 45th and 7th NE, the light changed to red. Suddenly my father started cursing and making obscene hand gestures. As I was trying to figure out what was going on, I looked around and caught my reflection in the window of the Blue Moon Tavern.

Our family had just arrived at the intersection of my father's two lives: that of the celebrated Darrell Bob Houston, award-winning, footloose writer, and that of Darrell Bob, our dad. Until that day he had protectively kept his family out of the public eye, and kept his public life out of our sight.

Twenty years later, I stepped into the Blue Moon Tavern to watch our dad's old friends from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer—Ray Collins, Emmett Watson, Tom Robbins, amongst them—celebrate the life and writing of Darrell Bob Houston, the writer, who passed away in 1984. They gathered to announce a writing award established in his honor. His best friend, Tom Robbins (who gave me a huge “ruby” ring for my 10th birthday, when we celebrated our July birthdays together in 1969, at the famed Pike Place Market) read the Seattle Weekly's in memoriam, along with a eulogy he wrote, entitled: “Sort of a eulogy to Seattle's Darrell Bob Houston, 1928-1984. “

“Darrell Bob Houston was a reporter who got around. He caromed from newspaper to newspaper like a pinball under a wizard's control: the Tokyo Stars & Stripes, the

Hermiston Herald, the Daily Olympian, the Tacoma News Tribune, the L.A. Times, the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, the Guam Daily News, but most of all the P-I. He was a Vietnam War correspondent and a 1970 Alicia Patterson Fellow in Japan; his most recent job was on a daily in Anchorage. He drove all the way up the rutted Al-Can Highway, sat down at his computer terminal—and left for home the next day. During the better part of the last decade, you couldn't find a freer lance than Houston.

*He once wrote that “old newspapermen don't fade way; they become anecdotes.” Some of Houston's anecdotes are from his own work—see his tribute to the oldtime Northwest journalism (*The Weekly*, November 29, 1978), or his account of a pilgrimage to Kerouac's old firewatch cabin on Desolation Peak (*The Weekly*, October 18, 1978). His death last week inspired a slew of Houston anecdotes. Rick Anderson recounted a choice few in a *Seattle Times* column in his honor, including the incident in which Houston sold *Esquire* (at the apex of its glory) a big story on the late Beat and Prankster Neal Cassady—and then made them send it back rather than permitting any damn nitwitted hamfisted editing of the piece...*”

“SORT OF A EULOGY”

“This is not a eulogy, although it ought to be.

On April 5, we turned Darrell Bob Houston loose, four years after the medics told him he had just six months to survive. Those who knew him were not surprised by his resilience. A heart as grand and wild as his is not by ordinary forces subdued.

Darrell Bob Houston was one of those rare humans larger than life, which is to say, he measured up to life, was in life, was of life, throbbed with life's passions and its glorious paradoxes to a degree which make it nearly impossible to imagine him dead.

But that's the way it goes, and this is not a eulogy.

The fact is, to attempt to eulogize Houston in a column of print would be akin to trying to capture a month-long orgiastic feast in one black and white snapshot. When a person starts telling Darrell-Bob stories, you'd better get comfortable, because each story begets another, and it can be a long wait 'til breakfast. Darrell Bob was one writer whose own adventures, encounters, and escapades drowned out even the sweet thunders he could bang from a typewriter.

Nevertheless, he did write prose that sparkled in five directions: north, east, west, south, and where we are now; was in my opinion, as true and rich a writer as Seattle has ever seen, and to encourage the kind of writing he exemplified is to bless the memory of the man, and to bless ourselves, as well....”

As I listened to their heartfelt “DB Stories,” as they fondly call them, I wrestled with the fact that they were, in some way, true. But they didn't describe the dad I knew. They were talking about the Darrell Bob who once held a group of bar patrons captive by

blocking the exit with his station wagon; who once had streaked naked from the Blue Moon to the Sandpiper next door; who was famed for all-night drinking sessions, after which he would “crawl on the P-I’s copy desk to catch a few winks”; who never missed a deadline; and who could “rise and write sparkling headlines, a perishable kind of poetry that recalls Keats’ complaint that he wrote on water...” To them, he was the last of the beatniks, a free spirit, a legendary American Writer—footloose, iconoclastic, exuberant, and ungovernable. As the stories wore on, I stared out the tavern window, looking back at the face of a little girl who remembers quite a different Darrell Bob Houston.

OLYMPIA, WA 1966

I can remember so many nights like this one, when we were entering our driveway after an evening of watching Dr. Zhivago at a drive-in theatre. I can still hear my dad saying, “Shhh, let’s be quiet, kids, the two ‘little ones’ are sleeping.” Bobby really was asleep. But I only pretended, for I knew by experience that my dad could easily carry us both in his arms. If he tucked us into bed, I knew he would be there in the morning.

Bedtime was something of a ritual around our house. On the nights when he wasn’t working, dad would sing us a song, scratch our backs, and wish us a full night of sweet dreams. In deep sentimental tones, he often sang folk songs about the longings of men and women of the past, and he always said goodnight with, “Bless your hearts, my darlings. Remember that ol’ Dad wouldn’t trade you for all the gold and silver in the world.” And I would fall into a secure, warm sleep.

Each night our home was filled with the muted sounds of my father typing all through the night. Often my mom would bring him a pot of tea and homemade apple pie, and he’d set up a cot so she could keep him company. If I couldn’t fall to sleep, he’d make me warm milk, and we’d sip it together back in his study until I fell asleep in his arms.

In the mornings, he’d make a big breakfast, and our family would gather around the dining room fireplace to hear him read his manuscripts. Whenever he reached the end of a story, we’d all applaud, then go off to begin our day. I can still see my mother on those mornings, subtly displaying her love. Femininely sheathed in a housedress, she would sit across from our father, gazing at him as if they were alone in the room. Her attentiveness, the gentle way she put down her teacup, the way she rested her chin on her delicately folded hands, the way she smiled when he looked up at her it all testified to her breeding. She was raised in a traditional Indonesian family and taught that a husband is king. But her gracious grace made it seem as if she were the one descended from royalty.

The moon first became dad’s guiding light in 1951, when my parents met at “Terang Bulan” – meaning, “By the Light of the moon” -- an Indonesian Restaurant located in the heart of Tokyo. He had seen her there many times before, learned she was Indonesian, bought an Indonesian conversation record (which my mother has kept all these years), and spent several nights studying the language. He finally approached her one night and said, “Selamat Malan” (“Good evening”).

On their first date he took her to a baseball game in Meiji Park, where he had been stationed by the US Army to maintain the ball field. My mother always told us that she neither understood the game of baseball nor the significance of his sharing this part of his life with her, but that it didn't matter. "When you're falling in love," she always said, "the setting is unimportant." (Once in the United States, my mom read the newspaper cover to cover every day, and quickly understood baseball and basketball stats, and kept track of who was traded for whom, and so on.)

They spent their first few years together in Tokyo, and my dad continued to romance her by taking her to Hong Kong tailors and having dresses made for her in every color. He filled their home with fresh pink carnations every day, and every evening they'd fix the only meal they knew how to prepare: scrambled eggs, toast, and tea.

During the mid-to-late sixties, our father worked at the Daily Olympian, and we lived in an old mansion in a well-to-do conservative Olympia neighborhood. Our three-story house embodied the three different lives of my dad. Darrell Bob Houston, the free-spirited newspaperman confined by a conservative town and harnessed to a paycheck, wrote in the third-story turret. On the second story lived a nurturing father who delighted in pulling out his old Army first-aid kit to bandage a child's skinned knee, or to walk her to school when the wind was blowing too hard. And on the first floor lived the published for the Avatar, a '60s underground newspaper, where Darrell Bob wrote under the pen names of Raymond Ditweiler and Girard Craig Jr., to name a few.

We lived just steps from the State Capital, and the building and the surrounding grounds served as our playground. Sometimes my dad would join the neighborhood kids for an afternoon of baseball. Since he himself had a boyish fascination with heroes, he understood why he was theirs. The boys wanted to hear over and over again how he'd been a pitcher in the Army's All-Star baseball team in 1949 and played against the San Francisco Seals in Tokyo.

When he wasn't coaching baseball or playing catch with one of us on the sidewalk outside our home, (or giving me a huge hug for such things as switch-hitting, and smashing a ball through our front window, and saying, "I always wanted a baseball player in the family, but I never knew it would be my "little Tebbie Lynn"), my dad was teaching us how to play tennis. He would drop off my mom at the local Laundromat, fill the empty laundry baskets with tennis balls, and take all five of his kids to the tennis courts. When it got too dark to see, he'd pull our car up to the court and turn on the headlights.

SEATTLE, 1968

Late in 1968, my father's writing career started taking off. He posed as a fruit picker in an Eastern Washington apple orchard that year, then wrote a series for Northwest Today on "What It's Like to be a Migrant."

The cement floor is dark and littered. Each day the camp swamper slops a white, lye-like disinfectant on the floor, but does not spread it around. It seeps in a vicious sulphurous stream of slime toward the drain that gleams there dully, like the navel of a universe going to rot.

I can still remember how my mom would take a small plane to Yakima, where they would secretly rendezvous at a nearby motel.

With his success came gradual, dramatic change at home. Before long, we started treating every arrival of dad's with much more fanfare than ever before. Eventually he started coming home late so often that we stopped waiting dinner for him. Sometimes he didn't come home for days. Then he'd show up with lipstick on his collar. Then the screaming would start, and grow so loud that it seemed as if my parents wanted me to commit their fights to our memory." "Where have you been, Bob?" my mom yelled one night, at 2 a.m. "Who were you with? You're no good! Just get out and never come back!" She was throwing his things out on the porch. He didn't leave, and eventually they'd go to bed. And we'd all get up in the morning and act like nothing had happened.

This new routine was interrupted one morning early in 1970 by a phone call that would prove pivotal in our family history. Only the day before, dad and mom had returned home from an intensive interview in New York where my father competed against six finalists for an Alicia Patterson Guggenheim Fellowship. My father had chosen the youth culture of Asia as his area of study. The interview had gone so well that dad said it had almost been as if it were in the Hands of God. And the phone call confirmed his impression. He had won an all-expenses paid fellowship, which meant that we were all to spend a year together in Japan.

My mom, who could barely speak English when she came to the United States in 1952, helped cinch the award with her ability to answer the panelists'--professors from Columbia University, amongst them--questions in five different languages, including Japanese. Hence, when I was ten years old, we jetted off to the mountain resort town of Karuizawa, where Emperor Hirohito had his summer palace. We spent lazy summer days on the veranda of the Mompei Hotel (where John Lennon used to stay) sipping exotic fruit drinks, touring, attending dinner/dance parties, and playing tennis every day on clay courts, with children of local and international dignitaries. In the fall, we settled down in Tokyo, and attended the prestigious American School in Japan.

[And then a childhood of life's "glorious paradoxes," (to borrow one of Robbins' phrases), continued after that.]

Upon winning the award, the moment had been festive. My mom was sitting in my dad's lap as they sipped champagne together.

At an excited pitch my second oldest sister, Lani, then 13, started taping an ad-libbed "interview...."

THERE HE IS LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! We just grabbed him while running through a crowd of screaming fans! Mr. Houston! Mr. Houston! How does it feel to have so many fans?"

"Help."

"If you have a few minutes for this 'CBS' reporter... What will be your next book, Mr. Houston?"

"I haven't written one yet. What was the first one?"

"Oh, I mean, what will be your next book if you decide to write one?"

"A coloring book."

"Now we're going to switch over to the arena and interview Mrs. Houston."

"What's it like being a wife to Darrell Bob Houston, the famous writer?"

"I don't want to say anything."

"Oh, come on Cathy, it's all for the family," my father interjected. "It's not for the public."

"Excuse me, Mr. Houston," my sister said. "It's just for T.V."

"Well, he's a GREAT writer, and I'm SO proud of him."

"That was Cathy Houston, ladies and gentlemen, after being voted one of the ten most beautifully dressed women in the world. Now isn't that a fact?"

"Now we're going to interview Bobby Houston, the youngest member of the 'Royal' family—at five years old."

"I'm THIX!"

"Bobby, what's it like being of the royal families of today?"

"I don't know."

"What do you do?"

"I play."

"Do you have hobbies?"

"Yes, I play tennis—with my whole family."

"You have private tennis courts I presume?"

"No."

"But, I bet you could afford to buy them if you wanted to."

"No!"

"Now here's Kerrie Houston, the smallest intellectual brain of the family, in college at the age of nine years old. Can you imagine that ladies and gentlemen?"

"What's it like to be in college at your age?"

"Oh, it's just fine, but there's too many ugly boys around."

"It must be tough to find a boyfriend at your age?"

"Yes."

"Do you hang around with your own age group, or do you prefer to hang around with the older group?"

"I prefer to hang around with the older group, like my daaaad."

"Do you hang around with his group?"

"No. I just hang around with him."

"When you grow up, Kerrie, or even at this age now, I bet you could write a book. Do you think you could write a book as well as your well-known writer, father, Darrell Bob Houston.?"

"No."

We listened to that tape one last time, in 1984. This time, the tape that had always brought so much laughter brought only tears. Across the room, my father's body lay motionless. It had been his last wish to die at home instead of in a hospital. As our last goodbye, we played the family tape that preserved a precious slice of our past—a memory of a happy time before my parents' divorce. It had been a time when we shared together, laughed together, and never thought of a future when it would all come to an end and we would all cry together.

