

Ten Spurs



Introduction by Kim Cross

The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference

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Ten Spurs

Michael J. Mooney, editor
Neil Foote, associate editor



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Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference
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Best of the Best

Ten
Spurs

25	Can I Get a Witness? <i>by Meta G. Carstarphen</i>
31	Digging Up, Digging Deep <i>by Frank L. Christlieb</i>
47	My Mother's Bread <i>by Leta Cunningham</i>
>>> 53	The Children Left Behind <i>by Leeanne Hay</i>
59	Birdsong <i>by Philip Kelly</i>
67	Jay-Money <i>by Casey Manuel</i>
81	Searching for Sarah Powell <i>by Mary Pfeiffer</i>
93	Mourning a Mother Still Here <i>by Melissa Stoeltje</i>
103	Milledgeville, a Bird Sanctuary <i>by Sue Whatley</i>
119	Tornado <i>by Seema Yasmin</i>



The Children Left Behind

by Leeanne Hay



In the early hours of a frost-covered October morning, the woods and fields around a country farmhouse in a county far from Dallas were filled with night vision binoculars focused on the fenced perimeter as the occupants slept inside. Small puffs of quietly exhaled breaths hung in the air from local law enforcement deputies, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents, and Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms agents. Few words were exchanged. The plan to execute the narcotics search warrant had been carefully crafted to minimize casualties going through the front door because at least one child was known to live there.

The deputies and agents continually scanned their quadrants of the area for signs of movement. Then suddenly with no lights on, the front door swung partially open. Focusing on the green glow that a warm body gives off, one deputy saw through his binoculars a small dark figure run out through the front gate to the unpaved road. The little body, clothed in what looked like a skeleton outline, looked left then right, then ran back into the house. The law enforcement team continued to observe and wait. Through the next thirty minutes, the little body would repeat five times the actions of running outside, peering left and right, then running back into the house. No one could have imagined what was going on, but they would find out soon enough.

The time arrived for law enforcement to disrupt the dawn and take down the house hard and fast—without harm to the child, a little boy named Lorenzo*, who was found sitting inside the front door wearing pajamas printed with a glow-in-the-dark skeleton design. Quickly scooped up and wrapped in a blanket, he was carried out of the residence by Agent Meyer*, who was assigned to look after him while law enforcement simultaneously executed the warrant and made arrests.

Lorenzo was promptly removed from the scene by Meyer and driven to the police barracks to wait for Child Protective Services to arrive. During that time, the law enforcement agent (himself a father) talked with Lorenzo to make him feel comfortable and learned that he was six years old. As they talked, Meyer asked the boy why he kept going in and out of the house. The hardened agent assumed that the child was being used as a lookout. The truth would turn out to be a small testimony to the innocence of child adapting to his environment.

“I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss the [school] bus today,” Lorenzo said. “And my mommy told me never to wake her up, so I got up and got dressed up myself. I went outside to look for the bus so I wouldn’t miss it ‘cause I wanted to go to the Halloween party today.”

Meyer knew that, despite all of Lorenzo’s effort and obedience to his mother’s wishes, he would miss the party that day.

Forget big city crime with high-profile pseudo-celebrities in a barrage of daily “breaking news” hype—with remote acreage comes bad habits and black market economies built on prescription drug abuse. Visit a different doctor at a different clinic four times a month and collect 360 pills from those money-saving ninety-day supply prescriptions-by-mail promoted by insurance companies. Take some and sell the rest or grind them up as a cut for another “product” and money is made. Entrepreneurship of this kind is alive and well off of the farm-to-market roads across Texas and just next door, too.

For the kids left behind after their parents are arrested—or overdose—a story like this will be quietly buried in the back of a dark closet of a family’s history. Just as these crime scenes pile up for those who answer the 911 calls, they are like heavy sins that weigh upon the lives of everyone involved. Consider the undercover officers’ own family lives that were wrecked by all the late nights and weeks they disappeared to go “on the job” with no more than a brief comment to their loved ones of “I’ll call you when I can.” It is another kind of collateral damage that never appears in the statistics of prescription drug-related crimes, just like posttraumatic stress disorder used to be omitted from diagnoses related to wartime casualties.

Early one morning in a suburb of Dallas, Detective Seaton* stood in the doorway of a home where two bodies laid. Her first thought was, “What in the hell am I going to tell their children when they ask me how their parents died?” Fortunately, it wasn’t up to the police to determine the cause of death of the victims. The responsibility of determining a cause of death was conveniently in the job description of the medical examiner. The detective had two victims and would observe and state only the facts. “Don’t speculate,” she said.

What you see in the police report are staccato specifics: one white male, dead, visible sign of a gunshot wound, and one white female, dead, visible sign of a gunshot wound. Identification at the scene indicated they were married. “No handwritten ‘goodbye cruel world’ note, no person standing there with a smoking gun in his hand, and no comfort for their family and friends,” Seaton stoically observed.

She knew that if she sat and thought for a few minutes, she could probably count the number of dead bodies she had seen over a twenty-five-year career in law enforcement. The number of distraught family members and the ripple outward of devastated friends would be too many to recall. She looked over the crime scene and knew that the press would report what had occurred on this quiet, affluent street in Collin County in sensational sound bites. The evening news would make her angry and sick—sick of strangers clamoring for gory details that had nothing

to do with the safety of the public at large nor even the family left behind to mourn.

In the hours immediately following the discovery of the deceased couple, Detective Seaton would only get relief from her general disgust with anyone wearing a press badge by unloading on her department's information officer, Sergeant Gabriele*. They had gone more than one round in the argument of what should and should not be released, the public's right to information and how, regardless of their own personal preferences, an established legal protocol was always followed. Seaton called bullshit on Gabriele more than once, but since he had known her for more than fifteen years and didn't expect her to change any time soon, he said he "didn't take it personally."

What Gabriele took to heart—and he hated to admit that he did—were the calls from the immediate family who, in their shock and grief, would spit out venomous phrases filled with curses at him for the television coverage that ensued. His deep empathy for all his victims' families belied his outward strong presence and dead-eyed cop stare when the television lights were on him. He understood the balance he needed to strike between confirming facts in the public domain to the press and being on the receiving end of whatever a family in grief and anger hurled at him. He knew that they weren't attacking him, per se, just the lousy circumstances that led to their lives crossing paths.

"I'd sue the shit out of anyone who wrote anything about my family that was a conjecture," Seaton spat out through clenched teeth. "And I mean one word that was not a confirmed fact from another source and I'd be on them ..."

Seaton is tall, fit, and smart. With an angular, short haircut, the soft Texas lilt in her voice belies the fact that she can handle whoever or whatever crosses her path. With a hard exterior and the verbal skills to reinforce her presence, it would be easy to miss the compassion she carries deep within her. It is rarely shown.

Gabriele and Seaton are more similar than they would probably like to admit. Despite their arguments and differing points of view, it is clear that they deeply care about the children left behind in the aftermath of a crime. It must be exhausting, even here in the tidy subdivisions of streets with pretty names.

Then there are the kids at a scene—not criminals, just bystanders, not responsible for the turmoil in their lives. In early 2014, during a multi-agency law enforcement investigation known as "Operation Cold Spell," federal and state authorities made arrests for drug trafficking and manufacturing with one count of firearms smuggling in Commerce, a small town sixty miles northeast of Dallas.

Multiple teams of law enforcement worked in tandem over several months to apprehend more than twenty-three suspects in the one-day action. Also in attendance was another state agency whose skills were required—Child Protective Services—for the removal of four children ages two through seven who were the bystander victims of their parents' criminal enterprise.

Measuring the societal and economic effects of these children left behind is not easily accomplished. Texas has not quantified the impact to services and the state budget for children who are raised by someone other than a biological parent due

to prescription drug abuse or death from overdose. Kentucky is one of the few states that has.

Thirty-seventh of the fifty states in size, Kentucky has the sixth-highest rate of overdose prescription drug deaths in the United States, as reported by CNN and the Partnership at Drugfree.org, with estimates that more than 86,000 children are impacted.

To gain some perspective of how many Texas children might be affected by their parents' criminal prescription drug abuse, consider this: Kentucky has one-fifth the population of Texas and no foreign country with discount pharmacies on its borders.

Far from the Texas–Mexico border, in a small wood-framed house off of a farm-to-market road so remote that both Hunt County and Kauffman County deputies would have a difficult time determining whose jurisdiction it fell in, Seneca's* mother, Melanie, was found dead by her father in the master bedroom when he awoke on a cold Saturday morning. With an empty prescription bottle of Xanax found by police on her mother's nightstand refilled just nineteen days prior for ninety pills, her father's statement to law enforcement was that his wife “... was known to abuse her medications.” After her mother's body had been removed from the home by the coroner, Seneca's older brother, Joseph*, 18, and his girlfriend helped Seneca, 13, get settled at their grandmother's home a few miles away. Their father, Todd, would remain alone at their little house, refusing to leave.

Later that evening, Joseph and his girlfriend would return to the family home and later report to law enforcement that they saw his father in a small white pick-up truck parked outside of the house. They assumed Todd was passed out from drinking. When his father didn't return to the house after a while, Joseph's girlfriend went outside to check on him. She found Joseph's father “cold and blue” and immediately call 911. Emergency medical responders arrived, but it would be too late to perform any lifesaving measures.

Law enforcement deputies would call a coroner and funeral home to remove the body after they photographed the scene. In Todd's truck they found a pill bottle with eleven Xanax, fifty-four Hydrocodone pills, eighty \$100 bills, a plastic bag with marijuana, two empty pill bottles, one metal grinder, and a green cloth sack. There were no questions asked or suggestions made about what actions these items might have been a bigger part of—addiction, distribution, and origin of the drugs were never addressed. The impact on the lives of the children and what behaviors this might lead to are not theorized. There are no records of reports to or from Child Protective Services this time. The deputies' and investigators' reports contained short, clipped sentences.

Dihydrocodeine plus alprazolam *plus* tetrahydrocannabinol *plus* a few more substances equaled “mixed drug toxicity” in the medical examiner's report for Todd, 45. The report for Melanie, 43, called it “poly-drug toxicity” with no other details except the same conclusion on the manner of their deaths—“Accident.”

Was it the combination all at once or was it due to remnants of drugs ingested

from days gone by that built up and interacted with the last dose ingested? Was it a conscious intentional suicide or an unconscious accidental overdose from grief? Or was this just an accidental legacy that a mother and father would leave to their children?

The families don't want to talk about why or how what happened is now a part of their family history, but social media has revealed their hearts.

Similar in style to the deputies' reports and medical examiners' findings, the obituary for Seneca's father and mother is each a few short sentences and mentions only the facts about important events (birth, marriage, death) and a list of family they are survived by. Yet with one additional declarative sentence at the end of her mother's obituary, the reader is left to wonder about the thoughts, feelings, and questions it conjures up for Seneca.

It says, "She was a stay-at-home mom who loved her children dearly."

**Author's note: Names used for minor children and their living family members are pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The writer thanks the municipal and federal law enforcement officers, agents, and deputies who shared their stories and has used pseudonyms to protect the confidential nature of their work. Source and research authentication is available for editorial review.*