

The Way Woody Tells It

by Peter Derk

Last spring at work, someone came into my office and said, "There's an old man with a cane here to see you."

I couldn't think who it might be. I don't make a habit of hanging out with elderly men, and the only person I knew with a cane was my grandmother. Canes are a point of interest for me, so if I had a friend with a cane, I'd know. Some guys stop at scenic overlooks on the highway. I skim the barrel of canes in the Walgreens' pharmacy.

I made sure my nametag was clipped straight and walked out to find Woody sitting on a bench, a dark brown cane leaning on the wall next to him.

He was fresh off a knee surgery, still tender. He gave me a tight smile like he'd been borrowing my knee and was bringing it back busted up after hot-Roding it the last few years.

He's never looked like a guy for whom injury is new. He's still holding onto the thick, dorm room fridge of a body he's always had, but his beard was darker years ago when he hurt his arm at the gym, tearing his bicep away from what anchored it and clamping his other hand down to keep the muscle from escaping into his shoulder. He had a little more hair when he broke his neck playing college football. He was only a grade-schooler when a horse kicked him in the face, putting him out for the better part of an hour.

He didn't stand when I came out. He sat next to his cane and said, "I'm done coaching. Let's have a beer."

The entire time I've known Woody Wilson, his story has been, "This is my last year coaching distance runners."

Every year it's the same thing. Then the spring rolls around and he's handing out photocopied calendars, workouts written in by hand.

But this time he really quit. The job posting is open. He closed his little black book, the one filled with a career's worth of names and race times, the one with tape goo on the front and the cover peeling away to show the cardboard bones underneath.

We had that beer together. A couple, maybe. He told some of his great Woody stories.

Retelling some of Woody's stories feels a little like me picking up Degas' old brush to paint a cheap watercolor house without any sort of texture or depth, maybe not even a front door. While I'm at it, I might as well wear Michael Jordan's jersey while throwing up bricks from a spot on the court he considers slam-dunk territory.

Even though Woody's told them before, I like to goad him into telling them again, listening for how he does it. He's a great coach and a generous man, but more than anything he can tell a story.

One of the best is from his childhood, when he lived near the rail yard. If you've ever lived near a rail yard, dam, creek, quarry, an old mine, or just about anything that would interest a boy, you know that it's forbidden by parents with the same tone they use to warn about windowless vans and doing mushrooms. If you grew up near any of those things, you also know that if you walked down there every day for a summer, every day you'd flush out a clump of boys who would run and scatter like dandelion seeds.

So, of course, that's where Woody went. Even though it wrinkles the skin around his eyes, you can still see the smile that pulled up his face as a boy, the one that took him and his brother down to the tracks.

When Woody tells a story the details change. It's part of his style, the sort of storytelling that turns a lumberjack into a skyscraper and a dog into a bright blue ox. In this story, the parts that are the same are the rail yard, his brother, and the ending. The part that changes is the bridge.

On one side of a set of tracks was a pole, like a telephone pole with rungs drilled into the sides. On the other side of the tracks, same thing. And connecting these poles, maybe twenty, thirty, fifty feet over the ground, was a plank.

The way Woody tells a story, wood is more like rubber, changing shape and contorting depending on the where he is, who's around him, and how many beers in you are. Most times, the board bridging the two poles is something like a four-by-four. For people not too acquainted with sizes, that's something like a fencepost, somewhere around the width of a kid's sneaker. Maybe even a little thinner.

After he tells the story far enough that the board takes shape, after his brother bets him a nickel that he won't, little Woody Wilson climbs one of the poles, sets a foot on the board, puts his arms out to his sides, and crosses.

The height keeps changing too, but it's never low enough that he could survive the fall. Don't worry. He always makes it across.

The ending is always the same. The story never ends with how dangerous it was, what his parents said, what Woody might have done to his own sons if they pulled something like that. That same mischief smile comes back and Woody says, "My brother, he still never paid me the nickel he bet me."

Most times he'll steer things back around to running, runners, or races. Over decades, he's collected a number of coaching disasters.

He'll talk about the time he had a runner, a girl, who couldn't finish a 3.1-mile race without puking all over herself.

The way Woody tells the story, the mystery builds. They try everything. Eating less, eating earlier, eating different stuff, less water, more water, pink liquids, and just about everything that shares a pharmacy shelf with the pink liquids. Nothing works.

He'll tell that part of the story first because he knows the order of things. It's only after he's told you about this girl, has you convinced that this puking mystery is the entire story, that the real story starts.

He says, "I hired a professional photographer to take pictures of all the kids. Big, professional, 8-by-10's. This was back in the days of film, so it's a big deal, but I thought it would be a nice thing for the parents to have at the end of the season."

The way he puts the story together, you see where it's going.

Of course, the photographer set up his equipment in the perfect spot at the regional meet. Of course, he got a picture of every one of the kids coming around the bend. Perfect light, perfect strides, perfect framing. Of course. And, of course, because this is Woody's story, a perfect shot series of the girl, the puker, captured at the moment when a rush of vomit was leaving her mouth.

Woody looked over her pictures. They were like a flipbook. Thumbing through them fast enough was like watching her vomit in real time.

When he tells the story, he mimics the faces.

The pictures were so bad that he had to scrap the whole idea. He couldn't give pictures to every other kid and not to her.

The way he tells the story, he's not mad at the girl. He's not mad about the wasted money, or that the photographer managed to click the shutter at such a terrible moment. With the patience he has for his runners, he laughs, the pictures tossed away a small price for the story.

There might be another beer, and if Woody has another beer, so will you.

Depending on which way things go, or what you ask, or if someone is putting up the chairs to start sweeping, he might tell a sad story. He might tell you about how he's been afraid of lightning since he was a boy and a bolt from blue sky crushed a tree near the road he was walking, knocking him down and filling the air with a taste like clean rain and campfire.

Depending on how that story goes, he might tell his other lightning story. It has less detail than most of his stories. It's short. He doesn't spend time filling in the names or the places. It's a story about a kid, a runner, speared by lightning on the track. Woody got to the kid and started CPR, pushing and breathing.

He doesn't talk about the paramedics getting there, when he switched from pushing to watching, what happened in the next couple minutes and the next couple days.

He'll tell you enough to know that the kid didn't make it. He won't say anything else about the parents. He doesn't say he went to the funeral or if he wore a tie.

His storytelling is merciful, minimalist in form when that's what's needed.

This last time we talked, enough empty glasses on the table that we were figuring who might wake up and give us a ride home, Woody told me a new story. It was from only a little while ago, just before he finished coaching. It was still a little raw, not sanded down and smoothed out the way most of his stories are.

He takes runners on a trip every year. He's got a lifetime of stories that start this way. Kids who've never been on a plane before and sit clutching the airsickness bag in both hands, listening studiously to the safety procedures. Kids who learned all about the ocean in geography but didn't know how salty it really was until they dove in open-mouthed. Kids, like the one from this story, who were just damn slow.

Woody has coached a lot of slow runners. He has the patience, the kindness. This runner, though, was especially slow, not to mention a little bit of a social outcast.

The way Woody told the story, even in its unfinished form, was kinder. He sprinkled in details about her way of dressing, about her ears parting the hair on either side like Bette Midler throwing apart curtains when she hits the stage. He had a better way of saying she doesn't have friends.

Her mom thought it would be good for her to go, so she asked. Woody said okay. Then he went straight home to figure out not whether the girl would come in dead last, but how long after the second-to-last place finisher they would have to keep the clock running for her.

The way Woody tells it, the transitions aren't silky yet, and this version cuts to Arizona, to a breakfast Woody and the slow runner eat while the other runners sleep. The way Woody tells it, it's natural that a coach would set an early alarm to have breakfast with his absolute worst runner. The way he tells it, it's normal that he smiles to her and starts his motivational speech by saying, "Life is pain."

This is the part where the listener has to fill in the story a little, the part he hasn't fit together all the way.

He tells the runner that life is pain, that getting old is pain. He doesn't mention to her that he'd gone in for a follow-up from his knee surgery that meant a flush and a catheter. He mentions that growing old is pain, but he doesn't mention the particular pain of spending a week with teenagers in

good health while you are pulled aside by airport security, taken to a separate room to show them papers for your metallic knee and to take down your pants.

He says that going through school is pain. He doesn't mention the time he broke his neck playing football. He doesn't talk about going to school the after that horse kicked him in the face.

He says that childbirth is pain, and the runner laughs. He says to her, "When you're out there today, try running in pain. It will get you ready for life. I'm not going to tell you how fast or how slow or how much time you've been running. I'm just going to shout Childbirth at you, and you'll know what I'm talking about."

Like any Woody story, you think it's going to wrap up after his locker room speech, after he's standing on the sides, yelling Childbirth! at a young runner. Then, you think it's over for sure when he says she ran the distance five minutes faster than her previous best. You think it ends when the other kids surround the girl, congratulating her.

Woody always has a little more story.

It ends that night, after the kids go to the mall to unwind, after they decide to give that slowest runner a makeover, after they go back to the hotel and announce "The Unveiling of Emily."

It ends after one of the kids introduces Emily, who's too nervous to come out of the bathroom. It ends after a second announcement where Emily is pulled out of the bathroom for everyone to see.

Where the story ends, Woody doesn't tell what she looked like. Of course he doesn't. That's where an amateur storyteller would go. All he talks about is how good it felt that this kid, the one he had better ways of describing, could spend an evening at the center, not the slowest anything. Just Emily.

The story isn't formed yet. He never remembers the part about himself, where he gets a little credit.

Woody could teach anyone a little bit about telling stories. He tells other peoples' stories better than they do, something never clearer than it was at his retirement when people were asked to share their favorite Woody memories.

One runner talked about the time Woody coached a state championship team. She talked about winning, but she forgot all the Woody detail-warping, forgot to mention that he hurt his foot kicking a tree after he mistakenly thought a runner had dropped out.

Another runner mentioned a couple favorite moments. She got a little bit of the pacing Woody uses, telling a long race story that ended with a short, "Also, dancing with Woody at my wedding."

Nobody came to pick us up after we went out for that beer, and by this time neither of us could drive. Just like any other Woody story in the making, it didn't end where we thought it would, which is how we ended up at a dance club trying to sweat out enough of the night to drive.

I have a favorite Woody story. It's about the first time I ran a ten-miler. It's a good story, I think, and one that he would like. I could tell it, but the way he tells it is much better.

Peter Derk lives, writes, and works as a librarian in Northern Colorado. By his estimate, he's doing a passable job on two out of those three things.