

Surviving July

A Short Story by Joe Dimino

We had entered our 14-month courtship in the worst housing market in recent American memory. As my wife, Caroline, and myself went out for a meal and a look at the newly renovated Nelson Art Museum, my phone began to vibrate. It was Debbie, our dedicated real estate agent, likely telling us that we would have to vacate the premises yet again the following morning to continue the nightmare of selling our home. And know that the failure of our home not selling was only the tip of an iceberg that was mounting in the month of June.

After exchanging some pleasantries with Debbie, she started to unravel the script of a phone call we had been waiting for the thousands of minutes in my cell phone log that had elapsed in our pursuit to rid our old home. She said that we had an offer from an investor to snatch our home about five grand below the current asking price. As my phone clicked shut, Caroline and I discussed the eminent possibilities. Initially, I wanted to counteroffer because we had reduced the cost of the home by about \$33,000 over our painful journey to sell.

Caroline assured me that we would be insane to turn down the offer and get on with our lives. As the sting of running after our 2-year old child, Miles, who is in the autism spectrum, and the assorted bag of not sleeping in for over a year, I nodded in a weary acceptance. Not getting my hopes too high, because it singed me horribly in previous offers on the home, I tried to keep the beginnings of my excitement in check.

So, the process had indeed began. We quickly accepted the offer and got on that proverbial quick train to find a new home. This was toward the end of June and we were trying to calculate the veracity of what would happen during the month that would follow. At a minimum, we would be courting an investor to buy our home within a three and a half week period. As the reality of our potential home sale began to sink in, the blinding machinery of surviving a grueling month began to settle in. At a minimum, we would have to pack up our entire lives, find a new home and move into that home. With just that, it would be enough to whip our bones nearly blind to make it without going insane. Then, throw into the mix the hustle of our typical lives. As I mentioned before, our son Miles is in the autism spectrum and requires a weekly list of therapy visits both in the home and at the clinic. As such, we also had a nationally recognized individual in the realm of behavioral therapy who had ties to B.F. Skinner that offered to evaluate the therapy our son Miles was receiving.

Because of the mounting nature of our home searching, we had to postpone a follow-up meeting with this highly recognized voice in the field of behavioral therapy. After nearly a month, we have not heard anything from this individual and likely won't. There is no way to accurately convey the daily nuances, along with the huge task of home shopping, and get someone to accurately understand that you are postponing their expertise in lieu of life.

As the month of July began, I also realized that I was going to be seeing the hero of my political world, Bill Clinton, live in person. He was going to be in Independence, Missouri giving a speech on the anniversary celebration of the old Harry S. Truman Library Museum. This was going to be sandwiched in between every waking minute in the morning and evening, when not working a full-time IT day job, to get our home packed and ready to move.

Just as we were gaining momentum in finding reputable homes and packing up our huge surplus of stuff to move, I get a phone call from a San Francisco-based TV producer wanting me to produce a segment for a channel owned by Google called Current TV. As I spoke with this producer from a fuzzy Los Angeles cell phone, I began dismissing this assignment due to the mounting amount of things that needed to be done. On the top of that list, was relieving my wife who had been with our sick son Miles all day long and coming home from a doctor's visit. In addition, she was watching our summer bound nine year old Zen. So, my mind was twirling with a huge yearning to revisit my journalistic roots and produce a piece for one of my most admired channels on cable television.

The segment I was going to report on was a flood in Central Kansas and my producer assured me that I would have a number of days to complete the piece. After I got off the phone with him, I did some online mapping and realized that Osawatomie, Kansas, which was hardest hit and relatively close to my Kansas City home, was opportune to go down and see what we could film. As I began getting my gears rolling, without even mentioning this to my wife, I got another call back from the producer telling me that they needed my piece within two days because of the pending Fourth of July holiday.

I began filming some intro pieces while driving home in the car and planned on getting my nephew scooped up into a ride down south to produce my first-ever piece of televised journalism. With weariness in her eyes, my wife conceded that this was too big to pass up and I was on my way with the camera rolling and feeling the old journalistic adrenaline coursing through my bones. I ended up getting the footage I wanted, edited it down and impressed the folks at Current. As a result, the piece was on a three week run on international TV and my ink spot in the world of viewer created vanguard journalism was pressed onto the proverbial video page.

Now that the insanity of that two day run, in the middle of everything else, was gone, I was back into full-on moving mode and the time was dwindling down at a blinding pace. After one blown offer on a great home and reshuffling other potential homes, we had our backs against the wall to find the right home for us and vacate our home in the appropriate contractual timeframe. The whole time, my wife was doing an amazing job of finding quality homes in the appropriate price range. Then, she found the one that was to be our future home in the wings. As she poured through home after home in a community that was eventually agreed upon because of its quality special educational programming for Miles, the amount of viable homes was dwindling. All the while, I was negotiating for the right lender, insurance, inspections and all the other underpinnings of home

selling/buying insanity. I started to firmly believe that it is wholly inhumane to put humans through the process of buying and selling homes.

On our final drive to look at three homes in our price range, we looked at a home my wife had seen the day before. A sprawling, yet charming home, in our price range unfolded in front of us like a welcome origami. We smiled collectively and immediately put an offer on the home. Stacked with charm and a small peach tree in the back yard, it was a home we couldn't pass up. Again, I had to curb getting my hopes up too high to save my frayed and extraordinary level of stress that was seeping into every square inch of my blood flow. I was just taking everything day by day. In fact, it really wasn't until this stretch of July living that I had truly lived that day by day principle and just tried to keep my brain sane enough to wake and move about in the frenetic pace each successive day.

As the 3PM deadline for the acceptance of our offer passed, my wife popped another valium as I called Debbie to see what the news was. It was good. They had several minor concessions, but the initial journey to a new cool home was starting to happen. We finally cracked huge smiles that shook the aging moon dust of our dark and glowering moods that had inevitably creeping into our denial addled depression of being shoved in a home my wife had initially bought. It was a tiny ranch home built for two and hellish with four. The cob webs and ghosts of the past were starting to scurry and thoughts of decorating a new home began coming from my wife's giddy voice.

The next big hurdle was going to be our home inspection, which was the final rush of stress that was going to surge through our bones. To make this as painful as possible, on a rainy day we met our realtor at the house and found out that a miscommunication blockaded our scheduled to time inspect the home. This meant that the following day was going to be our new inspection time. Fast forward to the following day and the inspection went off without a hitch. It was another compounded positive notion that we picked the right property. In concert with this, funding was solidified and we were merely waiting and biding our time.

Through the haze of our busy home hustle, we realized that several key hurdles were going to be in our way. First of all, we would have to load up our entire home into a truck, park it overnight and sleep at my parents-in-law's home. Then, we would have to move in the following morning. Secondly, we had scheduled a week-long trip to Florida for some time on a beach with the kids. This trip was scheduled about a month before we knew that we would ever sell our home. In fact, we were going to take our home off the market several weeks before we got our much desired offer. So, this summer vacation to Florida was designed to be a minor relief for the pain we would have to endure to stay in a small, beaten and wrought home that would be our continuation of hell.

The morning of moving came and I never saw the splash of sun pierce the morning dew of leaves as I did that morning. Waiting for the ensuring insanity to continue, the day began. Things were being moved and laughter was heard booming from the inside of the home as we filled our twenty six foot truck within two hours. There was an enormous amount more than needed to be loaded up and moved. In a sort of panic, we tried to call

several regional U-Haul locales for another truck and everything was taken. Continuing our collective panic, we called our realtor and asked if we could either move in early or store the remainder of our stuff in the garage. Debbie said she would call us back and let us know.

Essentially, the investor wanted our stuff out of the house, so our realtor offered to have her husband bring a trailer to load up and park on their farm overnight. It was an extraordinary act of kindness you rarely see in the realm of sales, but it happened. And subsequently, we got our lives moved out of the prior home and into our new one the following morning. Finally, the blurring numb of not thinking we would ever move out of that tiny box home we four bodies, one cat and two fish inhabited for so long faded away like a rapidly dissipating cirrus cloud. Piece by piece, a tetris game began spreading out through the house and it was instantly home.

After an amazing first night in the home, we again packed our lives up to head out of our oasis to another ocean oasis for a week. Once we hit the air and our Miles had his eyes gleaming over a descending ground in an airplane seat, we realized that the insanity was subsiding some and we could regain our strength in the land of salt water, gulls and lazy afternoons getting pounded by good Floridian sun. And it was just going to be as simple as that as our real castle awaited us back home.

When we first landed and waited for our shuttle to take us to our rental car, I got a pang of fear thinking about going home. Everything had transpired so quickly that I forgot we had a new home. I was treading through the fictitious gloom of having to go back to that old home of lost voices, ghosts and possible demons that were beginning to be tucked back into the black. Then, the enormous notion of our new home brought a smile to my lips as though I smoked again and I was enjoying the nicotine in the Florida air following a long flight away from our home.

After a week had elapsed, the final beach had day begun. I was the first one up that morning and I immediately scooped up a cup of coffee, baby juice and some fruit. I treaded down to the ocean front with my goods and 2-year old Miles in my arms. Decked in pajamas, we sat down there in the early mist light and comfortably absorbed our final tranquil morning of looking out at the tame gulf of Mexico wade before our awaking eye balls. Miles lasted about 15 minutes and we headed back to the condo.

Once inside, my delightful mother-in-law, Judy, was on the porch with glasses on, serious face and talking into phone. Things did not look good. As it happened, her husband, Austin, was in the hospital and not doing well. He's 81 and has a bad dose of health. He just beat a bout of Hodgkin's Disease and is basically hanging on to living the best way he can. Well, he had recently gone into the hospital with a bad bout of pneumonia and the antibiotics were not working. So, Judy was booking a last minute flight back home with us. Originally, she was going to stay another week to get some alone time and relax after a year of caring for her ailing husband.

Soaking in the last of our vacation, we carried our relaxed bones to the car under a thin veil of stress to get Judy back home to her husband. Leaving plenty early to get around any possible traffic, we essentially had two highways to travel north to get to our rental car outfit in Tampa Bay. Following 75 North to 275 North would get us to the exit we needed get on our plane and fly back home to Kansas City.

On the way, there was a lot of rain and plenty of traffic slowdowns. Also, we began to notice within an hour of the trek that we might be going further north than we bargained for. At this, we checked the map and our hunch was correct. We overshot our 275 N entrance by a long ways and had to turn around and head South to get into Tampa and make our flight. As we attempted to do this, we kept hitting traffic run arounds and the stress began mounting. I was getting a bit dizzy and dismayed because our chances of getting on that plane to KC was rapidly deteriorating.

Finally getting on the right southern highway with little time to spare, Caroline called the airline to see if there were any delays with our KC flight. We were in luck – there was a 45 minute delay as I just missed our needed exit and had to go across the Skyway Bridge that was over 10 miles long. No exits, no chances and we had to glide over that once pleasurable expanse of ocean water to a huge mounting car of dismay. The entire time, our car sick two-year old bellowed loudly and consistently in an absurd pain that further threw me into absolute insanity. It was the first time in my young adult life that I felt what a heart attack might really feel like. From the underside of both of my armpits to my wrists, I felt the numb trickle of complete pin pricks.

We finally got to the rental car facility and were running around like insane people. All of us kept shouting that we had to leave IMMEDIATELY & that there was no time. Quickly I signed the final paperwork and we ran into the bus. On the ride to the airport, we had a short and victorious sigh that we were going to survive this near heart attack experience. Once at the airport, the timetable had been bumped forward and we were going to leave within 5 minutes. The trek back home was quickly inching closer.

Once in our seats, we had to calculate an effective way to tame our 2-year old autistic boy with unfettered energy into a mode that wouldn't get us thrown off the post 9/11 plane. We had 20 toys, 4 snacks, gum and drinks to keep him moderately at bay. Before liftoff, we gave him a tiny strip of benadryl to shove him into a clear ear drum and sleep for the better part of our trip home. As Caroline and I mused at the massive expanse of sun settled cloud clusters riding the widening horizon line, we smiled speechlessly at the new home and beginning that awaited us on that tiny ground that looked like a train track assemblage from above.

After we had landed, we got Judy home and fetched 4 bags of cold groceries from her house before moving up the lane in a giddy mode to rest for the night in our new home. Around each new bend, the tingles of tired in all of our collective eyes and body sockets settled in, but wouldn't win with a new home on the horizon. With my magical garage door opener in hand, we pulled up into the new driveway and hit the button in a victorious stretch of a solid conclusion. Nothing happened. The red light on the control

black blinked weakly and we tried it again over and over. Nothing happened. The door would not roll open. So, at the urging of my sweet Caroline, we went up the road to get a new 9 volt battery. Perhaps that was the issue. A new battery would unlatch the lock to our newly awaiting abode. If not, all doors were locked to the place, including the front storm door. I couldn't even open that door to get up to the main house door to use my new key. It was a dumb early house blunder on my account to lock that front storm door that had come back to sting me.

On our way back from the convenience store, we put the new battery in with some trouble and pressed the button triumphantly as the new red glow of the open light kept wagging there in the dark car light traveling back toward home. At this point, Miles was beginning to get that crying daze into full swing and he was done with our adventures. Our nine year old Zen was also done. All of us were thoroughly tired, famished, exhausted and under hydrated.

Hope was abound as we pulled into the drive to get this garage door up and our lives back on track. As we pulled in, I paused, took in a deep breath and hit the 'OPEN' button with all my might. Nothing happened. I kept hitting it over and over. Getting out of the car, I went to every quadrant of the garage and its windows while hitting the button in rapid succession. Nothing happened. At this, I tried to wiggle and wrangle with every possible window on the home to get us inside. Without any luck, I almost broke down into a torrid crying bout, but I didn't have the energy or gumption to freak the family out.

As I walked in a daze out front pondering how the movie 'Very Bad Things' was happening to me and that it can always get worse, I muttered that I was done. Nothing seemed worth it. Life was against me and it was holding its steel toed heel against my thorax and not letting loose. I was the anointed 'fuck of the hour.' I couldn't get my family into our new home. How did this shit happen? How was I to get us in? As the vortex of grief and dismay went over and around my frayed brain, Caroline yelled 'Just get a locksmith and get over it.'

Immediately, I dialed information and got some Slavic dude on the line that said he would be at my home in 30 minutes. In the ensuing patch of time waiting on the front porch, I slowly drifted away. Still pulverized from moving this entire house in basically on my own with bruises still healing all over my body, exhausted beyond belief, still recouping from my near Tampa Bay heart attack and suffering the exhausted shock of not knowing what was going to happen next, I peered in a blank stare of emotional aloofness. All the while, both kids dawdled about like aimless blobs and my courageous wife filled in and played the proverbial comfort source. It was sorely needed. I was too far gone and wanted to be where she was, but I was simply spent beyond any human belief.

As the locksmith lights came swinging up our neighborhood, I was one him immediately to explain what I felt was the best entry point into the home. I told him that the door in the back yard that had the doggie door on it was the best way to go. So, we opened the back gate and this quiet man got right to work. His techniques and quiet stamina temporarily sent me out of my daze. He started putting a host of tiny inter-tube like things

and pumping them up into the door jamb to separate the door from the frame. He did this a number of times until he put a big screwdriver in and knocked the door square open. As the door flung open, I wanted to hug him.

I immediately thanked him, told him to hang tight for a minute and that I had to let my family in. Not hearing or registering a response, I crawled over a lawnmower in dismay to a boiling hot garage that smelt of rotten meat. Not just a bad scent of a solitary meat package, but a horribly torrid stench that permeated in such a way that I had a gag reflex that almost made me tear up several times.

As I went to the front door to let my eager family in, I said that the electrical company must not have transferred our electricity and in a horrible blunder turned it off. As our 9-year old Zen boy ripped his flash light through the stinking hot air, I went down to pay my silent home intruder friend. After the ninety-nine dollar tab was extracted from my exhausted bank account, I went back into our sweltering home of hell scents and waded through further dismay. How the fuck? That's all that went through my head. How the fuck is this happening? Caroline kept asking if I had called the utility company. Of course I had, I told her, and continued to go out into our front yard to call the utility company to immediately turn our house on. The friendly corporate voice full of ice cubes simply said it would be the next day between 8 – 5 that we would have our lives shut back on. I was too tired to argue and simply got off the phone.

Trudging back into the house, Caroline asked wearily that I open all the windows so that we could sleep. First, I had to extract the spoiled meats and goods from 2 refrigerators and freezers on both our main floor and in the garage. This was a horrible scenario to relive. With flies ripe in every move, there was a horrible stench in the freezers as I plucked the rotten chicken, sausage, ground chuck and melted sticks of butter. After getting all the contents of our full freezers and refrigerators extracted and on the corner of our grassy lawn to grace the new neighbors with our stench, I went in to open all windows. As I struggled with a flashlight in my mouth and cracking open old windows that didn't want to budge, I was gagging the whole time by the scent and an open mouth with a huge flashlight jammed in my jaw.

After this, Caroline insisted that she was absolutely exhausted and that we should just sleep. I told her there was no way that I would allow my family stay in that home with no wind, rotten flesh smell thick in the air and zero circulation. So, we pieced together yet another torrid suitcase to again live in another environment as the kids sloshed about in a complacent gaze willing to do anything to compromise their way out of keeping their eyes open any longer. It was going to be the Roadway Inn up the street to temporarily save our world.

It was now about 2:15 AM and I had nearly 3 hours until I was going to have to wake and train a bunch of teachers on fairly precise software programs. With the weight of dismay and surreal realities flopping around my brain, I pulled the car into park at the Roadway Inn and walked up into the small motel lobby to get our room booked. As I headed towards the door, I could hear my wife bellow in an exhausted laugh as she lit up a

cigarette and I heard two dudes at the face of some Interstate strip club next door talking loudly about how they would take care of the girls they were with. Once inside the lobby, I spoke with a friendly woman behind thick glass to get our fifty dollar king sized room for a night. As we ambled in, all of us fell off into a sleep that was probably one of the most pleasurable in our 3 years as a family. There have been many nights all of us slept in the same bed, but this was a night that was so delightful that all the anguish was beginning to fade.

As the alarm clock yanked my broken body to attention early in the AM hour, I ambled under the glow of my cell phone to the bathroom to get myself ready for my training. While tossing cloth on my body, I peered into the mirror to see that my eyes were ghoulishly red and I had to strain with pure strength to keep them up and open. I chuckled at the absurdity of our trek and hoped that I could finally restore calm to our lives and get on with living in a calmer month known as August.

My first act of the day was to get a cup of coffee and sit in a familiar environment with electricity and mere silence. I was the first one in work that morning and I just sat in silence for a while doing nothing and wishing I could have had my family around me for a moment to absorb the pure silence and tranquility of the moment. It was a helluva long time coming.

Following this very brief spate of recollection, I went on to call the electrical company to tell them that their floating 8 hour time frame was not going to cut it for me and my family awaiting me to return later that morning to the hotel to pick them up. Essentially, they were without a car. Our other car was in our garage that had no electricity. So, my hungry, very tired and cash poor family was awaiting for me in the hotel as I readied my exhausted bones to teach for the day. During my first conversation with a corporate friendly representative, she said that I should call back in an hour to speak with a Manager. I wasn't going to fuck with the lower end food chain rep to get what I needed.

As time dwindled down, I got back on the horn and told some manager that if I wasn't the first on their list for the day to get my power flicked back on that I was going to spend my morning working my way up to the President of the company and that they would regret I ever dealt with them. Essentially, my only crime was that I did was I was supposed to do. I had a recorded conversation several weeks earlier with a lower end rep that was to have my electricity seamlessly transferred from one name to another without any interruption in service. This did not happen. So, this manager put me on hold for a minute and came back to tell me that I would be the first pickup of their day. I smiled and readied myself for a fulfilled promise.

By around 2:30 p.m. I got my power turned back on after numerous phone calls. The silver lining was that the electricity was finally back on and the complaints could die. We continued to fumigate the place and started to relish our new home. The surreal nightmare was over. We had air conditioning, working lights and the electrical amenities that we so dearly take for granted coming through our fine abode. For now, everything could fade to gray as we got back to our lives.

It is now the middle of August and we are going to receive a check from the electrical company Aquila for around \$400 for absolute neglect. They traced down my phone conversation and immediately refunded me the money for locksmith, hotel and food lost. The following morning, my brother has said in synopsis to my long story, "Well, at least it can't get any worse." I corrected him and said that the person who quoted that needs to be corrected. It can get worse .. a helluva lot worse.

As I leave you in the calm waters of August, I want to impart the following: What doesn't kill you, makes you human and what ultimately kills you, is your legacy. So, be careful what you wish for and remember to live well while it's happening.

Good night & lights out.