

NOTE: This short story of some 1600 words was submitted to the Wyoming Writers, Inc. Short Story Contest in October 2006. To my surprise, it won a prize in their Fiction-Short Story category.

TELL ALL THE TRUTH . . .

Anthony J. Sacco, Sr. © Copyright August 20, 2006

The City of Denver's rabid football fans—probably the most fanatical in the country—had turned out in force on this bleak November Sunday afternoon, filling Invesco Field to capacity for the final game of the Bronco's so-so season. High up in the third deck, near the fifty-yard line but too far from the field to rub elbows with those who could afford expensive tickets closer to the action, a young woman, dressed in a second-hand black pantsuit under a dark green car coat which had seen better days and offered only limited protection against the cold, sat alone amid the loyal, but at this point in the game, subdued crowd.

Almost five years had passed since she'd seen or spoken to her father; not since, at the age of sixteen, she'd announced that she needed "my space," and flounced out of his single-again apartment to move in with her mother in an older, inexpensive apartment complex on the east side of town. There, along with her mother and brother, she had attempted, for awhile, to live out the last vestiges of what had once been their happy family life.

Some families of divorce were able to make a go of it. Not hers. Chaos had reined. But instead of facing the truth and dealing with it, they'd denied it. Especially her mother, who kept saying, mantra-like, that everything was ". . .

just fine." A line from one of Emily Dickinson's poems ran through the mind of this young woman, barely out of her teens but mature beyond her years:

"Tell all the truth but tell it Slant—
Success in circuit lies,
Too bright for our infirm delight,
The truth's superb surprise."

What, exactly, was the truth here? Was it that her parents had grown apart: mother morphing into liberalism, father into conservatism? Was it that, unable to agree on anything anymore, they'd become increasingly unhappy living together? Or was it that her mother, tired of living in her husband's shadow and no longer wanting to be his 'cheerleader,' had decided to embark on the career of her own which she'd secretly coveted for years?

She brushed a strand of shoulder-length auburn hair back from her pretty face, revealing high, firm cheek bones, eyes deep brown, luminous and intelligent but a trifle sad, and a jaw line that promised serious obstinacy at times. "I hated hearing my mother say 'we both have grown in different ways,'" she said aloud to no one in particular, and the people around her, intent on the action below, paid no heed as her thin, small voice was swept away on a Rocky Mountain breeze. "Oh, God! I just wanted life to continue the same as it had been. Like it was when they were together."

After awhile, she'd understood what Dickinson's poem meant—that the truth was sometimes just too hard for some people to swallow straight. In order not to scare the hell out of them or worse, Truth needed to be dispensed carefully, in small, easily-handled doses. For her, that had not happened. Her

mother's decision to leave had been dropped on her and her sibling like a bomb in the middle of a quiet spring afternoon.

Unable to deal with the family breakup, not wanting to meet their new friends, or face adjusting to a new mom or dad, she'd cried a lot, then become angry and sullen; prone to moodiness and tirades. Eventually, she'd driven both parents from her.

She forced a laugh from her dry throat. "I just couldn't handle it, you see," she said, as if explaining herself to someone, somewhere; a shrink, a friend ... or the God of her youth.

Down on the grass below, the aging football player she'd once called 'Dad', wearing number 21 between his shoulder blades and playing in the last game of his long career, assumed his defensive posture against a playoff-bound Indianapolis Colt team and waited. He'd been a free safety most of his time in the League, but having lost a few steps, his coach had shifted him to middle linebacker this season, and, because of his experience and feel for the game, allowed him to call defensive signals.

She had determined, a few weeks back, that she'd come here today to watch her old man's last game. He'd announced his retirement earlier in the season, and the press had agreed. "Football is, after all, a young man's game," they'd written, and promptly consigned him to the ranks of the has-beens.

What she had *not* decided as she toiled to save enough money for the trip and ticket, was what she'd do afterwards—after the last seconds had ticked from

the clock, the final gun had sounded and the crowd had filed from the huge stadium, while in the bowels of this vast place, players and coaches entertained the media and a few well-wishers for one last time before cleaning out their lockers and departing for their far-flung homes.

It was late in the game. The two-minute warning had been given. Less than a minute remained. Denver, behind by six big ones, had given up the pigskin, and the Colts were moving the ball relentlessly against a tired Bronco defense. *Too bad he'll go out with a loss*, she thought as the teams lined up for what was going to be one of the last plays of the game.

She saw her father's head turn left to right, sizing up the Colt's offensive formation. Then, his breath visible in the icy, mile-high air, he shouted something, inaudible to her so far from the play action. The ball was snapped and the Colt quarterback dropped back to pass. Denver was blitzing on the play, and she knew her father, physically exhausted by the pounding he'd taken during the game, but his competitive flame—his desire to win—still ablaze, had called it.

The sounds of pads on pads and helmets on helmets came to her as the burly linemen on each side of the line of scrimmage made contact; one set straining to keep the other from penetrating into its backfield, the other set straining to do just that. From the left, Denver's tall defensive end raced in. A missed block and he was behind the line, untouched. His fingers slapped frantically at the pigskin as it left the quarterback's hand, deflecting it high into the icy

air. Time seemed to stand still as the ball spun end for end, coming down in the eager hands of—number 21, a few yards away.

Now, as she watched the ball settle into the arms of the man who was her father, saw the only player in his path—the opposing quarterback—slip and sprawl on his belly, she realized, along with thousands of spectators, that he had an unobstructed path to the goal line forty yards away.

His fine football instinct still intact, he took a few steps forward, cut to his right, and was in full stride as she and the multitude of screaming fans came to their feet in anticipation. There was no one to stop him. Her father would score a touchdown—the winning touchdown if the point after was successful—and end his career not with a disappointing loss, but with a blazing win and the accolades of fans and media ringing in his aging ears.

He was pursued from behind, of course, tackled anticlimactically by a player ten years his junior as he crossed the goal line, but she hardly saw it through tears that flowed freely—tears of joy and pride.

She rummaged through her purse for a tissue. The depth of her suppressed feelings surprised her. She was truly happy for him; in fact she now realized that she'd never wished him ill, even while blaming him for many of her problems and avoiding him for so long. It was *then* that she knew what she'd do after the crowd had dwindled.

Seeing me after all this time may not top what just happened, she thought, but maybe I can be his daughter again and help ease him into the rest of his life; the one he'll live after football.

A few minutes later, swept along by a group of noisy, boisterous fans, she moved into the tunnel. Depositing herself on a bench outside the Bronco's locker room, she settled in to wait. *What will be his reaction?* She wondered. *What will be my welcome?*

Her wait was long. Several times, the yellow double doors of the home team's locker room opened, disgorging jubilantly happy players, coaches, media and fans. And each time she'd search the faces of those leaving. But her father's was not among them. Soon the corridor was empty except for her.

Silence descended like a thick blanket. More determined than ever now, she waited, only changing her position on the hard bench now and then and occasionally brushing the hair back from her forehead. *Should've brought a magazine to read,* she thought.

Finally, eons later, he emerged alone, head down, carrying a duffle bag filled with gear. His hair still wet from the shower, he looked every bit as solemn as the occasion of his retirement demanded.

Her heart pounding, she stood. He looked up, saw her and stopped, his face a blank. With her right hand, she made a hesitant, non-descript gesture intended as a wave. "Hi, Dad," she said. "I don't need my space any more."