

The Color Canyon Divides

By Trent Watkins

I walked down my high school graduation isle dressed in navy robes as “It’s the End of the World as you Know it” by REM played on the speakers. A slightly larger portion of the student body wore the more feminine white robes. It seemed natural to distinguish male and female in this manner. At the time I was not a fan of REM, but that song was the best song ever played at a high school graduation. One life was over, and a new life had just begun.

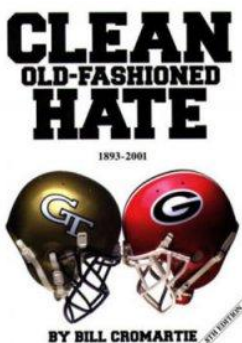


I learned a few things in high school, and most of it is like a bad memory. I saw the power of isolation first hand. I saw people congregate in cliques and ridicule those outside of their group. There were the jocks in school colors with footballs in hand, flaunting their success. There were preppies who carried favor with gold. There was the beta club: a select group of budding intellectuals madly scribbling away on blackboards and whiteboards. There were the band-geeks ridiculed for only wanting to play on rich brass. There were the wall-people—who later became the bell-tower people—with white makeup and “emo” stares before emo was a word. There were rednecks who looked to emphasize the rural life with exaggerated accents and flannel shirts in a multitude of color patterns. Last were those without a recognizable color. They were easily picked on for their lack of a supporting group. This is who I belonged with: the group always on the outside looking in.

I saw many fights in high-school— the mad flailing of youths trying to destroy anything different from themselves. I saw the black clad Bell-tower people launching lefts and rights at plaid clad rednecks. I watched blue and gold clad jocks pushing red polo-shirt wearing preppies and saw those same red polo-shirts attack the white clad beta-club. I even scrapped a few times myself. The colors didn’t matter to me. They were all a form of evil and worthy of assault. It seemed necessary enough despite its repulsiveness. I learned that sometimes the best way to keep from being attacked was to attack first: open with a bloody fist, show no fear, taste the dripping red blood, savor it, and the attacks cease. The red-red hate of war was its own defense. I watched all this and hoped that the end of the world I knew was indeed at hand, so I walked down that isle in navy dress and gold tassel with some hope for the future. I remember smiling broadly when I accepted that little piece of paper that I have since forgotten the location of.

My first act upon graduation was to accept a fall position with the White and Gold of Atlanta and learned that the greatest enemy was the Black and Red of Athens. I took practice chanting, “To hell with Georgia” with a thousand others clad in gold and black and was told I did a good job. I have since learned that this ritual, or some variant of it, is repeated all over the nation. It seems now the words were different. I wasn’t so much chanting “To hell with Georgia” as much as I was yelling “Yay, a color clique to join!” It was a place to call home. For the length of summer, this fantasy was true, but for now I would have to go home and wait.

When I returned from the Georgia Tech campus, my mom, brother, and I set out



across the country for two weeks to see the middle of America. My little brother, who is now substantially taller, is separated from me by nine years. In truth, he is technically a half-brother—the son of my father and his second wife—but despite everything we have been through and the vast separation of time and space, he has forever remained my brother. The “half” has long since been forgotten as an unnecessary formality.

At various points along the trip, my brother would play his favorite game. It was something I liked to refer to as, “What would you do if?” He would invent a series of inane questions designed to do nothing more than test my patience: What would you do if I knocked your plate on the floor? What would you do if I squirted yellow mustard all over your black shirt? What would you do if I threw your Yellow Jacket shirt out the window? My usual response was “beat the tar out of you.” I tended to use stronger language when my mom wasn’t around. Looking back now, it was sometimes difficult to believe how big a canyon of years is between nine and eighteen. Then it was all so clear.

As we drove, I saw many things. I saw green trees reaching for blue skies with brown earth beneath them as we passed through Alabama and Mississippi. I saw a black man playing guitar in New Orleans. The melodies his aged fingers played were as magnificent as anything ever played. I saw white and red shirts pass his open black guitar case without leaving any green or even a shiny silver or two. I saw green fields split by stretches of black tar with dead animals laying at the edges as we drove through western Texas. I saw their rotting carcasses and blankly staring eyes and wondered why no one bothered to pick them up, to remove them, to give them a proper burial. In New Mexico, I saw a swarm of black bats take to the night sky in a swirling rush. When the light of dawn came, the same swirling rush came home to the black of the cave.

What I remember most was in Arizona. I like to think REM was playing as we drove through the sparse coniferous trees. If it was not, then it should have been. It had been a long day of driving and a long trip in general. My brother was busy playing his favorite game, and I was doing my best to ignore him. Long before this, I had pushed my mother to the travel trip breaking point. It was a relief to hear my brother break from his game long enough to say, “Are we there yet?” It was equally pleasing to hear my mother snap, “No, we’ll be there when I tell you we’re there!” In retrospect it seems odd, sacrilegious, for one of the most important moments of my life to be trapped in a long, arduous, hot, tiring, frustrating car ride. Ultimately that is the power of life: the least important, most inane of circumstances can lead to the most important of discoveries.

It was in the evening, and the yellow sun was setting behind the trees when I first saw it. At first, it was nothing more than a great rift in the land filled with color. As the trees parted, the rift opened its great maw and defied any to cross it—so vast, so daunting was its presence. For as far my eye could see, the rift spread, and somewhere down below a mighty rushing river flowed. The canyon was filled with rich and fertile sediment washed down by the mighty Colorado River. The brown contrasted sharply with the brightly colored canyon walls. Rich reds filled those walls, and sandy browns, and the green of trees and grass where possible, and vivid yellows also. Eventually the canyon gave way to the sky in hues of orange and red and vibrant pastel pink, and even majestic purples gazed warmly up at the white and blue-gray of the overlooking moon.



I will always remember the canyon in the evening. That is when it is at its most beautiful, but also at its most sinister. The colors there don't wash across the landscape and meld with one another. They are finely segregated. Each colored grain of sand has its own special place with other grains of sand of the same color. Over the millions and millions of years time and space have first compressed these layers of colored sand into rock, cementing their legacy and forever separating them from one another. Don't get me wrong. The colors are beautiful to behold, just sinister. There is the notion that separating the colors creates beauty and to blend them together is less than beautiful. Fortunately there is another force at work here. There is a raging river flowing through the very heart of this segregated land. It tears at the foundations, ripping the rock from the very walls, and shredding them back down into sand and soil. The river is brown and turbulent, muddy and ugly, but it ever rages on. It has so much work left to do. If I lived in the canyon, I'd live by the river. That is where the living things grow strongest.

Looking back, that entire summer was about color and division. Each division was beautiful to behold: orderly, serene. Things fell easily into these orders and became lost in a sea of similar faces and things. It was only by climbing down into the canyon, the rift of America, that I was able to see what it really did. It separated one side from the other. It prevented travel, the sharing of ideas, the mingling of color. It prevented the America of reality from becoming the America of dreams. The dream is a powerful thing, a wisp of legend, of ideas, that whispers in the night of unity and sharing. The dream swims in the river: a river that's so hard to get to from the top of the canyon. The hike down is arduous and fraught with peril. There are spiders living in the walls and snakes in the caves. They wait for unsuspecting travelers to drop their guard and then they strike. They suck you into the wall and forever lock you in stone. Beware the color-divided walls on your journey and may you forever find solace by the river.