

# Struck by Lightning

**By Alan Nelson**

I went to law school with him. We kept in regular contact for several years. Then he vanished.

In law school, he was book smart yet practical. He was law review, yet didn't bore people or scare them away. He graduated near the top of his class yet had social skills.

I tried to find him. I called his old firm, and got nonresponsive answers. I sent notes to an address I tracked down in a public data base, but never heard back. I made calls to new phone numbers, but they were disconnected. I tried the state bar database to no avail. I even checked the Social Security Death Index, fearing the worst.

I ran into other classmates. I asked them, and they asked me. None of us knew where he'd gone.

This continued for quite some time before I gave up. His memory migrated to a back corner of my mind. Then I plugged in my friend's name on the Texas bar site. He was alive, but inactive.

My gut hurt. He must have run into serious health problems, I thought. He didn't want to bother anyone.

Then I saw my wife's cousin in Colorado. By chance, my classmate's name came up. She not only knew him, she saw him regularly.

"He's a seventh grade science teacher," she said.

I gaped. I gawked. I gawped. I shook my head. I tried to process. I felt a shriek coming out like Bilbo Baggins' "Struck by Lightning!" I choked it back down. I tried to smile. I nodded stupidly.

"How about that," I said.

She and her boyfriend knew him well. They had hosted him and his wife at their home several times. They'd gone on trips together. She gave me his email.

I googled him that night: a backpack leader for Sierra Club trips ... an outdated profile on a web site of a law firm that closed six years ago ... a PDF booklet on the structure of the atom written for middle school students.

I looked at that email address for months. Now I didn't want to contact him. The situation threatened my identity. We'd met on the first day of law school. We'd been study partners for several classes, and practice court partners for six months of hell. He was smart and reliable.

Finally, I emailed him. That night I got a call on my cell phone. It was my classmate. He sounded the same. He talked the same. It was if we hadn't talked in a day or two, not over eight years.

"The law was sapping my life away," he said. The shock, though expected, still slammed me. I stumbled out of the house, plugging cell phone ear buds hard into my head. I walked in the dark and listened as he talked.

He'd quit once. The firm begged him to come back. He came back for a little over a year, but the same problems emerged again. Too much work, too little resource, too much infighting.

He quit again.

He got his teaching certificate. He lives about three minutes from the school where he teaches, and rides his bike to work. He really, really is a seventh-grade science teacher.

"This year, I didn't even pay the 50 dollars," he said. "I'm not even a lawyer anymore."

I sat heavy on the ground. Perhaps I fell. I looked at the moon. My dog licked me in the face. Somehow, I'd let this become about me. I didn't know how much more I could handle. I looked back at my distant house, dark under the crescent moon. I felt like I was frozen into shadows of an unknown Edward Hopper painting, awash in stark realism.

All that emotion and energy and study. All that pain and endurance. I felt like we'd become fellow survivors. Yet now I felt he'd been left behind. Or perhaps I had.

We spoke of our practice court professor who didn't approve of life in general and us in particular. Then he told war stories of cases still in his mind from eight years before. Fact patterns of cases long resolved for better or worse. Horrible clients and crazy partners. A bit of wistfulness resonated over the cell. Upon reflection, that may be what I wanted to hear.

He had to wrap up the phone call. School had just ended, and he was leading a backpacking trip to New Mexico early the next morning. We said we had to get together. We hung up. I looked at my phone. It was if he'd just disappeared again.

I began to think of him almost as if he could be found on the Social Security Death Index. Back in law school, he looked like a lawyer to me. He was someone you could rely on when the chips fell against you, and buried you. I didn't know I was really relying on a seventh grade science teacher. He's the smartest seventh grade science teacher I've ever known.

Then I shook my head. I stood up. I began a long walk under the moon with my dog. I knew he was, and is, more normal than me. I knew he'd shrugged off the persona the law clamps on you. I know great seventh-grade science teachers are harder to find than great lawyers. In my heart I believe seventh-grade science teachers are more valuable. Yet still I feel a loss.