

Six Quarters (from Grand Street literary journal)

by Rick Rofihe

First, I take off my watch. I put it here on your driveway. Maybe you see me put my head down to look at it so much you think I charge by the minute. You start to worry. First thing I say, "Don't worry." Then I answer you about Six Quarters.

It started with the back and forth. Back and forth across the border. Us on the Mexican side, aunt on the Texas side. Back and forth.

My parents had—they had problems. My old aunt comes over from the Texas side and she sees it—that they have problems—and she takes me and the little brother back to her side, this side. For little bits—weeks, months, maybe whole summers, I don't remember. Back and forth.

But the end of the one summer she doesn't take us back down. She puts us in school on this side, where we weren't even citizens. I had some school on the other side, but the little brother started on this side. My aunt said to my parents to give him his first year on the Texas side. Well, that's how she stole us.

He was just five then. I was almost eight. Today he is different from me. My old aunt did the best she could for me, but I had three years on the other side when I was already old enough to know problems—that they were problems.

My aunt, she was my father's aunt. She was old, but my uncle was older by twenty, twenty-one years. No kids of their own. When I came, he was seventy-two, but still working—at this, at that, not so much for money, but to keep busy. And I was always watching. When he would be fixing things, I would watch him, maybe hold things for him. I think I was twelve—so then he was seventy-six—and he was fixing the lawn mower in the driveway. And he had the rosebushes behind him—dark pink roses, and there was dew on them.

Now I see your roses, so maybe even if you don't ask me that question, I tell you all this anyway. Yours are more pink. His were more red, but still pink. Maybe that is not dew on your roses. Maybe you have automatic sprinklers to water at night. But I start to remember anyway.

"Watching, watching," he says. "Always you are watching. Someday you have to start doing." So I am thinking, Well, I'm not going to school like I am to grow up to fix lawn mowers. But it was summer, and I liked my old uncle, so might as well learn. And here I am, thirty years later. Same time of year.

Now, you want to fix a car engine? I can. I can fix it. But car engines have so many problems. That's a four-stroke engine. That's valves. That's timing. That's an oil pump. That's so many things that your lawn mower, it doesn't have. That's problems, but I could fix it. And now they're making four-stroke lawn mower engines, something like my old uncle never saw.

The four-strokes I can fix, but this little two-stroke you have here, I'm at home with. Not really different from my old uncle's mower. So when you phone me and tell me what lawn mower you have, what problems you have with it, I tell you I'll be there in the morning. I tell you to have waiting one gallon of gas and a half cup of oil to mix—for a two-stroke engine, the oil goes right in with the gas. You know that, but I say it just to make sure. Because I don't carry around gas and oil.

So we mix one ounce of oil with one quart of gas. Oil—one ounce; gas—one quart. Or, as my uncle would say, "quarter." Because a quart is a quarter-gallon. And he said that in the British Empire their quarts—their quarters—are bigger. And in one of their gallons there was almost five of our quarts. "Five quarters!" my old uncle would say, and laugh and look at me like I should laugh, too. "Five quarters!"

Yes, my old uncle liked roses. Grew them. He had a way of

smelling a rose—after he smelled a rose, you are surprised the rose is still there.

Look here: I check the magneto, the coil, the fly-wheel, the spark plug of your lawn mower. See what good care I take? With your lawn mower? What about my lawn mower? Well, me, I don't have a lawn mower, but I know me. Say, with my car—as long as it gets me there. With your car—if I fix your car, I make it just so. And you see me look down at my watch—is it to remind you you are paying? Yes, you are paying, but that is not why I look at my watch.

Today, these days, I talk. But for years I don't smile, don't wave, don't talk. I live in ten towns in ten years—ten towns! Five on each side of the border. Some of those towns twice. And you know, the closer to the border those towns are, they are rougher.

The little brother, I lost touch with him. I know he's in Chicago, so I think, I'll go to Chicago. I start out that same day, and I end up, no money, in New York—in New York!

Now, agencies—city agencies, state agencies, federal agencies—a lot of trouble in them. And people with trouble coming to them. But one lady in one agency helped me—sent me to one man in another agency who helped me. Clothes, food, room, and they were, for me, looking for work. Because I am a citizen, you know. I show them—my aunt had it fixed up. Then I tell them, “Small engine repair.”

But it is not so easy to find just what you want. Anything, they say at the agency to me, anything. I'd have to do for a while. And I said yes, anything.

On a Friday they send me out to see about a job in a repair shop out of the city, in a big store. Maybe you know the store. I go on the train. I am early. I look around the town.

I look in store windows. In one window, first I look in, but then I look at myself, like in a mirror. I think how the man at the job might look at me. I think: Before I see him, I'll cut my hair. I don't see a barbershop, I see a beauty parlor. One woman, first one to the

window, her chair is empty. She's leaning back on the counter, reading. A magazine. I don't really want to go in—all women in there—but I tap on the window. I show her with my hand that I want to get my hair cut, for her to come to the door. I want to find out how much to get my hair cut. She holds the door open, stands in the door. Fifteen dollars.

"Fifteen dollars," I say back to her. I don't want to say it's too much, or too much for me. "But my hair is fun," I say. I figure she doesn't see too many like me in there. "It's fun to cut."

I see her holding the door open. "In the chair," she says. I sit, and from the back she touches my hair. "Fun," she says, kind of quiet. She walks around, looks at me, lifts up the hair from my forehead. She says it again. "Fun."

Still, then, I don't talk much. I mean, in those days. But if she's cutting my hair, and there's something about me she wants to know, and she's not getting paid, I think I got to tell. Soon she finds out a lot about me that nobody—nobody around there, maybe nobody around anywhere—knows. Something, not much, about the towns. Something, not much, about my old aunt and uncle. And I tell about the little brother. About the job I go see about. About how then I will go to Chicago. I try not to tell her too much, but I tell her a lot. For finding things out, she has a way.

In that chair, I start to forget about Chicago. That was my idea—to get some money, to have some money to get to Chicago. You know, I wasn't even sure how to find the little brother when I get there. And then I am in that chair.

I go see the man; I get the job. I go back to the beauty parlor—because she says to come back, let her know what happens. Everyone in there looks at me, but I tell her. She says, "Wonderful, I'll buy you dinner." Now I feel bad, and I say, "Already you lose fifteen dollars on me." So she says she has food. To come to her place. Now all these women in there look at her. She says for me to

sit and wait until she's through with her appointments. She brings me a Coca-Cola and a glass and puts a pile of magazines in front of me. I drink the Coca-Cola but I just look out the window. Except when I look at her—not right at her but I look at her in the mirror. And I don't touch the magazines.

I have to tell you the truth that when we go to her apartment I get worried. Big apartment. I think: her mother, her father. What will I say to them? Or sister. Or brother. Or boyfriend. Or husband. I look around. Every door I see, I think someone's going to come out of that door. If you know me in Mexico, in Texas—the life there I was living? Soon husband is all I am thinking.

The phone rings. "I'm all right," she says. "Don't worry. He's fun." She looks at me while she talks on the phone. Then we start eating, talking—mostly her talking. After a while, she talks about me—talks about me! To me! About my hands, my eyes, and then she talks about my hair.

I go out from my little room in the morning to an agency. Take a train not far. And by night I sit in a big apartment with a woman and I drink coffee and she says, "I like to watch you drink coffee." Coffee—watch me drink coffee! I say, "How do I drink it? I just drink it." But I like to hear what she says.

So, no problems. It is not long later that we get married. No problems. I go to work—at the job, no problems. At the apartment, no problems. No problems, no problems, and then behind every door is coming a problem. After work is a problem. Weekends is a problem. Behind every door, her mother, her father. Sisters, brothers. Boyfriends from before. The husband before me. Her stories about them, and stories they told her, she is telling me.

She looks at me. She waits. She tells another story. She waits. But when I think, I remember only two stories—one about me and my old uncle, and one my old aunt told me. Only two stories? So I save them.

Everybody in her stories, it was like they were there. There with her but not with me. It is a problem. I have a problem. So we have problems.

Today, you see me smile, answer your question. But before, for ten years, I am not this way. And the day I don't go to the job but take the train into New York City, Penn Station, I am not this way.

I walk over to Grand Central Station. I phone my wife at work and tell her I am going to Chicago. Even with problems, she doesn't want me to leave. Can you believe, like that, I leave? Like that? In me, what kind of life?

I get to Chicago and four days it takes me to find the little brother. I have to phone Texas. I have to telegraph Mexico.

Glad to see me? He is surprised. His wife, she is really surprised. But they have in their house a basement, like an apartment. I get a job in Chicago; I pay to stay. Big repair shop, lots of motorcycles—motorcycles are two-stroke. One month, two months, five months.

Six months, one day I wake up and don't feel good. Next day and next day, I don't feel good. So I think, it's the beer—better not go to the bars. I go downtown. I look in store windows. I stand and read magazines. I drink Coca-Cola. And still I don't feel good. I even go to the doctor.

Well, from doctor to doctor you can go. From beer to Coca-Cola you can go. Even to milk you can go. But if you don't feel at home, you don't feel good.

I think back to what I say to my wife to get her to cut my hair, first time. I get an idea about how to remember stories, so I can tell them to my wife. I try to tell the little brother about it. So he can help me remember.

Well, he is different from me; he looks at his wife, his wife looks at him. He says he can't help. OK, I go by myself down in the basement. I stay for days—I sit up in the bed, I look at the door. But

the only stories I think of are the two I already remember. Not much to go back with, but, anyway, I go back.

I take the train from Chicago to New York. It is too early to call unless I call her at work. I think, what if one of those women in there answers? Who knows what they say about me to her for six months?

I sit in Grand Central. I don't drink beer, or Coca-Cola, or milk. I don't look at magazines. I wait. I call her at home. It rings and I am thinking, What if someone else answers? But she answers.

"Wait right there," she says. "Don't go anywhere."

What is that—sixty, ninety-minute drive back? She is not smiling. I don't say anything. In all that time, she says only one thing. "Chicago. You in Chicago."

You know, I have no job when I come back. Next day, we talk about it. With my own tools, I tell her, I don't need a job. My wife, she buys me my own tools. I get cards printed up. I put them in stores, supermarkets, like where you saw it. Now I will answer your question.

I say to the printer, put in one corner "Lawn Mowers," in one corner "Outboard Marine," in one corner "Motorcycles," in one corner "All Two-Stroke Work," and in the middle in big letters SMALL ENGINE REPAIR. And the phone. The printer says to me, "What about your name?" I say my name is long and hard for the people to say, and that the people might not like my name. He says then to put the name of my business. I say it has no name. Make up a name, he says. I think of my old uncle. I say, "Five," but then I think I got to make it so even my old uncle would have to laugh. "Six!" I give the printer the same kind of look my uncle gave me. The printer doesn't care about the look I give him, or, after, ask me what it means when I say, "Six Quarters."

I don't think my wife ever tells me the same story twice. I tell her the same two stories now many times. I tell her the five quarters one, and she asks me questions. I can answer because it is my story. The other one I tell is one that I only heard, so she doesn't ask questions. But I think she likes it just as much.

You know, the way I answer your question is maybe different than I tell it before. Same story, but I take longer, put in a little more. Lots of things are different now. People on the other sides of doors. Sure. Two kids: little boy, baby girl.

My wife reads the little boy books—reads him books! So now I listen, like I am a little boy. Me! I don't say anything, but I listen to those books and I change my stories. When I tell her my aunt's story now, I start off, “It was a long, long, time ago.” She laughs. But it was a long, long time ago when my old uncle first sees my aunt.

“My old uncle was old when he got married. He would go north and work—Texas, California, Idaho, as far north as North Dakota. No drinking, no smoking, no restaurants. Maybe some bread, some tomatoes; maybe he sits by himself by a river. And once a year, in the spring, he would come back to the village. He was getting older, and no wife.”

I stop the story there for a while. I say to my wife, “It was a long, long time ago. Maybe before hairdressing schools and before hairdressers made more money than guys who can pay just for baby-sitting and day-care doing small engine repair.” She smiles at me. Then I start the story again.

“So he rides back into town on a horse. A horse is what people had there in those days. Even just to look at a car was a big thing. And to ride in one? So he comes into town on his horse, and everybody knows about it, that he was away in the north working, and no wife. You know, in Mexico at that time almost any woman over nineteen years old—married. Had to be. Maybe you find one or two eighteen, a few more seventeen, not married—maybe. Maybe sixteen you had some to pick from. And the mothers are dressing up their daughters, pushing them at him. But my uncle doesn't say

anything. It looks like he will ride out of town like every year—not married. Except he is riding down a street one day, and he sees a girl playing jacks. You know, bouncing a ball, picking up jacks. Out in front of her house; for something to do. And she looks up at him, on the horse. It's a small town, so he would pretty much know who she is—just a poor girl. He goes over into Texas for a day and he buys her a nice dress. When he comes back into town, he goes to her house, talks to her parents, and they call her in. And he gives her the dress. He didn't say anything to her and she didn't say anything to him, but as he leaves town on his horse the next day, she watches him go. When she can't see him anymore, she climbs up a ladder onto the flat roof of the house. For another minute or so, she can see him. Then she looks around for the highest building in town with a roof. So she can watch him some more. And she comes down the ladder and runs to that building and up the stairs to the roof. And watches him again until he is gone out of sight."

I stop for a minute. I tell my wife, "My uncle was not a usual man. Even then, when she was thirteen and he was thirty-three, it was not impossible that he could, in those days, have married her." Then I start the story again.

"Every spring, he comes back to the village on the horse. He would give the family some money so she could have a few nice things. The one day he would come to her house, they would only for a moment look at each other. When they would pass each other somewhere in the town, again that is all they would do—just look at each other. But as he left town every year, there she would be, up on the roof of the tallest building in town, trying to see him for as long as she could, watching him until he was gone out of sight." Every time I tell it, I stop here. "This is a true story," I tell my wife. Then I start it again.

"When she was seventeen, that spring, he didn't come. He sends some money, and a note to her parents. It says something like, Have her finish grade 11. Let her take grade 12. Something like that." I stop the story again. "A true story," I say again to my wife.

"So he didn't come that spring, and he didn't come the next

spring, but then in the summer he comes. In a car—a car!

“It was a car like they don't make anymore, with a two-stroke, like a lawn mower, an outboard, a motorcycle engine. To him it must have been music. And they drove away together, to get married, over into Texas.”

My wife, she never asks me too much about that story of my aunt's. But the one with the five quarters, because it is my story only, she asks: What was the sky like? What was the air like? What was the ground like? What was the rose like? How did my old uncle, how did he smell the rose?

But you know, I'll tell you something. If I leave for work in the morning before she does, she stands in the window up in the apartment and waves to me. I cross the street and walk a little way up the street to the corner. Around the corner is where I park my car. She waves to me as I walk. With one arm she holds the baby girl, and with the other she waves. The little boy, he is standing next to them. Like my wife, he is waving, and he is also saying, all the time, “Daddy Daddy Daddy. Daddy Daddy Daddy.”

Now, it is not exactly like in my old aunt's story—my wife doesn't go up to the roof so she can see me a little longer. But at the corner I turn around to see them, and that's when she says out the window, between the Daddy Daddy Daddys, “Call me.” We talk already a lot by that time of the day, you know, and before that—the day before, after work and in the night. But still that's what she says: “Call me.”

That's why I look down at my watch so much whenever I'm working. I see when she's between appointments, I leave the lawn mower alone for a minute, I wipe my hands, I say, “My wife's between appointments, can I use my phone?” Like I say to you now, my wife's between appointments, can I use my phone?

I use my phone. I call her.

