Twitter Thread by Randy Milholland



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Who wants to hear a nice story about meeting a hero?

So this is a lot, I apologize. But this is the story of how I met one of my teenhood icons while I was still a teenager. But there's a bit of lead up.

When I was sixteen, I discovered Neil Gaiman's Sandman series. It was about three years into it's run. And like the works of Phil Foglio and Don Rosa, it was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I was hooked instantly.

My teen years were pretty chill. Most of the teen angst had been used up by my sister, so my parents and I had a mutual understanding and I was trying hard not to make life hard for them.

My sister moved out for the first time in March or April of 1992. Her room was bigger, so I laid claim on it instantly. Like, I waited an hour for her to be gone. We had a strained sibling relationship, to say the least. No hate, but no like.

Flash forward to October of 1992. I'm taking the TAAS test, a standardized test required to graduate. It's day one of three. I finished pretty fast and I'm reading an issue of Sandman when my councilor and the school's Latin teacher show up and ask me into the hall.

I didn't take Latin but I knew Doc (I can't remember his whole name but he was called Doc because he had a PhD) usually showed up when kids were hearing bad news because he was tiny, elfin, and calming. And generally a sweetheart.

The first thing my councilor asks is, "How many siblings do you have?"

... That's a weird fucking question to have a school councilor pull you out of class for.

Doc shot her a death glare and said, "You're done talking now."

He begins to explain my sister was in a car accident. They didn't know how bad. I needed to go home right away. Don't worry about the test, I can retake it in Spring.

It was less than a week after my sister's 22nd birthday.

I went home. I packed up some things. My parents are holding it together. They know almost nothing but have been told we need to get to Houston immediately. The five+ hour drive is quiet. I spend it re-reading comics.

We get to the hospital. My sister is in ICU. Her car was stationary when it was hit by a speeding car. Over one hundred broken bones. Shattered jaw. Punctured organs. She's in coma.

The ICU doctor is talking to my parents about living wells and organ donation.

It's hours before we can see her. Around 9 at night, we go in. She's got tubes everywhere. Her jaw is wired. A machine is helping her breathe.

My parents talk sweetly to her, but my mom is squeezing my hand so hard I expect to hear pop sounds.

We get an hour with her.

My parents start making arrangements with work to take time off and looking for a hotel for them. Not me.

I am told I will be driven home and taking the TAAS test. We do that for two more days. Wake up, go to school, come home, dad drives me to Houston to see my sister.

One the third day my father learns his mother has had a stroke - one of many she never told us about. This one she never recovers from. She's vegetative at best.

I'm sixteen and I can see the stress cracks on my parents as they try to deal with all of this.

A sidenote, I had actually planned on dropping out of high school at this time. I was going to quit, get my GED, and go to community college. I decide this plan I'd been working on for months is out because my folks don't need it.

Eventually, my sister is moved from the hospital in Houston to one specializing in head trauma and body rehab - after my parents learn the doctors are scamming the insurance for meds and tests they never did, but that's another story.

So December of 1992, my sister is back in Fort Worth. It's the only Christmas gift my mom needed. She's still in coma, unresponsive. The hospital does their best to give hope but also be honest about the possibilities that this is her the rest of her life.

For two months I had basically been on my own until the weekends, when my parents brought me down to see my sister. Now I see her daily. I do school work in her hospital room. When I have none to do, I read her comics.

I read her Sandman. We're in the middle of Brief Lives.

And I'm trying to be a good kid. I'm trying hard to ask for nothing and help out however I can. I deflect my parents questions about how I'm doing because I think it's the right thing. I refuse to talk about how I feel because I want to make it easier on them.

One morning in February, when I wake up, I can't stand up. It hurts too much. Just stabbing in my gut. I'm having acid reflux for the first time and I have it in spades. Mouthfuls.

My dad, still a farmboy, heaves me up like I'm nothing and takes me to the doctor.

The doctor does some tests - I'm there most of the day. The doctor was in his 80s and ran the practice with his wife. They were old school, and part of that was never talking to the kids about what was wrong. Only the parents.

Fun fact, he's also the doctor who gave me my hernia test in 7th grade. As he cupped my balls, he muttered, "I hope this don't stir something in you."

Great guy.

His diagnosis is this is all related to stress. I am put on a drastic diet - mostly rice, boiled chicken with no spices of any kind. I'm allowed to drink unsweetened tea.

At 5'11", I drop from 136 to around 110 over the next few months.

But I feel genuinely ashamed of myself. My parents have so much going on, and in my teen brain, I'm making it worse. I'm the problem here. I'm a burden.

My father, an old Southern Baptist raised in Arkansas now in his 50s, sees this, and does everything he can to stop it.

There are multiple, "You're our child, you will never be a burden" talks. It doesn't help. My father tries a different method. We talk comics.

My dad actually loves comics. He preferred comic strips like Pogo or the political cartoons of Etta Hulme, but he knew his DC.

My dad had been a small town barber from the mid-50s to the late 60s. He sold comics, too. And he read them all. He let kids who were panicky about haircuts read his favorite issues. So we bonded over comics.

I told him about Sandman and he got irritated. "That ain't Wesley Dodds." When I explained how they were linked he seemed better about it, especially since Sandman Mystery Theater was in its run.

When I was obviously holding things in, he'd try to talk to me. When that wouldn't work, we'd talk about comics. I started reading Brief Lives to my sister. It helped. It provided a small escape in the middle of something that seemed so big and overwhelming.

My parents were a little less thrilled about me reading Brief Lives to her, but I think since it calmed me down it helped.

My sister woke up in April of 1993. She had post-traumatic amnesia. She thought she was in high school. She kept asking if her old boyfriend was okay.

And that eventually gave way like a fog rolling out, but it opened new stresses and pain for her as she realized her situation. My family struggled to deal with it together.

I still read comics. I still read Sandman.

And then I learned Neil Gaiman was going to be in town.

Specifically, he was going to be at Heroes Comics in Hurst. Heroes was, at this time, a hole-in-the-wall comic shop a little TOO crowded for its own good. But (most of) the people who worked there were nice. One clerk, Jason, told me the second he learned about it.

I'm excited. I'd never met a celebrity who wasn't a politician (my dad knew a lot since he was a union president). I get all the details of what I'm allowed to have signed, when it will be, and I run home to tell me dad.

He listens, and says, "Please don't go meet that guy."

It was confusing to say the least. It wasn't a command, though. He honestly just didn't want me to meet Neil Gaiman. "I won't tell you not to, but please don't. There will be other chances. Please wait."

I'm not mad... just confused.

I tell my father that unless he expressly forbids me to do so, I am going to Gaiman's store appearance. My father sat quietly for a while and said, "Then you'll go."

We don't talk about it for a while. We don't talk about comics for a while. He isn't distant, just nervous.

The day of Gaiman's signing is also the day of my high school's End of the Year Journalism banquet, when all the Newspaper and Yearbook kids meet with our teacher at a restaurant and celebrate being done. I was staff cartoonist.

I dress in my only suit, a blue suit, and put on a tie - I can't remember if it's Fred Flintstone or the MAD Magazine one - and pick up my friend, Heather. She wanted to meet Gaiman too. She loved the comics but was also a die-hard Tori Amos fan.

She wanted to ask him about his mention in her "Thanks" section on one of her albums. We pile into my 1979 rust-and-blue Mustang Ghia and fly down the road listening to awful music and singing it at the top of our lungs even worse.

Specifically this song, which was getting a LOT of air play at the time: https://t.co/dUhzgajv1L

Don't you fucking judge me.

We get to Heroes. They have a table covered in titles Gaiman has worked on. We're super early - like right when it starts. There's one or two people ahead of us. Heather looks at me and says, "I meet him first because you are going to explode on him."

I say that's fair.

Heather hands the CD to Mr. Gaiman and asks him about Tori Amos. Since the credit said, "Say hi to the Sandman for me," he wrote, "Hi. Neil Gaiman." Heather is pretty stoked.

Then it's my turn.

I nervously hand over the copy of Sandman 41 to him. He comments on how it's very worn. I apologize. Gaiman smiles and says there's nothing to be sorry about, it's meant to be read. He has Brief Life posters for sale. I buy one. He draws a shine in Dream's eye.

Since there's no one else there yet - it's still early and most people are getting off work or out of school - Gaiman just starts talking to us. Nonchalant, friendly. I ask questions about the series, about comics, he answers all of them.

He asks us a few questions that are basically how are we. He talks to us like adults, not kids. He's kind and open. He didn't have to do any of this. We stay there fifteen or so minutes. I see people come into the story and coming towards him so I know we need to go.

I thank him again for the comics, for signing, and everything. The whole time he's never disinterested or distant. He's warm and friendly and wishes us well as we leave. We head out to the Journalism Banquet (... at a shitty barbecue place)

We tell all the Newspaper kids about it because most of them read Sandman, too, and there's a lot of excitement. After the dinner ends, we all hang out for a while and then I get home at around ten.

My dad is waiting up for me at the dinner table.

He never waits up.

I'm expecting him to be angry or something, although I wasn't even close to my curfew. Instead he asks me, concerned, how things went. I word vomit over him how excited I was and how nice Neil Gaiman is and just go on and on.

It's a weight off of my father. He softens a lot and says, "I'm so glad," a lot over and over.

I ask why he was so worried about me meeting Neil Gaiman.

Something you need to know about my dad - his first marriage ended with a drunk driver hit his car and killed his wife and son. My half brother was wasn't even two years old yet. My father saw them die.

Now his daughter was in a car wreck.

There was a long quiet as he stared at me and held my hand. "You just never know what's going to be too much. What if someone's unkind at the wrong time? What if it's too much to bear?"

I think it was the first time I saw my father cry.

We had a long talk that night about a lot of stuff, about bottling things up, about where I was, about comics. We stayed up too late, but I didn't mind.

When I reread any issue of Sandman I go back to that time in my life. I remember it vividly. The nights at my sister's hospital. My dad sitting on my bed, thumbing through comics and muttering about changes. About being told I mattered by my father and about Gaiman showing it

I try to remember that when I do conventions now. I don't always succeed, I'm sad to say, but I try to treat everyone like they matter when they're talking to me.

So yeah, I know everyone says don't meet heroes but I met two of them who were the kindest people ever. I don't have regrets.

Anyway, that's the story. Brush your teeth and get to bed. You have school in the morning.