





THE RAINBOW'S SHADOW

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FOREWORD

By Clayton Williams

The time and place of Jessica McClure's struggle perhaps helped save her.

Rescuers, through their strength and spirit, combined to create a formidable structure of heroic feats. Indeed, the work of these men and women combined at a time when so much in West Texas seemed impossible.

For the media, it was easy to paint the picture of West Texas as a desolate place where little more existed than a few gruff, foul-mouth volunteers brought to tears at the thought of Baby Jessica trapped in a well. It was quick, easy work to paint the picture as a struggle of men and women on the brink of collapse.

But that's the picture the world saw when its media armed with cameras and microphones and stormed the backyard of Ray and Maxine Sprague. They planted themselves against the fence like children pressing faces and palms against a pet shop window.

The people in the Permian Basin of West Texas—it may be said—did not face struggle though the story was printed in such a way. It's just that they did not know the struggle they were living. Out here, life is waking in the morning to do what others might consider struggle.

To West Texans, it's life.

The boom and bust time of the mid-1980s were a part of life—part of getting up in the morning. And so it was then that when a little girl fell in a well, men and women responded the way they would every day—waking up to

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live life.

More than anything, the rescue of Jessica McClure itself represented nothing.

It was a culmination of people, resources, effort, and spirit to do one thing. Saving a little girl is a feat likely considered among the most pride-filled moments in many of the lives of the men and women involved in the rescue. And it should be so.

What came after is merely a byproduct.

What we learned and did not learn in those days following the rescue of Jessica McClure could not be foreseen. So much of what happened over the course of those 58 hours had never been seen before. The rescue did not form a template—and neither did the aftermath.

The men and women who were there to help save Jessica McClure did not need to examine the many facets of rescue management. They did not need to document every move on paper to forge their moment in history. They did not need to understand the complexities of the ensuing media spotlight.

They only needed to save a little girl.

Those who came after have learned much about the effects of causes. The events taught lessons to men who had learned much of everything they needed to know about life out here in West Texas. The generalizations of the men and women who helped save Jessica McClure could go on forever. And just as they have gone on since, with the media still coming around to develop stories on the famous rescue now almost 20 years later, the generalizations and clichés abound—or perhaps it's easier to write it off that way.

That's how easy it has been to write-off the effects of the rescue—even for the people here who have been offered little official information about after effects, shrouding those effects in a cloud of mysterious rumors.

What can be taken from the story is a lesson learned from well-earned achievement of men and women who could, just as easily, turned their backs and run.



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FAME is a food that dead men eat,
I have no stomach for such meat.
In little light and narrow room,
They eat it in the silent tomb,
With no kind voice of comrade near
To bid the banquet be of cheer.

But Friendship is a nobler thing,
Of Friendship it is good to sing.
For truly, when a man shall end,
He lives in memory of his friend,
Who doth his better part recall,
And of his faults make funeral.

—*Henry Austin Dobson*

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INTRODUCTION

It fell to Dr. Jerry D. Spencer to make official the cause of Robert O'Donnell's death. Training in medicine was hardly necessary. There were plenty of clues, including a combination of prescribed medications sifted from O'Donnell's blood. Alcohol was not a factor. Not a drop was found among the antidepressants, sleeping aids and painkillers.

Still, this chemical cocktail did not bring O'Donnell's body to lie cold and blue on a metal table for Dr. Spencer to examine. Nearly anyone in Midland, Texas, including O'Donnell's calf-roping, hard-living brother—who found his body slumped over the wheel of his pickup truck—could have told you.

The cause was clear, if not apparent.

The roof of O'Donnell's mouth had been torn to shreds, a black hole left by tiny pellets, scattered from the exploding barrel of a single shot .410 gauge shotgun. Although such a blast could easily cause what Dr. Spencer was left to examine, the true cause of the death of O'Donnell—husband, father, brother, son and hero—did not need a doctor. Everyone knew, but no fingers were pointed. It was death by toddler—a little girl who, indirectly and with no fault of her own, had the misfortune of falling into an abandoned well October 14, 1987.

For Robert O'Donnell, that day was the beginning of the end. For the dozens of others involved in the rescue that created a worldwide media frenzy, it was a life-changing experience. This is that story.



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“Above all else remember, fame is fleeting...”

—*From The Conquerors*



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CHAPTER ONE

“Those People Are Going To Need Help For A Long Time”

April 23, 1995. Robert O’Donnell was in the deepest of a string of deep funks. The fireman-paramedic turned asbestos removal technician had failed at everything he had done of late, including being a hero. From that lofty perch there was no place to go. No place but down. And, he had done that, too.

On this night, he slumped low in a chair at the home of David Poe, his stepfather, who 20 years earlier had married his mother in a gaudy Las Vegas chapel. At 37, O’Donnell was on his third career. His first—as a paramedic and fireman—had brought him the greatest rewards. It was the one he, perhaps, was best—and worst—at.

Hoping the worm had finally turned, O’Donnell was three days into a new career with Lubbock’s King Consultants, a low profile company specializing in the removal of asbestos from 1940s and 1950s era buildings. Asbestos found its way into buildings during the days when the fireproof insulation was touted for its safety and durability and before its cancerous health affects were fully known.

His fellow employees at King hardly knew him. He was just another face in the crowd, a new hire learning the ropes. Few, even among his supervisors,



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knew of his previous heroics. He was eight years removed from that balmy night in Midland when he descended a rocky hole to save a little girl's life, becoming for a moment a national superstar. Time had moved on and memories faded.

Tonight, O'Donnell was seeing the end of the line.

Television wasn't helping his mood much either. From the set at his mother's home, horrific images spilled into the living room. Three days earlier, a military veteran malcontent had declared war on his own country, exploding a rented Ryder truck in front of the federal courthouse in Oklahoma City—taking 168 lives in a flash, while calmly walking away.

The death and carnage spewing from his mother's television set this evening only sent his mood into darker recesses.

O'Donnell was resting hard and trying to feel at home in his mother's house. As he pointed to the collection of images flickering from the television set, his mom, Yvonne, recalls the words that followed:

"Those people are going to need a lot of help for a long time," O'Donnell says. In retrospect, it's obvious the tattered hero was speaking not of the rescued—but the rescuers. Everyone heard, but no one listened.

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CHAPTER TWO

Officers Descend on Tanner Street

October 14, 1987. Students in Miss Hobbs' fourth grade homeroom class at Midland's Lamar Elementary School wrestled their way through another math assignment—a worksheet of long division problems left blank awaiting answers. Along this side of Midland's south-central core, a police siren or two during the day would bring little or no alarm. For that matter, in any part of Midland a police siren would do little to stir a mid-morning classroom exercise.

While the somewhat subtle, quiet town of Midland knew its share of criminal activity, much of it took place quietly. The real crime would be left for Midland's less than respectable neighbor, Odessa. Students at Lamar were a mix of children from throughout Midland. Bussed from every corner of the city, some students were part of the upper-middle class. Some were part of the lowest in Midland. Hispanics mingled with white students as did blacks. On the cusp of adopting the previous generation's watered-down versions of their own prejudices, these students played among each other on schoolyards and worked side-by-side in classrooms. They ate together at lunch tables and did little to reflect the harmful prejudices that had segregated their community's



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school less than a generation before. Indeed, it took a court order and some serious busing to get this kind of intermingled community.

Wedge in a tidy corner of Kessler Avenue, a quick eastern turn from the major thoroughfare of Midkiff Drive, Lamar Elementary sits today in a quiet neighborhood of slowly aging homes. The school's open walkways did little to protect children from potential madmen—today an easily imagined occurrence and one that prompted Midland school officials to encapsulate their municipal learning facilities with brick structures in the mid-1990s.

The sirens of this morning, though, did not wail and fade. They came, growing in strength and volume. Miss Hobbs' students were allowed to watch from afar as the world sat adrift in a moment.

But, the teacher's grip on her class was starting to slip away.

9:30 a.m. Reba McClure, known as "Cissy," treaded furiously around her backyard just blocks away. The 17-year-old paced back and forth from a tiny pipe in the corner of the property, about 30 feet from the house and just six feet from a back fence that paralleled the alley.

"Jessica!" she yelled out, sometimes standing above the pipe and at other moments, leaning right into it. "Jessica!"

A slight whimper could be heard from 20 or so feet down the long, rusty shaft. Another 50 feet down was a pool of water.

Cissy ran inside, snatched the telephone and dialed 911. Lloyd Dunagan answered at the city's dispatch terminal.

"I just ran in the house to call you," Cissy told Dunagan. "I got to get back."

Next door—at 3311 Tanner Drive—69-year-old Maxine Sprague worked on a crossword puzzle and

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nursed the arthritic pain that woke her a half hour earlier. The panicked calls for the little girl sounded oddly dissimilar from the usual playful shouts of children. Maxine and her husband Raymond, 75, enjoyed quiet mornings over a pot of coffee with the cool West Texas breeze settling on their screened windows. It was normal to hear children playing next door at the home of Jamie Moore, Cissy's sister, who took classes at Midland College. Cissy filled in babysitting at the home during Moore's studies. All at once, Maxine heard the playful shouts that normally come from Moore's home turn into screams of terror as Cissy stretched her arm down the dirty, brown pipe reaching for her daughter.

"Oh my gosh," said Maxine, springing from her seat. "That's not the kids."

Maxine rushed into her backyard, still cloaked in her bathrobe. Her two dogs, Ish and Jojo, lapped at her feet as she ran to investigate. Peering over the fence, she could see a number of children around Jessica's well, some crying.

"Jessica fell in the well," Cissy hollered.

Maxine ran through a side gate, dropping to her hands and knees beside the well.

"Jessica! Jessica, talk to me!" Maxine shouted. The three-year-old daughter of Lawana Keller, 21, stood by as the woman screamed into the well. Another child, the 10-month-old son of 28-year-old Pete Starks, sat looking on without the slightest clue of Jessica's new-found trouble.

Maxine heard what she could only interpret as a giggle as she put her ear to the well.

"I think she thought they were still playing," said Maxine.

She waited by the well until she heard the sirens nearing. The chorus of sirens grew louder as other police vehicles joined whatever pursuit was taking place as the girth of the response grew. As it did, child



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after child in Miss Hobbs' class could only look at one another and let their imaginations race.

Patrick Crimmins, a reporter for the *Midland Reporter-Telegram* punched in early—around 5 a.m.—that Wednesday morning. Moments before Lamar students heard the sirens, Crimmins had just begun wrapping up his day. In West Texas, many newspapers in the 1980s operated as afternoon dailies, each gray copy tossed to doorsteps just before 5 p.m. That meant reporters, like Crimmins, needed to wrap-up stories by 10 a.m. so copy editors could get their eyes on stories for placement and so that presses could roll for that afternoon's edition.

That is serious work for a fresh reporter out of Dallas' Southern Methodist University who did not study a lick of journalism while in college. Crimmins left SMU with a bachelor's degree for Lubbock, where a shot at law school at Texas Tech University left a bad taste in his mouth. He lasted most of two semesters.

"I got there and I just hated it. I dropped out before the end of my first year," said Crimmins.

He left Lubbock for Huntsville, where he landed his first job to help fight the *Huntsville Item* as a reporter for newspaper upstart, The *Huntsville Morning News*. The *Morning News* was launched by a group carrying torches through the town square as they raged about their town's newspaper of record, the *Item*.

In the end, the *Huntsville Morning News* lasted only a year. Its last edition was published on August 1, 1984. Crimmins was tossed with the office furniture. He choked on his pride and began a job search, having decided the news business was in his blood.

In May 1986, Crimmins heard of a position at the *Reporter-Telegram* from his girlfriend who was employed by the *West Texas Business Journal*, known as the *BJ*—their offices located in a loft above the

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pressroom of the *Reporter-Telegram*.

Wednesday October 14 was a light morning for Crimmins. He hit the sheriff's office, located in the basement of the Midland County Courthouse with a trimmed lawn and a miniature Statue of Liberty placed out front. The courthouse was the centerpiece to what was once a perfect downtown. Crimmins moved on to the police station, then on to the Central Fire Station a straight shot from downtown along North Loraine Street. Nothing major.

Crimmins' *Midland Reporter-Telegram* took on the role not unlike many newspapers in similar sized communities. Controversy culled in its pages came largely from an occasional editorial, inciting a few liberals who would call in but gladly dismiss the chance to leave their names. Midland's democratic factions tend to rest publicly. The pockets of liberal voters walked quietly amid this largely conservative community.

As Crimmins wrapped up his day Wednesday and headed for the door, the police scanners posted in the newsroom caught his attention.

Some remember a call for a girl stuck in a pipe. Others remember it as a girl stuck in a well. However they heard it, everyone remembers the first thought that flashed into their minds when they heard the news of Jessica McClure.

"3309 Tanner Drive, we've got a girl trapped in a pipe," a dispatcher called out for the closest police cruiser and EMS crew.

Rick Brown, the assistant city editor, tapped on a keyboard at his desk. Life in Midland was not ideal for Brown. The chain-smoking editor belted out assignments and worked his magic between the line reporters and higher management.

Newspapers stick crime reporters with the police and fire scanner. It would have been difficult for the 28-year-old Crimmins to miss this call. His desk was