

Mitch was always falling down. Even as a child, he was beyond clumsy. An eight year-old version of Mitch once tripped and fell out of a Cake Walk. A *Cake Walk*. It's a circle. How can one screw that up? Frosting and pastry everywhere, with a red-faced Mitch in the middle and angry walkers-for-cake on the perimeter. This carried on well into adulthood. At his very own wedding he got caught up on the paper rolled out down the church aisle and up onto the altar. Paper! Somehow he managed to work a foot in under the edge and much to the chagrin of his wife, and all in attendance, tumbled his way off the altar, ending up face down in his Aunt Mary's lap in the third pew.

His general awkwardness likely contributed to his being shy, withdrawn. One might theorize that Mitch had low self-esteem but in fact, he just chose to keep a low profile in constant fear of hurting himself or anyone within his unbalanced gait. Although in one way he was introverted, in others he was gregarious. Over the years, his clumsiness closed him off from the outside world but he broke free nonetheless. He took great photographs.

He had an eye everyone in the small, mountain town of Evansville appreciated. What he saw was conveyed on photographic paper and left most anyone in awe of his perspective.

"I didn't realize how beautiful our downtown actually is," quipped the mayor.

"Oh, my, look at how the evening shadows seem to just dance off of Mount Sheridan," observed the village busybody, Alice.

"That guy sees things nobody else does," noted town historian, Gene.

It *was* true. Where Mitch feared to tread, he photographed. His images stepped in places others did not know existed. Reality was refracted to an almost illogical degree, always erring on the side of beauty. For such a clumsy fellow, he was poised beyond imagination.

He had a way with words. Not many, just enough, but always the right ones. His Spartan, economical approach to writing and speaking set him apart. Like his photography, what he shared was new, fresh and insightful. His shy nature was both at fault and to be credited as anytime he opened his mouth, everyone in earshot struggled to listen. It wasn't just what he said; it was also what he wrote. His letters to the editor of the Evansville Daily News were pored over as if they were gospel, the townspeople being his congregation.

His letters were never about religion, politics or anything controversial, especially himself. No, his subjects were always the same: boring, common. He wrote journalistic haiku. He infused excitement into that which most often was ignored and that, in addition to his concise style of writing, is what made it so... addicting.

For example, a few years ago he wrote a letter in which he discussed the merits of the storm drain system in town. Leave it to Mitch to research the subterranean section of Evansville and to convey it as so much more than a series of pipes. His words evoked an image of the roots of a magnificent Oak tree, stretching and straining out from the center of town, following the curve of the streets, diving deep under the oldest buildings, always meandering downhill toward its final resting place and depository,

the Webster River. It was poetry, no pun intended - pure, lyrical art. He was the champion of the underestimated and all who read his letters were better for having experienced them.

Mitch was often prodded to start a website, or a blog, or get on Twitter to share his work but he always refused. He said, "The paper is enough," and so it remained enough. He wasn't against technology. This was quintessential Mitch. Who knew why? He absolutely refused. It didn't matter – they *still* had his letters to the editor and that certainly sufficed.

In an average week, many copies of the paper were left on the rack, unsold in the grocery on Main Street. But on those weeks word got out that a letter from Mitch was published, never enough copies were printed. In fact, there was even a coffee clutch formed that met only on the mornings after the newest *Mitch letter* was to be read. It was called "MitchMocha." They knew to converge at 8 a.m. the morning after, at the library. There the dozen or so members would commandeer a few tables and break into small groups to discuss, finally moving into the conference room in back to workshop the article as if it were a novel they'd just finished and adored en masse. Invariably the discussion would spill over into the café and hardware store – some folk actually preferred to withhold comment until after they became aware of MitchMocha's rendering. Silly, perhaps, but very real and the effect Mitch had on the good people of Evansville.

But if one were ever to inquire into Mitch's personal life, up and abruptly would go his walls. His shyness was contradictory to how fluidly and easily he expressed himself through both Kodak and news papers. There were those who believed his incessant reluctance to reveal himself stemmed from the memory of some secret tragedy that he carried with him, like some somber chain that kept his spirit enslaved. Others thought he perhaps led a double life and all the public got was the silent one, the Clark to his Superman. The truth was quite boring, actually: he was merely shy. Nothing terrible had taken place in his past (outside of the occasional trip and fall) nor was he involved in espionage. He simply preferred to limit his expressions to film and print, nothing more, nothing less.

Regardless of his intent, his persona grew. As the rumor mill churned over the years, one bizarre story surpassed another. Frank, a childhood acquaintance, once, very drunkenly, swore to a barroom of twenty or so patrons that the reason Mitch was so reserved was his shame. Shame for what? For having a tail.

Yes, a tail. Frank was certain that he once caught a glimpse of a long tail that dragged behind Mitch on the locker room floor after a swim at the Y.M.C.A. He swore, on his dearly-departed mother's soul, that Mitch was unaware of his presence as he calmly wrapped up the tail into a neat bun, like a hair-do, and let it fall into the back of his trousers as he pulled them up.

Then there was the hairdresser, Francis' explanation. Mitch was from Mars. She spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to convince townsfolk that he was indeed an alien. Her premise, in short, was that no human being so private could be capable of such public elegance. He actually irritated her and if he'd enter a room or even a general area where she was, she would make haste to remove herself. Most people felt she knew she was wrong and was avoiding the unavoidable confrontation with

Mitch, but Mitch didn't seem to mind. People were too polite to ask him and anyway, that would be a personal question to which he'd never respond.

And that didn't exactly clarify *who* Mitch truly *was*. One might think knowing his family would offer some semblance of or vantage point into what made this guy tick, but no, it seemed even his own kin had no handle on him. Mitch was either indifferent to or unaffected by others and their often wild and rampant rumors. The fact that he didn't defend himself only flamed the fires of the mystique, the myth and the mystery of Mitch.

Everything changed with the collapse.

The Webster River began as a mere trickle high up on Mount Sheridan. The waters were used to provide power to the many mills on the slope. Evansville was once a vibrant logging town but those days were long gone and in recent years the borough had turned to tourism as an alternate industry.

In time, all over the mountain campgrounds opened. One cleared some timber along the river and revealed an area the stream had been diverted by what appeared to be an ancient rockslide. Instead of the water finding the path of least resistance on the surface, it appeared to dive down under a rocky meadow and emerge on the other side. An underground river, of sorts! Soon the water above this area was diverted around it, through a more logical depression, and rejoined its path down the mountain. As soon as they were able, the owners explored underground, where the river had run, and they discovered a cave.

Inside the cave, lining the lower walls and the floor, were countless, exposed crystals of a myriad of colors. When a flashlight shined across, it illuminated them and the light refracted, entering more crystals and so on until the entire cave was bathed in a rainbow of colored light. The ceiling, void of the crystals, appeared to move and dance in the ever-changing hues and tones of light. Even a single, child's flashlight could set this phenomenon in motion. It was unlike anything ever seen before and immediately everyone in town knew its importance.

Mitch wrote a letter in which he described the cave walls as, "...intentionally adorned by Father Claus himself with the most remarkable of Christmas displays." The Associated Press picked up the letter and soon, people from all across the nation were descending on Evansville to see the "Crystal Christmas Cave" in all its glory.

The town was reborn, wealthy and stable. In fact, to signify its rebirth, it renamed itself, *Evansville, the Crystal Christmas Cave City*. Even its website adopted the new name as its domain, *CrystalChristmasCaveCity.com*. And the tourists flocked.

Unfortunately, the owners of the campground had not foreseen the inherent danger in deviating the water from the cave, the same water that fed its structural integrity. In time, parts of the roof caved in. Small pebbles became stones became boulders until one day a shard of exterior light was visible on the ground. Small sections started to collapse and soon the danger was too great and the cave had to be temporarily closed.

The tourists stopped traveling to Evansville.

Then the cave collapsed.

It was as if the town had been an inflated balloon since the advent of the cave's discovery and someone had suddenly let out all the air. With no new faces around town, spending their vacation money, the citizens had only themselves to look at and despair. Evansville, like the cave, imploded.

Pete, the city engineer, inspected the damage and found that although the roof had certainly and completely come down, the lower walls seemed to be intact. The city council met and devised a plan to painstakingly haul away the rubble so as not to damage the crystals, especially the ones embedded in the floor. Then they would erect a structure overhead, a canopy, to keep out the elements. Perhaps they could line the ceiling with mirrors, increasing the volume and intensity of the light display, they speculated. This could be a godsend, in a way, and the cave would be even safer as a result. Imagine the increased tourism!

But the plan was costly and the town was broke.

The only way they could raise the money was by increasing tourism, but that was their Catch-22. Without the cave there would be no revenue to fix the cave, which was needed for increasing revenue. What could they do?

The decision was made to reopen the cave, or at least the crevasse left behind, so as to elicit more tourists. The hope was enough would return to put enough money into the city's coffers to build the roof, which in turn would drive even more dollars to Evansville. It was worth a shot.

But how would they be able to sell that? *Crystal Christmas Crevasse* sounded ridiculous. *Crystal Christmas Canyon* was no more appealing. They needed a creative way to spread the word. They needed Mitch.

Never before had Mitch been *asked* to write something but everyone already knew he would refuse. They had to somehow sweeten the deal, make it easier for him. Instead of writing a letter to the editor, perhaps he could publish directly to [CrystalChristmasCaveCity.com](http://CrystalChristmasCaveCity.com). No, he'd never do that either. What else?

"Twitter," suggested Pete. "Why, he could just push a button or two and voila! And it's restricted to 140 characters, so he doesn't need to say much, like usual." And so was born the proposal: Evansville wanted Mitch to Tweet to save the day.

Of course he declined. Who knows why? Mitch remained strangely opposed to the idea. *But this was his town!* One might think, as did all the citizens, and his loyal readership to boot, that he would not hesitate to do his part to benefit the cause. But again, this *was* Mitch after all. And the answer remained a shy and polite, "No, thank you."

"But Mitch, only *you* can find the beauty," pleaded the mayor. *Mitch was not moving.*

“Can’t you write something about how the morning light seems to just dance off of the crystals?” begged the village busybody, Alice. *Nothing doing.*

“But you see things nobody else does!” implored the town historian, Gene. *Nope.*

MitchMocha invited him to their coffee clutch but *Mitch was a no-show.*

Frank reasoned with him that if it had anything to do with his tail that now was the time for him to think of others and not of his freakish appendage. *Mitch acted as if he heard nothing.*

Even the hairdresser, Francis gave it a shot but as soon as she caught sight of Mitch, *she ran far away.*

All hope was lost. Everyone left Mitch alone. Dark days were surely ahead.

Then one, random evening, Mitch was eating in the old shoe store that had been converted to a diner. He had a plate of meatloaf with a side of mashed potatoes. His vegetable was peas and his drink was hot tea.

Nobody bothered him.

Nobody asked.

He sat there, enjoying his dinner and reading news online. It was very still in the store as well as inside Mitch. After he finished his tea, he ordered a piece of peach pie, ala mode. He enjoyed it immensely and had a second cup of tea to wash it down. Mitch gently pushed his pie plate to the side and opened a new browser window.

*The mysterious photographer created a Twitter account in the store to rebuild the cave.*