YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN
You Just Can’t Stay Very Long

Short Stories

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These are works of fiction and all characters, places and events are fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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The people of the Red Cedar River Valley are my people
and though I’ve never lived there, it is my home.

“...there’s a penalty for living and dreaming
for daring to think—
that’s the bullet you loosed
not knowing about self-inflicted wounds
and no places left to hide.
Homeward bound is a lonely trip,
home to where you fit—where you belong,
so simple except,
when home is a place you’ve never been.”
ONE

ALONG THE RED CEDAR

I was born in far western Wisconsin. It was a few years after the Great War ended. I came into the world in a small cabin near the banks of the Red Cedar River. A midwife who was my mother’s oldest sister attended my birth. She had come down from Canada. She was unable to prevent the hemorrhaging that would take my mother’s life. Such was the state of medicine in the 1920s.

My father was left with a newborn son and a 6 year-old daughter. He was also left with a lot of anger. He worked as a section hand on the local railroad. Section hand work was hard. I can remember
later seeing men trudging from work to one of the two taverns in town. My father would stop in the cabin and begin cooking supper. He would send my sister Avril to the tavern with a quarter and his beer bucket while he prepared a meal. When beer was illegal, he would send her to the secret location everyone, including the sheriff, knew about.

When I was older I’d be the beer runner while my sister would cook a meal. My father would collapse exhausted in a chair. Beans and cornbread were sometimes augmented with smoked fish and, when times were better, canned and fresh vegetables and fruit. Sometimes a neighbor would allow my sister to make lutefisk when she made a batch. One of them taught her to make lefse and we ate that potato dish often. Norwegian people are friendly and generous. Ladies taught Avril to make a great fish soup called fiskesuppe. She sometimes cried when recipes turned out bad on her own and I tried to comfort her.

When the money wasn’t tight we had some fresh and processed meat and canned sild. We had pea soup and at Christmas our father found the money for Avril to make krumkaker, rulle polse (meat roll) and rosettes. Christmas days are my happiest memories from growing up.

We pumped water from a community well but our father drank more beer than water. A neighbor had dairy cows and we were allowed to milk one of the cows in exchange for doing odd jobs around the small farm.

Avril was my whole world for as long as I could remember. I don’t know who took care of us in the early years but I vaguely remember different older women spending time with us. However, from about the first time I have clear memory, Avril did everything. I know
she washed and cleaned and cooked. And she wouldn’t let the older kids bully me. When I was little she’d tell me stories and make me feel safe.

The railroad work was killing my father and the booze didn’t help. At night he’d sit before the fire and we’d listen to this old wind-up phonograph. It was his prized possession. There weren’t many records but we could hear music and crackling voices from what I could only imagine were far away and exotic places. It always seemed to make him very moody. He spoke little. He would eventually turn off the record player and send us to our beds.

Ours was one of the few phonographs anyone had in our part of town. I found out later that our father had earned the device because he made numerous trips hauling things he wasn’t supposed to into and out of Canada. I know it had something to do with the man who sold all of the alcohol in town.

The cabin had one tiny bedroom and the main room had what served as a kitchen and living room for most of the space. My sister and I slept on what could best be described as cots in the main room. On cold nights Avril would call me to her bed and try to keep me warm. In the morning she’d get up to tend the fire and I could see her breath in the dim light. At night, my father would sit in front of the fire, or, in the hot months, in front of one of our four windows. I’d hear the far off train whistle and it was obvious the sound affected my father. He’d stare out the window and sometimes turn the phonograph back on. Sometimes he’d finish what beer he had left in his bucket or find one of the whiskey bottles he’d always have stashed.

Many nights he would go to the local tavern. Sometimes he’d come home stumbling with a loud, laughing woman. I was usually
awakened by the noise but I would pretend to be asleep. I could hear them laughing behind the closed door and I would hear sounds and noises I couldn’t figure out. The first time it happened, I wondered if Avril was awake and could tell me what was happening. I heard someone say give me that bottle and it was followed by laughter. It sounded like someone fell out of bed and there was more laughter. I looked over at Avril. In the darkness I could see her holding her ears and keeping her eyes tightly closed. It wasn’t until I was much older that I discovered what was happening.

Some communities and parents were always very diligent about children attending school. Ours were not. My sister and I attended as frequently as we could but our father never encouraged it. The house and garden needed to be tended and God help you if he thought you were putting “that damn school” ahead of what you were told to do. Winters were cold and we often didn’t have clothes to match the more brutal weather. We would go outside only to get the firewood we needed or make a hurried trip to the outhouse.

School was held in the local Lutheran church and the minister’s wife taught all grades in one room. It was about 2 miles away. Learning to read opened a world to me. The county had a library and once a month or so, a wagon would arrive from which we could borrow books. It was magic. In summer we couldn’t wait for our father to leave for work so we could pull out the books and read. Without the library books, we had little to read. We had a Sears-Roebuck catalog. Everyone called it a wish book and for us, wishes were about all we could do with it. Avril had a hymnbook she borrowed from the church. She would read it over and over as if it were a book of short stories. I borrowed a
dictionary from the school and I’m embarrassed to admit I used it like Avril used her hymnal.

On warm weekends the community would gather for a baseball game. The local team was called simply The Cedars and they entertained, and visited, teams from all the nearby towns. I loved the games—partly because my father was the pitcher. During the week he was just like everyone else, maybe just a little poorer. On Sundays they cheered his name and suddenly we were somebody important. He could really throw hard. I think the other teams were a little afraid of him because he could throw so hard but was also wild. He’d sometimes hit a batter and step menacingly toward the other team if they protested.

My father seemed always to be angry. Sometimes he drank and got kind of mellow. Other times he got drunk and even more angry than usual. The ball games were different and we lived for the reprieve.

At the games people were always talking about him going off to Chicago or New York to play where people were actually paid to play baseball. It was the one time I would see my father happy. The local tavern owners were the unofficial sponsors and would provide free beer for the players. Food would be cooked over open fires and women would bring covered dishes of food for all to share. Teammates would be pounding my father on the back and stories of the day’s game would be told, retold and exaggerated. It would be after dark when we guided our stumbling father back to the house. There’d be no phonograph those nights. He’d stumble toward his bedroom and Avril and I would talk quietly in the dark as he snored and sputtered.

Two things happened when I was about 10 that would change everything forever.
My sister left home. She was about 16. She had managed to somehow save $7 from babysitting and little odd jobs—enough money to head for Chicago. My father had been arguing with her often. I overheard him telling her it was time she got married. I can remember hearing him shout about this man or that man and how it was time she got a husband. I do remember him bringing some of his fellow railroad section hands to the house. I believe some of them were even older than our father. He’d make Avril go for walks with the men or sit on some old bench by the river. I think Avril cried herself to sleep those nights.

It seemed sudden, but now I realize there had been many angry arguments leading up to it. One day Avril told me she was leaving in two days. My father arranged for her to get a free ride on the train. The conductor was his catcher on the baseball team. Our father patted her on the back, wished her luck and walked away. I never had much money if any. It took all I had to buy the red ribbon I gave to her to wear. She squeezed it with both hands. She then hugged me and kissed me and I hugged her back. As far as I could remember, she was the only person who had ever kissed or hugged me. I think we were going to start crying when she turned suddenly and ran to her train car. I don’t know when I ever felt more alone. I watched long after the train disappeared along the tracks. I missed her so much.

That same year, the economy of the nation was in free fall and the worst of it hit our valley. Something called a depression was snuffing out businesses and fortunes. We had little of either but what we did have disappeared one Friday when my father returned from work in the middle of the day. All of the local workers had been laid off.
For 3 years we got by on money my father could scratch from odd jobs he arranged for each of us. He began hunting and fishing to supply food. I cut firewood and milked dairy cows for pennies. He sometimes drove a team of horses, and later a truck, for hauling milk, but the pay from all of the jobs was sporadic and barely kept us in beans and buckets of beer. I wanted to go to the county high school. A lot of kids were in my boat and the school allowed for a certain degree of lax attendance. Missing so much school made it hard to keep up and I guess it was pride that forced me to give it up.

I learned early that things could never be so bad they couldn’t get worse.

Around the time I became a teenager, 2 hunters brought the lifeless body of my father to town. There were whispers that he had committed suicide. I was even asked by the sheriff if my father had left a note. A note? He would have had to dictate it. He could neither read nor write.

I guess I just grieved for my father but maybe, I was only feeling scared about my future. My father rarely smiled and his conversations with his kids could have been mistaken for someone merely giving orders. My sister and I had both learned early not to cross him. However, he was the adult in my life—my security. I was a youngster, alone and on my own.

The year was 1938. I didn’t know where Avril was. I lived in the old cabin and survived on things I could hunt and fish with my father’s old equipment. I relied heavily on handouts from the local minister’s family and others who could spare anything in those hard times. It was rural Wisconsin. Firewood was free for the cutting and
gathering. I sold the phonograph and a few other things but they brought little money. Kind folks would frequently invite me for dinner. I was hungry often. Times were hard for everyone.

I had no relatives other than Avril and I had no idea how to find her. She had written for a time and twice included a dollar. However, the last letter I sent to her last known address was returned by the post office. I believe that my father was himself an orphan and from near the Minnesota border. I’m pretty sure my mother’s people were all from Canada. As far as I could figure out, I had no relatives I could hope to find. I really was on my own.

I lied about my age and got into the Civilian Conservation Corps. Men lived in tents and we worked 40 hours a week. We got paid $30 a month—most of which we had to send to our “family.” “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” the local minister said when I tried to enlist his support for my plan to enter the CCC. I think it was only after I began dating his daughter that he decided I might thrive by being far away in a labor camp. They agreed to be “my family” and hold the money sent home for me by the government.

Life in the camps was hard. We lived in tents and worked hard building fire roads and fire towers. Living in tents was uncomfortable and there was little privacy. We planted trees and fought forest fires. I stayed for the 6-month period and applied for a longer enlistment.

We weren’t always welcomed in nearby towns and the rules kept us busy and mostly out of trouble. The men gambled where it was allowed, or where they could get away with it, and we spent spare time playing baseball or reading what books we could find. It was after dark by the time we would return after work so there was little light to read
by. Boxing was allowed in some units and it served as a way to avoid more serious fights in disputes between men. There were bullies and there were thieves and scoundrels. However, I was usually safe, warm and well fed. I never thought of the Corps as family but looking back, I’m not sure how I would have recognized family anyway.

I got out of the Corps and returned to the only place I’d ever known. I caught on with a farm family. I worked for room and board. On weekends, I earned a small amount of spending money as a fishing and hunting guide. I rowed hours on the local lakes for rich men who seemed only to know there was a depression when it was time for paying the guy who rowed for them.

The next paying job I found was with Uncle Sam. I was drafted into the Army and for about the next half dozen years, I had steady work.

I will jump ahead to now. I’m old and I’m entitled. Hey, even my kids are getting up in years. My grandkids know I’m sad today. My kids know what’s on my mind. The young ones are something else—they’re a joy even amid sorrow.

I’ve just returned home from the cemetery. We buried my sister Avril today. Her husband had passed several years earlier and she eventually moved in with my wife and me. My wife Elizabeth is a lot younger than I. At times like this, it seems as if the whole world is younger than I. Liz is the one who insisted I write this. She said, “It’s the little people who have done the big things.” I think that’s the retired junior college literature and English instructor in her. I told her all I ever did was put one foot in front of the other. She responded that I had just found a theme if not a title.
Avril and I had found each other years ago in one of those miraculous episodes that just seem to happen to people. Oh, I’m sure we would have eventually looked for, and found each other. In this case, it just happened in storybook fashion.

I was injured during WWII. No, I’m not a hero. I never made combat. I was assigned stateside as an ambulance driver for a military hospital. I was sent to Chicago. I was hit head-on by a drunken driver on my second night on the job. Cars and ambulances were huge back then but reports said he was driving over 60 mph when he hit me. Seat belts were non-existent and I was severely injured. I would be in the hospital for almost 5 weeks and would have rehabilitation after that. I will always walk with a slight limp.

A nurse was making the rounds in my ward and stood and stared at me. She quickly grabbed my chart and grinned,

“Corporal, I order you to get well right now.”

The voice stunned me. She got closer and kissed me on my forehead. It was Avril. I never allowed her out of my life for the next half century. She married the young doctor she was dating and the two of them encouraged and financed my education. The GI Bill paid for a lot and they supplied the rest. I eventually became a hospital administrator. That’s as close to the medical field a grateful guy with a squeamish stomach could get.

Avril and I guided each other through careers, marriages and a torrent of kids, grandkids and recently, the perils of old age. We made a couple of trips back to the old Red Cedar River Valley. A lot had changed. The old cabin was gone but some of the foundation and its footprint, and that of the privy, still remained. We found our parent’s
graves and Avril told me what little she knew of our mother. We talked about our father and I think we both agreed to forgive him for not doing better.

We found a woman we had known growing up who was about our age. We were graciously invited to her family reunion where we made old acquaintances and sampled the old recipes of our youth.

Through it all, it was me and my big sister—putting one foot in front of the other. In the childhood years it was pretty much Avril and me against the world. Somehow, she made it a fair fight.

When I came in to see her in the hospital, she was tightly clutching an old faded red ribbon. She smiled. She died in my arms as I kissed her—just like that day she kissed me goodbye on the banks of the Red Cedar River. Some kisses aren’t goodbye kisses; they are “I’ll love you forever” kisses. Yes, through it all, it’s been a good life.

Reprinted from BUT I WAS JUST PASSING THROUGH
TWO

THERE WAS EDEN

Jennifer Margaret Kirtland. If I live to a hundred, I don't think I'll ever be able to think of that name without remembering the image of an energetic young woman hand delivering her resume' and letter of application to me. That was around three years ago. She applied for a position I had advertised using the corny and sexist description "Gal Or Guy Friday Needed." I think about that day a lot, and this particular day, it was an image I didn't want to fade away.

Jennifer Margaret Kirtland. I slipped into a small hospital chapel for a little time to reminisce about the person by that name, and my life since I first encountered her. It was a welcomed opportunity to get away from hospital noises and odors. I guess I was also going to try to pray. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d prayed but it seemed like the only thing I could do. Yes, I guess I was desperate.

If you forced me to classify what I do for a living I'd probably say I'm a consultant. I do a lot of computer work and can thank my father for most of my skills. He was the real deal—a systems analyst. I never had the ambition to get the degrees to follow him directly. I'm more the nuts and bolts guy you'd bring in to run a new product promotion or maintain a web site. Maybe the equally out dated term, jack-of-all-trades, would be more accurate.
For some reason, I've always been very good as an idea man. Advertising, promotions, public relations, web sites, employee recruitment, problem solving—you name it and I've probably made a few dollars dealing with it here in Northern Ohio. I also operate some very busy servers and provide a web presence for a number of clients. In addition to the sites we host, we also master a number of web sites. I’m also the guy who has a reputation for knowing how to write a proposal that will get the desired results. If you’re trying to get a grant for your program, I can write your proposal correctly, I can also be the guy who gets you organized and up and running for your project.

We do a lot of different things, and I find the variety interesting. I can also see where others might not. You really can’t know what opportunity walks in the door next. Some find that a little unsettling. I thrive on it. Need more? I have a good working relationship with a couple of local printers and I provide a kind of vanity press for writers who seek to self publish their work. I guide them through the steps and help get them ISBN numbers and bar codes. The printers and I make a buck and the writers get their works in print reasonably and with no phony promises or strings attached. I used to jokingly tell my writers to remember me when they became the next Hemingway—until one of them reminded me Hemingway was dead. I don’t make a fortune on the printing thing but the look on someone’s face when he or she sees her poems, prose or photos in print is priceless.

The "Gal Or Guy Friday" thing is most embarrassing in retrospect. It was my ill-conceived idea to attract an older applicant without, of course, appearing to violate some kind of age sensitivity. Maybe that's not too imaginative for someone who fancies himself an
advertising consultant, but I've been so disappointed in the people I've hired in the past, I was desperate. It's a two-person office—an overworked executive assistant and me. That's a secretary to most people, but it’s really much more than that to me. In the past two years, I have hired and fired four people in the position. A year before that I divorced an assistant—parting with a wife and assistant with the same court decree.

You might say I'm a bit of a perfectionist. Some might say an S.O.B. or worse. In any event, Jennifer Kirtland turned my little slice of the economy upside down.

I got run over that first day. To my surprise, she hand delivered her letter of application along with the thinnest resume I'd seen. I mentioned to her that the usual practice was to mail the material to the post office box. She replied that she "Googled" the address to show me how resourceful she was. I think it was a gamble on her part. Many employers would have simply rejected her efforts, but then I'd always imagined my operation to be out of the mainstream. I had to fight back a smile at the way she seemed so proud of her resourcefulness. I covered up by briefly glancing at what she'd brought. I noticed it only listed several jobs she had while at the university.

She looked at least 10 years younger than I. I was quite interested to see her letter indicated she was a graduate of The University Of Wisconsin-Stout. I knew of the school. It’s always been a well respected institution. It was once called Stout State College. My grandparents were from a little town called Colfax that is located near the university. My grandfather always had these great stories about growing up in the little town with its interesting Norwegian people.
Jennifer had moved to Northern Ohio, put down a deposit on an apartment and taken a job with a local company. I was familiar with the company and the fact it was swallowed up in a takeover. Its jobs were consolidated and almost all of its employees were laid off. Jennifer admitted she was running out of savings and had a lot of money tied up in a security deposit and a lease that required the first and last month’s rent up front.

It was late on a Friday. I’d already interviewed and rejected a number of applicants in the past 2 weeks and I didn’t relish starting another week as a one man band. Several labor intensive projects were due to be started and I didn’t like the idea of more solo late nights. I’ve had to stall a couple of projects and in a business that requires word-of-mouth advertising, that’s not good.

I’d been using a receptionist from a temp agency and about all I dared entrust to her were the phone answering duties and some mailings. However, I also didn’t like the idea of having to break in a person with no experience. Truthfully, had this latest applicant mailed in her letter, she wouldn’t have merited an interview. Several of the rejected applicants had some experience meeting the public in a somewhat similar business setting. I explained to Miss Kirtland that I really needed someone who understood customer relations.

She said, "One of my professors had a way of explaining customer relations. He said the customer is always right—but the boss is never wrong."

I fought to keep a poker face. If she got me laughing, I was had. Anyway, while Miss Enthusiasm had no business experience at anything even remotely related to what I do, she understood every office and
graphics program I threw at her. I asked her to sit at one of the Macs and process some photos I'd taken that day. She found the proper adaptor and was loading my photos from the camera in a few seconds.

"Make that one a 28k jpeg," I said and she was finished almost before I finished the instructions.

"Print a label on it that says test photo in Times font and make it blue."

She obviously had a good working knowledge of Photoshop, the old AppleWorks and the other programs I use. She also answered my questions about copyrights accurately. Half the people I’ve interviewed didn’t know the difference between copyrights, trademarks and patents.

To make my search for a reason to reject her more difficult, she had knowledge about web sites, servers and the programs one used to interact with them. She was good and could use both a PC and a Mac.

I tried a different scare tactic, "I work long hours. This is a salaried position with no overtime pay or fringe benefits."

I'm still relatively young myself, but more recent young grads seem to expect to start with a position and big bucks. Perky Jennifer responded that she enjoyed keeping busy.

I threw out a ridiculously low salary figure with the explanation that someone with so little experience couldn't expect to begin too far along on the salary scale. She winced almost imperceptibly.

"I'm sorry Mr. Steele, I was hoping for something closer to the advertised figure, but could it go up in the future if I prove myself?"

It was four o’clock on Friday. The next Monday I had hundreds of digital photos to contend with, a ton of correspondence to answer and several calls to make. Two fledgling authors also had appointments.
"When could you start?"

She kind of hesitated and then said apologetically, "I need to put some more money in my parking meter and then I can start."

I couldn't keep from laughing out loud and I raised the starting salary gambit slightly.

"We can start you on a trial basis at eighty percent of the advertised max. We'll see how things work out. I'll need your Social Security number and you'll need to fill out a couple of forms. Start at 8 Monday morning. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes sir." She almost radiated energy as she shook my hand. I explained about the employee parking lot and when payday would occur. I think she really would have started right then.

I watched from the window and caught sight of her heading toward a thoroughly beaten up automobile. She had the most buoyant lilt to her step. She almost strutted. Once behind the wheel, she sat the longest time and I couldn't tell if she was staring at the front of the building or just trying to start that heap.

I was beginning to think I'd made another impulsive mistake. Even I was beginning to doubt my ability to judge character. I'd been through so many executive assistants. And then there was the little matter of my personal life.

My mind flashed back to Mr. Warring's exquisitely paneled law office. I inherited his services and concerns from my late parents. He more or less came along with a nice inheritance and I guess he always felt obligated to impart some fatherly advice.

After my second divorce he warned, "Ted, this is the second of two very financially destructive marriages. For all intents and purposes
you are just about ruined.” He told me I’d kept my business but it was then basically just a name on a door and some equipment. “You've had to settle these marriages by giving up much of your inheritance.” He reminded me I’d had almost 8 years of a very successful business and all I had left was a business name and its reputation. He added that with one more disaster I’d lose half of that community property too. “You have no IRA and no savings. If you're ever planning to marry again you must allow me to prepare a pre-nuptial agreement. I advised you to do that before the last marriage. I know—you followed your heart—well, you've just about followed your heart close to bankruptcy.”

He was being a little harsh, but I believe he realized if he lost my account he wasn't losing much. He was trying to be helpful and I guess he just found my style kind of frustrating to stand near and watch.

"And Ted, you go through secretaries like one of my clients goes through day laborers. There is an adage in the law that an attorney who represents himself has a fool for a client. It would be no disgrace if you used a search firm to find your next secretary."

The Jennifer Kirtland saga began that Monday. She was quite the enthusiastic worker. She did have a gift for working hard and disarming concerned customers. I had to get her a key to the office because she was in the hallway waiting for me when I arrived every single day. Deadlines and appointments are important and I'm early for everything. I never once got to work before her. Every day she worked until I closed the shop down and usually stayed even when I offered her the chance to leave. I started accepting work I wouldn’t have had time for in the past. That translates to more money on the bottom line. Hiring Jennifer began to be a profitable decision.
Northern Ohio has beautiful winters and some big snowstorms. Schools and other operations are closed often due to inclement weather, but Jennifer must have thought she worked for the Post Office. A janitor once told me he saw her arrive well before 6 a.m. when a forecast had predicted a near blizzard for the morning rush hour. She greeted me every single morning with a smile and a mug of hot coffee.

I think Jennifer had about three outfits that were suitable for the work environment. Men who have been married as often as I learn to pay attention to little things like what a person is wearing. It's kind of a defense mechanism. The following week, she added another outfit and I casually mentioned that I would be taking her and a perspective client to lunch on Friday. She showed up in, what I guessed was a brand new dress. I assumed I'd successfully dropped a suggestion about being conscious of our image in the office because about once a week, for the next month, she showed up in something unfamiliar. I drove home one day congratulating myself on my tact and personnel skills. I saw Jennifer’s unmistakable rolling wreck parked in front of the Goodwill Store. On one hand I gave her credit for being thrifty and certainly she had an eye for good looking used clothing. I just wondered what people might think about what I paid my employees based on where they shopped and what they drove.

She had been with me about 3 months when I heard her answer a phone call one Friday and begin to talk in a frightened tone. It sounded serious. She came into my office with fear written all over her face.

"My mom has had a heart attack and needs emergency surgery now. I need to drive back to Milwaukee. May I take a few days off next week if I can’t get back on Monday?"
I've learned to act hard nosed with employees—and clients too for that matter. Giving inches really does translate into losing miles. There was something very sincere about her request though. I knew that she was still driving that rolling wreck. I later found out it enabled her to save money she could send home to her mother and younger sister every week. Just that week I had teased her that the junk dealer was in the parking lot looking at her car—probably thinking it was abandoned. She just smiled and said it was a vintage automobile and jealousy didn't become me. All of this was going through my mind as she stood there.

"Look, go on home and get packed. I'll go with you. We'll fly. That heap of yours won't make it past Chicago."

I knew she was afraid to fly and that's why I offered to go along. She tried to protest and I simply waved her off and said, "Get going while I make the reservations."

It was Friday and I reasoned I could come back later in the weekend and not miss any appointments.

All I could get was a commuter flight. It was rough weather and we bounced around a bit. We had one stop at O'Hare and we were off again for Milwaukee. I knew she was scared about the flight and very worried about her mother, so I talked shop with her almost all the way.

We eventually rented a car, got short-cut directions Jennifer could make sense of, and soon pulled into the parking area of the hospital. She got to see her mother just before they began anesthesia. We went to the surgery waiting room. Her sister, Melissa, arrived about the same time and I was introduced. She had the same scared look on her face as Jennifer. We had been warned that this kind of heart surgery would take a long time. A few minutes into the ordeal, the girls' aunt
arrived to lend her support. A few hours later, the two exhausted young women fell asleep leaning against each other. Jennifer's younger sister had her head on her big sister's shoulder and Jennifer had her arm around her.

Their aunt gave me a little history lesson, "Those little girls have had it rough."

She went on to recount how their beloved father, Tom, had died of a heart problem when they were little and how their mother had refused to even consider dating another man.

She said, "They had a great marriage and his death just devastated all of them.” She explained that their mother was very dedicated to her husband. He ran a small business and they had a nice house in the far western part of the state. After his death, his partners allowed it to descend into bankruptcy, leaving Jennifer's family nearly destitute. They moved to Milwaukee to be near family. She told me that their mother went to work in a restaurant and was still doing that kind of work when she had her heart attack. She had inherited a ton of expenses and her husband had little insurance. After he died, they had to move to a pretty tough neighborhood.

She paused to smile at me and continued, “Jennifer got that thin little scar on her chin protecting her little sister from an assault. She's a tough kid, but she got beaten up a few times in that neighborhood."

She went on, “Jenny didn't have much of a social life in school. I don't think she ever even attended a prom, a dance or anything very special. She worked as soon as she was old enough and gave everything to her mother so that they could move to a better neighborhood. Her mother worried so much about her taking the bus home at such late hours
from her jobs, but Jenny insisted on working. She went to Stout because she qualified for a scholarship and she worked sometimes 1 or 2 jobs at a time. Even then, she sent money home. Now she's helping her sister through college and I know for a fact she still sends money to her mother every week."

"It was a touching story and I smiled at the two young women who slept on the couch across from me. I was dutifully impressed and thought that maybe I’d finally gotten lucky with a hire.

It was three a.m. when the family was paged to meet with the surgeon. I woke the two sisters and told them the doctor wanted to talk to them. The two held each other and I followed. Thank God the surgeon had an exhausted but satisfied smile on his face.

"She’s doing fine. She came through it quite well. I'm very encouraged."

Jennifer just stepped forward and kissed the surprised man on the cheek. Melissa pecked his other cheek.

The tired surgeon smiled broadly and said, "We'll have someone page you when you can see her. There is a recovery waiting room on the 4th floor."

Everything went well through the rest of the morning and each of us managed to doze some in the other waiting room. Jenny and her sister came back from their brief but encouraging visit with the recovering patient. Jennifer insisted I go back in with her to meet her mother. On the way out I told Jennifer she could take me to the airport and stay with her family. I handed her one of my credit cards.

"You just stay until you're sure all is well. Your plane ticket can be exchanged for another later date and if they don't cooperate, just buy
another ticket with this and I'll deal with them. You can turn the rental in when you get to the airport."

Jennifer and her sister and aunt just showered me with praise and thanks for bringing Jenny home. We started for the airport and I guess I was feeling so satisfied with my generous and magnanimous self that I got a little carried away with the moment.

"Now you just stay with your mother as long as you need. We'll just call this sick leave."

"How can I make all of this up to you?"

I laughed, "We'll see how you feel when you see the pile of work that'll be on your desk when you get back."

She pulled up to the passenger drop off and I got out. To my surprise, she got out and ran around the car. She kissed me on the cheek. Without a word, she ran back to jump in the car.

Jennifer returned to work late on Tuesday. She came to the office at 4 p.m. with a great report about her mother.

The next day we settled back into our routine. My business was starting to take off again and the future looked busy and bright. Jennifer and I soon developed a pretty good working relationship and I began to give her a little more responsibility. She proved a good worker, but in the spring disaster struck in the form of some careless acts and a lot of bad luck.

The problems started with Jennifer somehow managing to delete an account on one of our servers. That’s most commonly done for non-payment, and in this case, Jennifer simply processed the wrong account. We keep back-up on all of the web sites we create and run but Jennifer
managed to delete an account for one of our other clients. For privacy reasons, we don’t monitor or copy these sites.

To say the least, it was very embarrassing to have to call a client and explain our mistake. That doesn't create a lot of confidence, but thankfully, the client wasn't too upset and hadn’t discovered the mistake yet. He had back-up files and I kept his business with assurances that it wouldn't happen again. Extending him a year's free service solidified the deal. We advertise our web hosting service, but word of mouth has probably brought us most of our accounts.

Jennifer was mortified at her mistake and I really chewed her out for her carelessness. I also docked her $25 a week until the debt was paid. It wasn't until I noticed she wasn’t bringing her usual lunch every day that I realized docking her that money was an incredibly cruel and thoughtless act. It dawned on me that she was probably budgeted to the dollar so she could send money to her family. I began planning to give her a good raise as soon as I thought it would be disassociated with her screw-up.

I usually took her to lunch every couple of weeks, or when there was a new project to discuss. I'd always enjoyed the time and I determined to start taking her to lunch every chance I could. I really felt guilty about my decision to dock her pay.

About that time, I was working to land what I felt was one of those rare breakthrough opportunities. In this business you have to go out and convince people they need your services. A noted area businessman had hired us for a couple of small projects for his son's fledgling political career in a neighboring state. It was local government type stuff and the like. He was paving the way for his son to step into the big time and
among other things; we did his web site and helped him with a blog. Because of the political nature of their plans, Mr. Bertram didn't want to use his regular corporate resources.

It was a great opportunity for my company to get exposure in a potentially lucrative field. The old man was so pleased with my work, he invited me on a deep sea fishing excursion off the Gulf Coast. While there, we talked about me doing a major project to prepare his son for an eventual shot at running for Congress the next time an opening developed.

Father and son each caught giant tarpon on the trip. The fish were huge and I had my trusty digital camera. I took a dozen great photos and we began kicking around the idea of using them in the son's upcoming campaign ads. Michigan is a state with a huge voting block of sportsmen and a half dozen great advertising scenarios almost wrote themselves around the photos.

There is a fortune to be made in political consulting, and this had all of the earmarks of bringing me into the big time.

And Jennifer Kirtland literally blew us out of the water. We had procedures we followed and she carelessly broke one of the cardinal rules. I have always insisted we back up important files and photos on a remote site or device before we do anything. She downloaded the photos and I'd asked her to process them into a series of styles and sizes. I was roughing out some magazine ads that I needed to get sent before a looming publication deadline. For some reason Jennifer returned the memory disk to the camera and proceeded to clear the disk, thus erasing the photos. Because of an earlier problem with our newest Mac, she had to use a back-up computer of a different brand. She had loaded the
photos to a file but had not saved anything to another site or device as she should've. It was just a careless shortcut. To her horror, they instantly ceased to exist when some kind of a glitch cleared her screen. She was stunned when she came into my office. I exploded. I hurried to her computer desk and the camera. Nothing worked with either.

There aren't many sure things in this business, but this was one of them. There are ways to recover files but nothing we tried worked. Something should have worked but it became clear those photos were gone forever. I wasn't pleasant to say the least. In the blink of an eye I lost more than a few photos. I lost a huge professional opportunity. Jennifer was going to make me look like an idiot in front of my biggest potential client. Prestige was disappearing into embarrassment.

I had to make one of the most difficult phone calls of my life. It was still within memory of the fiasco of her last big blunder.

Jeremy Bertram showed up in person within the hour. Jennifer tried to explain what she'd done but he stormed past her and into my office. He was almost shouting.

"I don't believe it—lost? Every damn photo? Just like that! One day you're telling me about some great photos and a surefire campaign and before I even get to see them, you tell me they're gone! What kind of Mickey Mouse operation are you running here?"

I tried to explain what happened only to hear an obscene tirade that ended with: "If you don't fire that girl you can forget ever doing anything with my company or anyone I know—ever! You need to act now and salvage what reputation you still have."

The whole photo thing had come together so smoothly until Jennifer's mistake. I had been hurrying to get ads prepared for outdoor
magazines and the like. I had to call each of the media outlets and crawl my way out of the contracts.

If I hadn't already decided to fire Jennifer, I was quite motivated to do just that following the humiliation of Bertram's lecture and the embarrassing calls to the media outlets. This was public relations work and that is one hundred percent about image.

I was too angry to confront her right away. I slammed my door and paced and tried to cool off. Yes, I threw some things around and yelled at the walls as if they were stupid people. After a few minutes, she knocked on the door. It was Thursday, near lunch, and I tersely told her to go home for the rest of the day.

I added, "I want you to come in tomorrow at five o'clock. I'll talk to you then."

She tried to talk to me but I guess I was glaring at her so intently she left quickly.

Yes, I admit I threw some more things around the office. There's something about looking like an idiot that drives a man to look like an even bigger one. We're obsessed by size like that. I was still enraged by the time I closed the office on Thursday. I had fielded one more angry call from Mr. Bertram. He was as angry as I was embarrassed.

He had summed up his final position, "Look, I'll give you another shot, but so help me, I'm taking a hike if that idiot is anywhere near your office and you're an idiot if you don't take my advice. Look, I could lend you any one of a dozen people to help you until you find a competent assistant. Just say the word."

He offered to look for some other outdoor related photos of his son and send them for me to fit into the plan.
I remembered that call the next day as I went over what I planned to say when I fired her. I wasn't nearly as angry as I was on Thursday. I had awakened Friday from a pleasant dream. I couldn't remember what the dream was about but I somehow seemed far more relaxed, almost like I had a peace about something. At the office I wrote out a generous severance check and placed it in an envelope I marked with her name. No decent employer likes to fire an employee, and I have to admit that by the time I was usually ready to part with an employee, the feeling was pretty much mutual between us. This one was different. There was something very upsetting about what I was about to do.

I looked at the clock at 4:15 and then glanced outside to the parking area. She was already parked there. You couldn't mistake that pile of junk she drove.

I said out loud, "For God's sake, she knows she's coming here to get chewed out and fired and she still shows up early. What do you do with someone like that?"

I sat and watched her trudge across the parking lot. We had gotten one of those spring snowstorms, and now an afternoon rain was turning it into a depressing gray sludge. The bounce was gone from her step and I fought off the imagination she was crying.

My mind wandered to the day she arrived at the office for the first time. I had other flashing memories of her already smiling and working at her desk as I arrived before 8 every single morning. I saw her eating at her desk rather than joining other secretaries in the building for lunch out. It was the same thing everyday—a sandwich or salad from home while she answered the phone or leisurely worked on an assignment while she was "off duty." Well, it was that way until her boss
started taking $25 out of her pay to cover the server mistake. She only drank office coffee for lunch after that until her debt was paid.

I tried to force myself to think about the blown opportunity, but my anger just couldn't take hold as deeply as it had. I thought about those days I treated her to lunch while we discussed a new client or assignment. I thought about how happy she seemed for my various successes—how she just beamed when I told her about some successful outcome of a project we had worked on together.

I tried to remind myself that I was about to enter the big leagues and she's holding me back with rookie mistakes. It should have been a powerful argument—it was a strong argument the day before—but it now seemed less than that. I had to put the idea out of my head that she really was just a rookie who was entitled to rookie mistakes.

Something just seemed to be missing. Her empty desk had drawn me to it a couple of times that day. I struggled to put aside the idea that something very important was out of place in my life. I had a kind of flashback to one of the days I was moody and kind of curt with her. I went out to lunch and when I returned she was hard at work. I found a piece of cherry cheesecake on a paper plate. There was a hand-lettered card that mentioned a fictitious Happy Bosses Day. It went on to state that if any happy bosses happened to come by they could have the dessert. As usual, my moodiness melted. She was always doing little things like that.

I heard a soft knock at the door and I tried to get back into my stern frame of mind as she entered. She was wearing her very best outfit. It was one of those she'd worn those times when she knew I was taking her to lunch, or a client was due to stop in. Though disguised as best she
could, it was obvious she had been crying. She stood in front of me and I thought I saw her lip and chin quivering.

I stared at the tiny thin scar her aunt had told me she'd gotten defending her little sister. I was in danger of weakening, and I forced myself to think about my task at hand. I mean, I was on the verge of being this high power executive and she was holding me back. She wasn't the tough kid or the confident young woman anymore. She clasped her hands in front of her.

I hurried into my prepared spiel, "Miss Kirtland, you really leave me no choice in this matter..."

Maybe it was hearing me refer to her as Miss Kirtland rather than Jennifer or Jenny—we'd been on first names since the second week—that got to her. Or maybe she knew I was about to fire her. She'd have to be pretty naive to expect anything else given what happened and all the words the office had contained the past few days. Possibly she saw the white envelope on my desk and knew what it contained. Before I could continue my message, she clouded up and the dam just burst.

She started sniffling and was making a concerted effort to stop it. "I'm so sorry, please, do you have to fire me?" She started sobbing and turned away from me, her face in her hands. It sounded like she was saying something about loving her job.

I melted. It was suddenly about something a lot more than business opportunities. Maybe I've been a meaner jerk at times in my life, but I hope I haven't ever been as rotten as I felt at that moment. I felt absolutely cruel. I felt like a sadistic tyrant—a bully picking on someone half his size to impress the other bullies. "Big man," I muttered sarcastically to myself.
As she stood sobbing, I suddenly recalled my comforting dream from the previous night. I instantly understood why I had awakened so contented and I knew what I had to do.

"Aww, turn around." I said and opened my arms as I approached her.

I threw caution to the proverbial wind. Bosses should not be touching their employees. For some reason, I didn't care quite as much about business and mistakes.

She turned and I put my arms around the sobbing young woman. After a few seconds, I twisted away slightly to get some Kleenex and I gently wiped her face. I held the tissue and wiped it across her runny nose.

"How can I fire you? Who else would ever hire a snot nosed kid from Wisconsin?"

Laughter was intertwined with her sobs and she pressed her face against my chest and put her arms around me.

I held her back slightly and said in mock alarm, "Are you wiping your nose on my tie?"

She started laughing more than crying and I gently wiped more tears away.

After a few seconds I said, "If I can't fire you, you're going to have to come up with a way to convince Bertram I really came down on you hard."

She looked up and smiled, "Can't you just yell at me real loud?"

It was my turn to laugh. Those words were the exact same words I'd once used when I was a little kid and trying to get out of a punishment. Over the years my parents would jokingly remind me of
what I said. It was a pleasant memory. I guess I was missing my parents more as time went on and her words evoked this pleasant memory from so long ago. I was suddenly aware of simpler, more secure times.

"I said the same thing when I was about nine and trying to get out of a punishment."

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Yea, I think they were laughing too hard to hit me. You can’t stay mad if you’re laughing."

We both laughed. It felt so good to laugh again.

She smiled, "Well my poor little body and I aren't for hitting either, so you'll just have to yell at me. A little."

I knew right then what I wanted to say and it had nothing to do with yelling or hitting. I threw caution to the wind for the second time in just minutes. That was a record even for me. I'm sure this was one of those impulses that irritated my lawyer but I went ahead anyway.

"I think there is one thing I could do to keep from dismissing you that everyone would understand."

She knew how to befuddle me. Eyes that were full of tears seconds ago now twinkled.

"Does this idea involve doing violence to my poor little body like your other suggestion to hit me?"

"No, wait, I didn't suggest anything. I was just telling you what I remembered when I was little."

"I swear I never knew you were such a weirdo. My mom always warned me about men like you. I have to say I’m surprised."

"Jennifer, I liked it a lot better when I was firing you."
She gave me this exaggerated hurt look and said, "And how could you even think about firing your best employee anyway?"

"You mean my ONLY employee!"

"That too. Ok, what's this new weird plan? Are you going to put me in stocks out in front of the building? Am I going to have to wear a dunce cap?"

I was suddenly nervous. The previous night’s dream came back to me and it gave me courage. She looked at me so sweetly and I took a quick breath.

"I could ask you to marry me."

I said it without having the slightest clue how she’d respond. The world paused for a second. The whole atmosphere changed. In a second she was kissing me and she began crying all over again. Her words poured out rapidly.

"I've loved you from the day I met you. I've wanted to tell you a hundred times—a thousand times. I wanted to tell you when you took me back home to Milwaukee for Mom. I wanted to tell you every time you smiled at me. I wanted to tell you yesterday and today but I was afraid you'd think I was just saying it to get out of trouble. Marry you? Yes, I will marry you!"

She cried and laughed, "We can even take my great car on our honeymoon."

We sat on the couch and necked like a couple of kids. We cried, laughed and we talked, but mostly we just held on to each other.

I told her about my dream that we were married and how happy I had been when I awoke.
"I couldn't remember the dream at first but when I tried to fire you it all came back to me."

She squeezed me and said, "I've been having that dream for a long time. Mine's been a daydream."

"How am I going to tell my attorney that I decided to get married again based on a dream? He's chewed me out for not having him write pre-nups for my other marriages."

"Let's go and get the pre-nup. Then you can tell him you're following his advice. I don't mind. I'm kinda worried that you just want to get married to get your hands on my cool car anyway."

"Why would I want that car? Is there some kind of world demand for rust I don't know about?"

I got a gentle punch in the stomach for my trouble. I asked her when she'd like to get married and added, "We'll skip the pre-nup if it's all the same to you."

She said sincerely, "Next week."

I was concerned about her family wanting a wedding and she got serious and told me that she and her sister had always agreed that they would spare their mother having to go through a wedding. She and their father had had an elaborate wedding and the thoughts of it were still very painful. She said her mother would never get over the loss of her husband. We talked about a million other things as we sat there.

We had lost all sense of time before I realized it was after eleven o'clock. I was going to take her to my home, in my car, but she insisted on calling her mother and sister before we left the office.

"It's so late Jen."

"Trust me, they will be happy I called. So will you."
I stood as she talked to her sister. "No, sis, it's much better than that, Ted asked me to marry him."

I could hear her sister shriek even from my distance from the phone.

Jenny held her hand over the mouthpiece and said, "She's gone to wake Mom. They were both kind of upset with you 'cause I told them you were going to fire me so I'll try to build you back up."

"Hi Mom, yes, Ted asked me to marry him and I said yes."

She paused and listened. Grinning mischievously over at me she said, "No we got all of that straightened out.... right, well he just yelled at me a lot and made me cry and instead of firing me he said I had to marry him."

I tried to get hold of the phone but she turned away and I called out, "Mrs. Kirtland, your daughter can't tell the truth. I never did that."

I managed to push the speakerphone button. "Mrs. Kirtland, we're on the speaker phone. Don't listen to your daughter, I've never yelled at her even when she needed it."

"I know that Ted, we've always had problems with her," she laughed.

Jenny tried to sound indignant, "Mom, whose side are you on?"

"I was on yours. Have you set a date?"

"Yes. Next week Mom. Ted has an account with the justice of the peace, he's been married like 9 or 10 times so he's a regular down there and knows what we have to do."

I yelled toward the speaker, "That's another lie Mrs. Kirtland."

Jenny's Mom laughed and said, "Jennifer, you'd better marry him before you change his mind."
They talked mother and daughter for a few minutes and before Jenny said goodbye she asked to have Melissa back on the phone.

"We're getting married next week Sis, can you come?"

"You know I'll be there for my big sister. How did he ask you? Was it romantic?"

"He was yelling at me for making one tiny little mistake like he always does. He has a terrible temper. He might also be one of those weirdos. He said he wanted to hit me but I refused so he just yelled some more and said I'd get fired if I didn't marry him."

Her younger sister was roaring in laughter and I just stared at Jenny, shaking my head in disbelief.

Melissa said, "Mom's telling me to get off the phone and let you get going. Are you doing anything special to celebrate tonight?"

"Ted's taking me to his place, I don't know what he's planning. I told you how weird he is."

I just groaned and heard Melissa say, "Well, I think I can let you out of the pact just this once if you need it."

"Thanks Sis, I'll call you tomorrow."

We were pulling up to my building when I asked her about the pact her sister had mentioned.

"Sis and I promised we would never sleep with a man until we were married."

"I'm sorry, I can take you home."

"Why?"

"Your pact not to sleep with anyone until you're married."

"Melissa let me out of the pact. Besides, I'm not planning on sleeping. Are you?"
The following two years were the very happiest of my life. The Warrings and Bertrams of this world will probably never understand people like us. If I were a boxer I'd probably always be leading with my chin. Jennifer was just Jennifer—enthusiastic, happy and caring. I'd been burned 2 times by marriages that were centered on money and sapped by my immaturity, but Jennifer was different. Maybe for the first time in my life I really discovered what it means to love. It’s like a cliché, but I think I really was thinking with two in mind instead of one.

We spent almost every hour of the day together and I craved even more closeness. We hadn’t known each other that long and our engagement was less than a week, but we made up for it. It was a little like learning a language by immersion into the culture. Others have said it before but I really wanted to be a better man.

She was the most frugal person I’d ever met. The two of us brown bagged it for lunch almost every day. Work was fun but for reasons far different from anything I’d ever experienced.

Jennifer really did make me a better person, but no one gets a hit every time at bat. I resigned the account with Mr. Bertram and his enterprises. He was neither pleasant nor approving. Behind the scenes, I created a web service unit called Id Promotions and put Jen in charge. Our first project? We volunteered to work for a young man engaged in a primary election campaign. He won by just 21 votes and I like to think we had to have swayed at least that many votes. His opponent was an ambitious young man named Bertram. On the surface it appeared that Id Promotions took its name from the psychological term "Id" and was really just an attempt to get a little experience in the political field. It might have. Then again, it may have stood for Idiot. Young Bertram
doesn't know his fledgling political career never got off the ground because of a couple of idiots and the sweet taste of revenge.

Clients just loved Jenny. Sometimes I found myself going to her with questions, and sometimes, I just tried to stay out of her way as she dealt with a client in ways I lacked the skill and understanding to do. At times, it may have appeared that she was in charge. I loved it. Business was good—so good that we hired another young secretary to assist both of us. I was calling the new assistant "Sis Friday" until Jenny finally said my joke had played out and I should call her sister Melissa.

And then, as Jenny explained it to friends, "We went and got ourselves pregnant."

I'd once convinced myself I'd never marry again. Two disasters were enough. If people had told me I'd someday be excited about becoming a father, I would have told them they needed their heads examined. Going into parenthood, with all of its responsibilities, didn't seem so staggering with Jenny to lean on.

Suddenly my day dreaming reminiscence was becoming a conscious nightmare. I came back to the present. The excitement of the first months of pregnancy had deteriorated as Jenny began having heart problems. I thought about the conversation Jennifer and I had had with her doctor this morning. Both of Jen's parents had heart disease and her heart was occasionally experiencing a frightening arrhythmia. Her doctor was all seriousness and business.

"Normally, we can perform things such as cardioversion and defibrillation during pregnancy but when we tried it earlier, we had difficulty with the fetal monitoring and the heart did not respond and convert. The fetal monitoring may just be a complication of having
twins, but there is some genetic history here that concerns me. I believe
we need to pursue this problem right now—aggressively. There is
nothing to be gained by waiting and much to lose."

All Jenny said was to make sure her babies were protected. She
called her sister and then she held on to me tightly. She was still a little
sleepy from the earlier anesthesia.

She'd always told me she hadn't requested to know the gender of
the babies but she said sleepily, "I lied to you. I wanted it to be a
surprise. They're boys, and they just have to be named Ted and Tom.
You have to promise me that."

I sat back in the cold reality of all of this. Instead of being in the
delivery room as we planned, I had watched helplessly as they wheeled
my sedated and scared wife away. She made me promise to take good
care of our babies and tell them how much she loved them.

She was rubbing her stomach and saying, "Just wait, you guys
are just going to love your father."

I could not have felt more helpless or despairing.

A month earlier I had discovered a book Jenny was reading. It
contained a story by Mark Twain—The Diaries Of Adam And Eve.
There was a passage underlined that had Eve praying that, when the time
came, she would be the first to die because she could not go on without
her beloved Adam.

It read: “Life without him would not be life....”

Jenny was still out shopping with her sister that morning, so I
had time to read further. I found another passage and I have not been
able to get it out of my mind. Twain had Adam deciding that it was
better to live outside the Garden with her than inside it without her. It
brought tears to my eyes. He had Adam saying at Eve’s grave, “Wheresoever she was, THERE was Eden.”

Thinking back to that day, I had tears in my eyes when Jennifer's sister found me in the chapel. She knelt in front of me and cradled both my hands in her own.

"I promised Jen I'd never tell you this, but the night after you hired her she called me and said she was in love—that she'd met the man of her dreams. You remember when you brought her back to Milwaukee when Mom had surgery? After you left she said you didn't know it yet, but you were going to fall in love with her."

I had to smile. It all sounded so much like something Jenny would say.

She continued, "She once told me that every time she told something about work to her diary, she referred to it as a date."

"Did she happen to tell her diary that I paid her for those dates?"

Melissa laughed and said, "No, and she didn't tell Mom either. She didn't think either one would understand."

I smiled and sat back on the chair.

"I wish I'd told her I loved her one more time."

"Don't worry Ted, she's really one tough person. She's a fighter."

She squeezed my hands.

"The only time I ever saw her cry was when Dad died—well, the only time until she decided to snare her true love—you had her in tears a few times before she reeled you in."

I couldn't help smiling.
She continued, "Once after she started working for you, she called me on a Friday night in tears. You had taken an old girlfriend on a long skiing weekend to Colorado and had Jenny call in the various reservations and cover the office business while you were gone. It wasn't jealousy. She was just heartbroken. She called and said she just knew she was going to lose you, and I made the mistake of telling her maybe she didn't have you to lose. I was kind of worried because Jenny never really had boyfriends or many dates. She was always working. You are her first and only love."

She paused for a second and continued, "When you took that trip, do you know she tracked the flight on the computer and didn’t rest until it was reported to have landed safely? Then she went and cried herself to sleep knowing you were spending the weekend with another woman."

I know Melissa was trying to cheer me up, but these stories were killing me. I figured she probably needed to tell them if for no other reason than to keep positive thoughts.

She continued, "The night before you were going to fire her was terrible. She called in tears. She was all but despondent. Mom and I were so mad at you. I had to keep Mom from calling you, and she even wanted me to drive her out here so she could tell you what you were doing to Jenny. If you'd have fired her, I think Mom would have taken the bus here to talk to you."

"I guess I really dodged a bullet."

"I think you did. You know, Jenny was always so tough about everything except when it came to you. We lived in a bad neighborhood and we had to be very careful. One day I missed the bus because I was
fooling around and had to walk home. Some boys stopped me and they were pushing me around and saying they were going to do awful things to me. I was really scared. Jenny just showed up out of nowhere. When I didn’t get on the bus she got off at the first stop and ran back."

Melissa paused and fought back her emotions before continuing, "Ted, she didn't even know how to hold her fists, let alone fight, but she tried. She stood there and challenged the boys. She got hit in the face and knocked down a couple of times. She got right up each time and her chin was bleeding and her face was already discolored. She had a black eye for a long time after that. But she wasn't crying, she just stood between the boys and me and tried to fight them. Luckily some adults came along and we got away. Kids taunted her at school about her black eye. They called her “Rocky" but she just ignored them like she was in some better world. It was amazing.""

She added, “I felt so guilty about missing the bus and getting her beaten up to protect me. I was crying. When we got home Mom was really mad and she took care of Jenny’s injuries. I was really scared. Mom bawled me out big time. She said I got my sister hurt and we both could have been killed. I’d never seen her so angry. She seldom punished us and really, Jenny never did anything wrong. Mom never spanked us even when we were little but I was the one always getting in trouble and she sometimes threatened me with it. I think she was so angry she didn’t know what else to do. It really startled me when she told Jenny to go get her hairbrush. I was shocked and started crying even harder. I was miserable. Jennifer came back a minute later and handed Mom a little plastic comb. She told Mom she brought her comb because she couldn’t find her hairbrush. Mom started to speak and suddenly she
was fighting to keep from smiling. Jenny just stood there looking so innocent. Mom still tells the story and we always get a laugh out of it.”

Melissa wiped a tear from her eye and continued, “Mom grounded me for a month. We never could go anywhere anyway, so that meant after supper you had to stay in your room and do homework. No TV, computer or phone. Do you know Jen came in my room every night to talk and do homework with me? She even brought her little portable radio. Mom got so lonely she let me off after a week. I’ll tell you a secret. I never did anything again to get in trouble or disappoint Jen—not because I feared getting punished but because I adored that girl.”

A message on the loudspeaker pulled us from our conversation, "Will the family of Mrs. Steele report to the nurse's station."

It seemed like it had taken far too little time since they wheeled her into surgery, but I had lost my sense of time. I was almost in panic. Melissa scrambled to her feet as I hurried out, tears unashamedly in my eyes. I tried to read the doctor's eyes as I approached.

Dr. Sedgewick offered her hand and gave me a broad smile. “We converted Jenny’s heart to a normal rhythm and she’s doing fine. The cardiologists are confident they have a permanent solution for the problem.” She quickly added, “And you sir, have two beautiful, if slightly premature, little boys.” How do you thank someone who has given you another chance at Eden? I stepped forward and kissed the surprised doctor on the cheek. Melissa did the same to her other cheek. Actions always spoke louder than words. It’s what Jenny would have done.
THREE

MR. LAFAYETTE MCCALL

I was rummaging through some old belongings from my youth. Report cards, B in English, C in algebra, A in geography. Funny, I thought, they taught geography in the “old” days. Maybe the world is smaller now and it’s not necessary to teach about it. I was finding nothing of much value. My wife and I were scrounging to find some things to contribute to the local high school’s annual rummage sale. I’d already found 2 baseball cards. The Internet says they’re worth about 3 dollars in good condition. That was a start.

Beneath some old sweaters that must have shrunk, especially around the stomach, I found my old baseball glove. It was tied up and tightly folded around an old baseball. That’s the way I’d store it in the day. We’d rub in a little neatsfoot oil and tie the glove up around an old ball or two to create the memory of a good “pocket” in the old glove. A very special old man had taught me that little trick among a bigger bag of lore. Next to my old glove was another one. It was even older than mine. It was a stiff catcher’s mitt and it too, was tied around a ball in its pocket. I knew I could never part with the gloves.

His name was Mr. Lafayette McCall. I met him one day after I played baseball. I was 14 and a high school freshman. It was small town America. I lived a short bike ride from school. Down the hill from the school was the ball diamond. We’d play pick-up games in the summer and in the spring, high school games occupied the grounds. Two or three old black men would frequently be in the rickety old bleachers. I knew
who one of the men was because I’d pass his house and see him working in his tiny yard as I bicycled to and from school. He displayed his full name on his mailbox, Mr. Lafayette McCall. His house was on the corner of Baker and Cooper. Cooper Street was my street and it was reserved for whites. Baker Street was one of the two streets in our little midwestern town that was “reserved” for black families. They were “Negroes” or “Colored” in those days. Baker connected Cooper with Warner—the street where the high school was located. When running late, I’d sometimes take the shortcut through his neighborhood. Looking back I realize that my safe shortcut was available to me but I’m not sure black kids could have enjoyed a similar safe shortcut through a white neighborhood. It was the 1960s.

I struggled as a baseball player. I struggled with everything back then including, but not limited to, passing school and understanding girls.

At any level of most any sport, speed is a key factor. I couldn’t throw with much of any speed. That ruled out pitching. My foot speed was probably worse. I smile as I recall a coach saying I could be timed around the bases with a sundial. Well, in baseball, there is bat speed. I wasn’t blessed with that either. I guess my strong suit as a sophomore was not many kids tried out for the team. My freshman year I was cut when 21 boys tried out. The next year they had the same 18 uniforms but only 15 players. Welcome to the reserve baseball team.

My junior year wasn’t as promising. I think over 25 kids were trying out for the varsity team and they were going to keep 15 or 16. I can remember it like it was yesterday. Mr. McCall and his friends were watching as the coach put us through drills. Everyone seemed to contribute an error or two as tryouts continued. I was trying out as an
outfielder as I was the right fielder on the reserve team the previous year.
I missed one curving fly and somehow managed to stab another high fly
after a long run. As I ran, the ball seemed to jump all around in my
vision but I managed to snare it somehow. The coach told the group that
he would also try some of us as a catcher since one of the 2 from last
year had graduated.

Batting practice was a disaster. They had the regular varsity
pitchers provide the pitching. They were fast and good. And they were
trying to impress the coaches too. A couple of them threw curveballs and
I was lucky to be able to hit even the straight tosses. I think I managed an
opposite field pop-up and several foul balls. I was pretty discouraged
after the first day. Tryouts were to last about 10 days before the squad
would be cut down to the allotted number. To make matters worse on
day one, I found my bike’s front tire flat when I emerged from the locker
room.

Since I was walking my bike, I took my shortcut. Mr. McCall
smiled at my transportation predicament and invited me to his tiny
garage. He got down an old bicycle pump and quickly filled my tire. I
thanked him but before I could leave he pulled out an old tub and began
filling it with water.

“Let’s check her out,” he smiled.

I smiled back at him. I lived with my mother and sister. My
father had died when I was about 8. I could remember him, and still can
today, referring to something to be fixed as “her.”

He submerged part of my tire and slowly rotated it. Eventually,
tiny bubbles began to float to the surface from the submerged part of the
wheel. He squeezed the tire and the bubbles increased a little.
“Valve stem,” he pronounced and added, “You’ll need to get a new tube eventually.”

He got an adjustable wrench and soon had my tire off.

“I watched you boys playing ball today—that is some pretty tough pitching.”

I agreed and said something about me maybe not making the team this year.

He concentrated on removing my tire from the rim and when it was off he said, “You need to impress the coach with a couple of hits. Hitting’s the ticket.”

I watched as he filled the tube with air and worked the valve stem around underwater. The bubbles seemed to be coming from the stem’s opening. He slowly submerged the tube along its whole length to check it and said, “Got any gum?”

“Sure,” I said and offered him a piece of my bubble gum.

“No thanks, you go ahead and chew up a piece real good. I’ll show you a little trick with the bike.”

While I followed his instructions, he took an ancient looking baseball from one of the cluttered shelves.

“A couple of those boys have nice curveballs but they telegraph ‘em big time.”

He gripped the ball with his right hand and showed me how a fastball is thrown.

“Now look here,” he said as he changed his grip. The ball was much further back in his hand.

“See, they load up their curve to get a lot more rotation on it.” He stepped back and showed me the delivery. He showed me how I
could spot the curveball early in the windup just by the grip. He showed me how to slightly bring my back foot forward and step into the ball with my front foot and hit the ball before it could curve too much.

“Try that tomorrow. And with the fastballs just try to make contact.”

He laughed, “But don’t do this when you make it to the Majors. They catch you doing this and they’ll put one in your ear.”

We both laughed and he said to give him a small piece of the gum I was chewing. He put the tube and tire back on the rim and filled it with the pump. “You’ll need to get a new tube soon but this’ll work for a few days.”

He took the chewed gum and tore it into smaller pieces and worked one of them around inside the stem opening. He took a nail and used the blunt end to force the gum in firmly. He worked the cap around the protruding gum and tightly screwed it on the tire.

He told me to get a tube and he’d help me put it on. I thanked him and left.

Two things happened the next day. My bike tire held air perfectly and I got 3 solid hits at batting practice. I don’t recall anyone else getting 3. Mr. McCall smiled when I waved to him in the stands. I stopped at his house on my way home and thanked him again for helping me.

“Got a minute?” I nodded and he showed me his old catcher’s mitt. It was even thicker than the two the team had. I got my first lesson on the fine art of catching. He had a few little tips that he said would make me look like I knew what I was doing. He showed me how to squat and move my feet to get in front of a pitch instead of just reaching.
There wasn’t much he could do about my arm but the next day I think I did OK when it came my turn at catching.

Mr. McCall bombarded me with little tips the rest of the week. He showed me how to read a fielder’s eyes during a rundown. The coaches had us practice run-downs every day. Once, I managed to read a shortstop’s eyes as I ran from the third baseman. As soon as I detected he had the ball coming, I pivoted around and raced safely into the base. Race may not have been the right word to describe my footwork, but I did slide in ahead of the tag. Fortunately, I never got the chance to run toward a fielder’s glove and “accidentally” get hit by a throw with my body as Mr. McCall had also taught me.

Well, I made the team. They decided to keep 16 players and I was the third catcher and second right fielder. I played for two years on the varsity but never achieved any kind of stardom. Mr. McCall taught me a lot of baseball on my frequent stops at his house. He taught me a lot that had nothing to do with baseball too.

My mother tried to discourage me from spending so much time with this old widower. Remember the era. I didn’t have many friends so there was no one there to discourage me. In many ways, I grew up in that little house on the corner of Baker and Cooper. He taught me a lot of the little baseball tricks I never played enough to ever use and a few things I’ve finally lived long enough to apply outside of baseball.

I am amused that some of the plays he taught me are now against high school rules in many places for safety reasons. He talked a lot about decoys. These are plays where the fielder pretends to be about to do something besides what he will actually do. An example would be an infielder who pretends like a throw is coming and the runner slides
thinking he’s about to be tagged. This would be used to trick a runner into not taking the extra bases that he ordinarily would have safely taken. These things don’t work if the runner looks at his coaches as he should.

In one of the few games I played, I once pretended like there was no play and I stood nonchalantly as an infielder relayed a throw toward me. The runner broke stride and slowed. The ball arrived just as the runner did and I attempted to swipe the ball and tag the runner with one motion. I think he would have been out had I not botched the throw and tagged the runner with an empty glove!

Another time I was filling in at third when a batter hit a real shot to right center. Many fields, like ours, were also used for football and had no fences. I remember the hitter was a big star and though I can’t recall his name, I believe he went on to sign a pro contract. As he headed around second and approached third, I pretended as if I was about to catch a throw. The ball was still in the outfield and he should have had an inside the park home run. Instead, he slid. He stood up with his coach screaming at him. He was confused and looked around before heading for home where he was thrown out easily. When he finally figured out what happened, he had to be restrained by his coach and the umpires. I looked up in the bleachers and saw Mr. McCall and his friends roaring with laughter. One of them pointed at me with approval. I felt 8 feet tall but remembered to leave the diamond with a ball bat after the game. Hey, the clown was a big clown but he eventually cooled off. In those days, the politically correct custom of teams lining up to shake hands hadn’t surfaced. Sadly, those are probably the highlights of my storied athletic career.
Mr. McCall came by his baseball knowledge the hard way. He once shared a scrapbook with me. It was about a man who’d played for 4 different teams in the Negro Leagues. Most of the clippings featured the exploits of a man whose name I didn’t recognize. The few faded photographs were familiar. Mr. McCall played under another name. He had run away from home at 14 to play baseball. He lied about his name and age. His girl friend followed later when he sent her money for the bus. He had been afraid the fathers would track them down and force them to return to Alabama if they somehow discovered their whereabouts. There weren’t too many Lafayette McCall’s in the world so he couldn’t play under that name. He went back to his real name when he retired.

He was a catcher and a pretty good one. He was also an accomplished hitter who, despite being a catcher, was a good base runner. Look, as long as I’ve been around, there have been black players. I knew vaguely about Jackie Robinson because I read a story in school about him. Mr. McCall had a hundred stories but none of them were bitter complaints about never being allowed to play in the white leagues. I know today, that the so-called color barrier really wasn’t broken when the great stars were finally allowed to play major professional (and amateur) sports. That barrier was only really threatened when black players began showing up on benches and bullpens. Even today, it seems in some sports that minorities are under-represented in coaching and management positions.

It’s a trite term today, but as I went away to college and later my working career, I realized he was telling me to play the hand I was dealt. I guess I’d always been envious, and maybe bitter, about not having a
father like most of my teammates had. Their fathers attended games and volunteered to drive the team in the makeshift carpools that such a non-revenue sport required. I was always riding with some of my teammates and one of their fathers. I envied them. I’m sure my mother loved me and she worked hard to earn money to support us. She had to be away much of the time and she was tired when she got home. I felt silly complaining about my immature hurts in the face of the injustices he encountered. It was a lesson I hope is still with me.

Mr. McCall told me about a cousin of his who was lynched in a small southern town because a 13-year-old white girl had been raped and murdered. His cousin was innocent, indeed, the murder was in another town and another man was arrested, tried and eventually executed for the crime. It didn’t matter. Mr. McCall’s cousin was singled out to be a lesson to all black men in the area. I always wondered how Mr. McCall could like me.

I once asked him why he helped me and he laughed and said I needed a lot of help. We talked a lot and he told me about his late wife, his kids and his grandkids. I even met them on a couple of occasions. They seemed bemused at him having me as a friend. His two sons were teachers and coaches in other cities. His daughter was a nurse back in Alabama. All 3 of them exaggerated how sorry they felt for me to have to listen to all of those old stories.

Mr. McCall and I talked about the mystery I found girls to be. And he told me about Wilda, the love of his life from his teens until the day she passed. She accompanied him across the country as he pursued baseball. They came to be in our town because that’s where the money ran out when the barnstorming team he belonged to folded. They didn’t
have the money to get back to Alabama. Pregnant, no car, and no money—all they seemed to have was each other. There was something that came over Mr. McCall when he talked about his wife. He missed her a lot. I don’t know, I was still pretty young, but there was a pride and now, I realize there was a poignancy that meant everything to him.

“You’ll know the one,” he would say. He assured me that someday I’d look into someone’s eyes and know I’d met “the one.” “They’ll make fun of us, they’ll make fools out of us and cheat and drive us crazy, but “the one,” she’ll be different. It’s in the eyes my young friend. Those eyes won’t lie. When you find her, you keep her and you treat her right.” I think he was giving me an order.

I went away to college. And no, there were no scholarship offers for someone who was never more than a benchwarmer. I made a point of stopping to see Mr. McCall whenever I came home. One by one, his old cronies passed. Funny, he never would tell me how old he was. I’d ask and he’d say things like he was old enough to remember when fire and dirt were invented.

I was well into my chosen field when my mother called me to report she had read an obituary for my friend and mentor. I flew home and barely made the funeral. His oldest son gave me a package he said they’d found in their father’s house. It was addressed to me and his son said they were going to mail it to me when they notified me of his passing. Yes. It contained a worn catcher’s mitt tied up and oiled with a ball in the pocket.

Now I’m older and retired. I sit in the local high school bleachers and watch the kids play. Mostly, I just sit at home with my wife and plan visits with grandkids. Time seems to be flying by.
I think of him often even though so many years have passed. My strongest memory of him is from my last visit. I eventually left him sitting in his back yard. Little did I know he would soon pass. He had been in a very nostalgic mood. His parting words mean even more today as I sit in my own backyard and the early spring weather makes me think of old men and baseball. He said, “You know, sometimes it seems like only yesterday I was 15 and sitting on a hill in spring, writing poems to my girlfriend…only yesterday.”
FOUR

GAIA
A Lullaby

So how do you dissuade a friend from suicide who is bent on accomplishing it? I think I’ve talked to every Chicago psychologist worthy of anyone’s recommendation. I accompanied my friend to several of them. So how do you dissuade someone? You don’t. If they’re going to change their mind they must do it. No one else can.

Gaia Malloy. Ok, it was chosen as a stage name. I knew her in college as Virginia Mallory. Virginia just wasn’t a glitzy enough name for what she had planned. Well, I was in college pursuing a degree when I met her. She worked in town and took an occasional theater class. To be exact, I actually wavered back and forth among several majors, but I eventually got serious and settled down. But this isn’t about me. Not really. While I played at studying, she sold expensive women’s clothes in an upscale boutique and worked as a model. Always in her sights were great careers in acting and writing.

Virginia—excuse me—Gaia’s dream was to become an actress. You know the routine. It’s been the stuff of dozens of movies and plays. My friend moved to LA (and back) several
times. We dated off and on but we weren’t too serious about any kind of relationship. She once described our relationship as “convenient.” Chicago is a wonderful city but not one that is best enjoyed or explored alone.

I eventually married a great woman I met in graduate school and I began a life that was destined to include a house in the burbs, 2 kids, a golden retriever and, most of all, a spouse I both loved and appreciated. I make a comfortable living and certainly have a good grasp on the brass ring, but again, this really isn’t about me.

Gaia and I became best friends if that’s possible for a man and woman and I believe it is. We kept in touch like brother and sister. My wife was not threatened, at least if she was, she handled it well. I shared Gaia’s letters and emails with her. When she called, she would tell Sharon that “The Crazy Woman” was calling her husband again. They’d talk and laugh a bit and Sharon would hand me the phone. An hour or two later I’d be hanging up and rubbing my ear.

Those were the good days. Gaia gave birth to a daughter over 5 years ago. She had been living on the West Coast and had managed 5 very minor film roles. We had sort of lost contact with her as our own life became hectic. We had our second child and we were exhausted every evening from our jobs and family roles. Gaia’s emails were not alarming or even very revealing. We had
no idea she was pregnant. Her child’s name is Clarissa and she greatly complicated Gaia’s life.

Clarissa’s father is married to another woman. He is in the entertainment business. To his credit, he dutifully, and without court order, agreed to child support. To his discredit, he pursued absolutely no role in the child’s life. He is an idiot. I’ve never been sure Gaia was quite up to being a single parent.

Gaia’s parents were always cold and aloof. Her father is a professor of economics. Her mother is a classical musician. Gaia was an only child and virtually struggled through childhood and adolescence by herself. They likewise took no discernible interest in their grandchild. They too, are idiots. This isn’t about them either. It’s about a woman with the courage to invent herself and forge a life for her child. And it’s about a little girl who has her mother’s eyes and her mother’s personality.

Gaia eventually admitted to us that she never wanted to be a mother. She was devastated. She had no husband and no career. She struggled at low paying jobs and scrambled to find childcare. She worked and tried to attend acting classes and casting calls. The casting calls never worked out.

I was as much a failure to help her as anyone else. Gaia’s parents were enjoying new careers in Europe and called only twice to offer their feelings.

We eventually convinced Gaia to move back to Chicago. Her emails and calls were revealing more and more of a desperate
and depressed woman. Her career seemed to be in hiatus but she did have my family and several old friends as a support system of sorts. Sharon was serious when she suggested Gaia and Clarissa live with us through the crisis. They stayed with us for the 3 weeks it took her to find an apartment and a job. Sharon and I alternated accompanying her to various shrinks and counselors.

It seemed to work for a while. She went through a few jobs and she seemed to have resumed writing. And then the darkness came over her again. She tried to “write” her way through it. Some of her writing was dark and pessimistic. Big surprise. She tried to write some happy and optimistic things. Her dark stories were kind of obscure and she seemed to leave much for the reader to finish in his or her mind. Her “happy” work dripped with a kind of saccharine and schmaltzy emotion that seemed beyond poignant and if you didn’t know Gaia—it seemed forced. Most of us responded with a kind of “gee, that was interesting” dismissal of her efforts. We were all busy with our lives and I’m afraid we were simply convincing ourselves Gaia was keeping busy. In truth, I can now see she was pouring her heart out.

She rejected every psychiatrist and psychologist she encountered. One day we noticed a change in her attitude. She’d always seemed to be on some kind of bi-polar roller coaster in the past. Now she seemed quieter. We were concerned. So were other friends. She invited everyone to her place for what she simply said was an announcement. We entered to see the now 5
year-old Clarissa piecing together a massive puzzle with a friend at the dining room table. Ever the precocious charmer, she quickly introduced her friend and went back to the puzzle.

Gaia had made a decision. She was moving back to LA. She wasn’t through with acting or writing and then she pointed to Clarissa and smiled. “Do you know what that child said to me at one of my lowest points? Out of the blue she said she was happy.” Gaia added, “We’re going west together. You see it finally dawned on me. With the way I was raised and neglected, I ought to know better than anyone, what it’s like for a lonely little girl. Well God damn it, that nonsense stops right here, right now. It’s Rissa and me. I’ll wait tables or whatever if I have to.”

Gaia found a job as a teacher’s aide in a private school near Hollywood. It enabled her to make some contacts. She is still waiting for a breakthrough. She takes her notebook with her and writes while she has Clarissa in her gymnastics and dancing classes. Her job allows her time off to read for parts and she has a line in an upcoming made for TV thing.
FIVE

IF YOU DON'T KNOW BY NOW

According to a story my kids like to tell, one of my former players met St. Peter in front of the Pearly Gates. The woman had led a pretty wild life and St. Peter was giving an occasional "tsk-tsk-tsk" as he scanned her record. Suddenly he perked up and said, "It's OK you can come on in. It says you've done time in Purgatory, you went through 4 years of soccer drills at DeMarr University!" I think it's a bit of an exaggeration but for some reason, the players think it's hilarious.

I'm almost 50 and still learning. I hope that's a good sign. I'm a teacher. Well, actually I teach a couple of physical education courses about coaching and sports administration here at the university. What I really am is the women's soccer coach.

DeMarr State is a medium sized school, but we play a tough schedule and have a hard earned reputation for a tough, aggressive and successful program in our division. We have a simple philosophy. Gender has nothing to do with success or failure on the field. Our women are tough and I insist on great conditioning and strict adherence to the rules and instructions. I don't recall ever seeing Bobby Knight or Bear Bryant putting an issue up to a vote. I do remember seeing them win more games than just about anyone else.

Among themselves, the kids refer to me as "Patton" or "The General." Some observers would argue that it's merely a takeoff on my
real name, George Pattman. They'd probably come to another conclusion if they followed us for a few practices.

Look, soccer is a different sport to coach. You can't just call time out and give instructions. The field is too big to always be able to yell something and be heard. On the pro level, you can't even reinsert a player you've substituted for. You need to instill your style and prepare your teams before the game. Discipline and teamwork are important in all sports but in soccer they are a sink or swim proposition. It's a low scoring sport. That alone, magnifies a mistake. Giving up one goal is big in my sport.

Modern collegiate soccer is a game of physicality and finesse. Preparation helps prevent injuries. It's also a game that penalizes fighting harshly. It's true sport in the old sense of the word sport. Coaching and discipline will control tempers.

What do the young women get out of this? They are offered the chance to develop self-discipline on a perennial winning team and they get to continue in the sport they love. Certainly there is some fame and recognition but I must admit comparatively few people attend many women's soccer matches. Mostly, they get a fine education for their trouble. DeMarr is an excellent educational institution.

Enter Lindsey Cole. I said I was still learning and Lindsey Cole became one of my better teachers. She was always on target to graduate. She had an excellent GPA and an ambition for graduate school in psychology. That in itself is not unusual. All of our players graduate. If they're not on track every year, they're removed from the team until they are. And they all have ambition.
She was also one of my best defensive players. However, none of that tells the real story. This really isn't about soccer. Like most things when Lindy Cole was around, soccer was just a factor in a larger drama that was always unfolding.

We got her out of a medium sized city in Pennsylvania. Schools our size, and in our division, often concentrate on local players and someone has to be an unusual talent if she's recruited more than one state away. We try to attract some of the great foreign players available. However, recruiting budgets are tight and our northern climate might also tend to discourage some of the available talent from warm weather areas where soccer thrives. In her case, one of my assistants, Debbie Ireland, was from Pennsylvania and had been tipped off about a promising young player not far from her hometown.

Debbie and my other assistant, René Reese, did most of the recruiting and a lot of coaching and counseling for us. That served a lot of purposes. René was as much a trainer as a coach. Young women seem as prone to serious knee injuries as their male counterparts, if not more. René is excellent at what she does.

Debbie was good at what she did too. She was an excellent judge of talent. She's been a competitive collegiate female athlete. Obviously I have not. I always knew I'd lose her to a larger school or a head coaching position. It happened after Lindy's first year and I miss her.

Both assistants are personable and persuasive women. They’re the kind of role models you'd like for your daughter. You have to win over parents while you try to win over good recruits. A bonus in having an assistant do all the recruiting insures that no one arrives thinking they
have been guaranteed a starting position. An assistant can't promise anything like that.

The biggest advantage to having Debbie and René on the staff is they are not me. I doubt if my demanding personality would sway many recruits without Debbie and René. I honestly believe I am fair with my players, but I'm not the pat on the back type. That's mostly the assistant’s role. It's not good cop-bad cop stuff—at least not intentionally. I push them to do their best and that starts the day they arrive. Give me some more time and I'm sure I could come up with more reasons for her to do the recruiting.

Lindsey Cole often displayed potential championship level talent in high school. She played hard and smart, but she also had a reputation for sometimes coming up short in games.

Debbie said it wasn't like choking in big games or folding under pressure. She was selected the MVP of her state tournament finals as a junior and almost single-handedly carried her team to the finals where they won. Other times, she sometimes became invisible in a game—almost preoccupied at times.

They lost in the first round of their tournament her senior year to a team they had beaten easily during the season. Lindy was outplayed throughout the game. That probably made her available to schools in our division, rather than others.

Debbie convinced me she was worth the risk. She felt a coach with my confrontational style and no nonsense rules might be just what she needed. I met her for the first time when she arrived on campus. She had almost a passionless, icy look and I wrote it off as shyness.

A practice early in our season brought me to a confrontation of
sorts with Lindy—although a true confrontation probably needs two active participants. She arrived 10 minutes late to practice along with two upper class players. They offered a believable but, none-the-less, unacceptable excuse about a long line at the bookstore to get a required text for an early class the next day.

By the looks on their faces, I knew the two juniors were expecting just what they got. Carrie and Madison had seen other players run afoul of this firm team rule. Lindy seemed to just shrink away, almost hiding behind her errant teammates. I suspect the older players had warned her what they faced. Seeing Lindy backing away was my signal to seek her out face to face as I finished my tirade. I chewed them out big time.

"Great job of leadership ladies. You're breaking in a freshman real nice. And am I supposed to think I can count on you during a game when you can't even get to practice on time?"

I turned to the younger player, “You're not in high school anymore Miss Cole. That cushy life is over. This isn’t a girl’s soccer camp—this is women’s college soccer. Your mom and dad aren't going to be able to protect you from the mean old coach. You won't be the first freshman who didn't make the cut in our program. At this level you're expected to get your job done on your own.”

I was on a roll, "Every second counts and each and every rule has a purpose. Look at what your disregard for rules is costing your own teammates. Go ahead, look at them. They’re running because of your disregard for them. They should be working on their stretching and their skills but three thoughtless and selfish people have hurt their team and their teammates!"
If my approach sounds a little harsh, ask a man who's been on a good (read: winning) male sports team what the coaches expected and what they had to say to people who came up short. Would you want me to deny the same opportunities to my team just because they are women?

The first half of my soccer coaching career was spent with men's teams and successful techniques apply to any gender. I don't like the General Patton thing taken too far. This is still sport. Anyone who compares sport to war is an idiot. It's not anything like war, but a lot of coaches have built some strong programs with military-like discipline and a little touch of boot camp. Visit a good women's athletic program. You’ll see the same mental toughness that marks the successful men’s programs.

Because teammates were late, I had the entire team running conditioning laps around the perimeter of the playing field while we waited for the tardy players. We called it running the flags. I had made some simple rules as clear as I could and I had instructed the older players to explain the consequences for breaking one of the important rules. Peer pressure has always been our greatest tool in maintaining team discipline. Players who had to run instead of practicing would privately get their point across to the offenders rather effectively. I was counting on the women who were on time, "counseling" our rule breakers. I didn’t invent the technique. It was there back in the Dark Ages when I played.

I assigned the three women to a manager who would supervise them while they "ran the stadium." Players have returned after graduation and we have shared a lot of laughs and stories, but to a
woman, each said the worst experience they ever faced was running the stadium.

A player who really screwed up on the team rules was assigned to run the stadium steps at the football stadium next to our soccer field. Football is our big cash generator here. Our stadium is far larger than you’d expect. One lap consisted of running up and down every aisle of the stadium. I usually assigned more than one lap. It was tedious and seldom had to be assigned twice for the same infraction. It was a penalty applied only for breaking team or training rules. If you didn't hustle or follow playing instructions, you might find yourself running around our soccer field, but not the steps. The steps were the trump card and reserved for serious infractions. Again, I didn’t invent it but I certainly benefited from it in my playing days.

My graduated players said the worst part was being separated from the team and losing our trust as evidenced by having a manager oversee and count the laps. One former player told me they all gave thanks we didn't have practice near the Rose Bowl. Our stadium is still big enough to get my point across.

I called the remainder of the team together for an improvised and short-handed practice while their teammates ran their steps. It was a good practice.

The three women were still struggling when I sent the rest of the team in after practice and dropped over to check on them. The two older players were running together. Lindy Cole was far separated. She strode alone, running with her head down.

I later told Debbie it seemed like Lindy quit on us after that day.
To say the least, her play became even more tentative. Debbie agreed. She said she was trying to communicate with her but she was very aloof. She added that she didn't seem to be very communicative with her teammates either. The more I got on Lindy the more she withdrew. I hate to see a person waste skills and Lindy was wasting hers. What remained was to find out if she was wasting our time.

We had our first exhibition game and she didn't leave the bench. She didn't deserve to. I couldn't ever recall not playing a player in an exhibition match.

The next week we had our annual alumni scrimmage. It's sometimes a competitive game because our grads will often bring in some ringers. I play everyone and later when I'm dining with our alumni players, I pick their brains about what they thought about our players and prospects. Not one single veteran could even recall anything about Lindy in the game. It was like she was invisible. I was beginning to think we'd made a big mistake in tying up a scholarship with her.

The following week ran hot and cold in practice. We were cocky. Our two exhibition matches were won by scores of 9-0 and 11-0. Those are ridiculous scores for our level of soccer and I tried to rein in some of the cockiness. We weren't THAT talented. We had three great days of practice before we had one of "those" days. The warm ups were ragged and careless and I was almost glad I had a chance to bring us down to earth.

We were practicing clearing the ball away from our goalkeeper and defending against corner kicks. I've devised several drills that require people to quickly move from position to position. I believe that players can benefit from playing positions other than their own in
practice. I think you gain some insight and awareness. Besides, in an emergency you might have to step into another player’s slot.

Everyone took her turn messing up and everyone got a taste of my anger and sarcasm. I was in rare voice and spared no one.

Even Debbie and René were exasperated by our play and called several players aside for a heated reminder of what we're about. I think I've corrupted Debbie because she was almost yelling at them. We reached a point where I guess I was looking for an excuse to blast the whole group and send them off early. There is no point in reinforcing bad play by repeating mistakes over and over. I normally practice longer when we're playing well. I once heard a professional golfer say he always went to the driving range more when he was playing well than when he struggled.

A regular defender fell kind of hard and while Debbie and René checked her out, I substituted Lindy. She'd never played worse—no one had ever played worse.

We acknowledge that freshmen will need extra patience but these were youth league mistakes. She blew three straight situations—literally giving away the ball to almost sure scores. Twice she was completely out of position—stuff we'd been stressing all day. She was rattled. When she managed to kick a ball straight to an attacker while looking totally lost, I lit into her and the team. I questioned her courage and her commitment.

"But why shouldn't she be a disappointment? Look at the great example you starters set for everyone. You win a couple of easy exhibitions and you want to call in your performance—you want to rest on your reputations. Some of you will get your resting done on the team
I wasn't finished with Lindy, "Pretend you belong here. Humor me—act like you don’t want to be the cause of the whole team running for the rest of practice."

I blew my whistle for the next play. I honestly think her teammate tried to help her with a soft approach. Instead of clearing the easy ball, she somehow headed it off our keeper. Our keeper dove after it in a futile attempt to keep the ball out of the net.

This is a tough enough game without scoring for the opposition. I tried to count ten to calm myself and got almost to five. You could have heard a pin drop.

I slammed my clipboard to the ground and said, "Everybody—ten laps outside the flags and then get out of my sight. If we ever have a day like this again, I swear we'll run the entire practice."

Debbie and I walked toward the locker room and she tried to console me, "We're really a good team."

"I'm actually pleased Deb. Maybe they'll realize they can't walk on water now. It's a lesson that sometimes costs a loss to learn. We may have gotten it cheap."

After the players all left, Debbie, René and I had a talk about Lindy. Debbie still believed in her potential and said she'd continue to try to draw her out.

"George, we've got some great kids, let me see if I can get them to work even harder to draw her out. You know, she was kind of a loner on her high school team. She did have these lapses, but they were nothing like how out of it she seems now. Maybe she's just a little overwhelmed by being a freshman and away from home and her support
system for the first time. Maybe she's having problems with a significant other. I'll really try to reach her. You know, I envisioned her being a starter this year. She had such great instincts and ability. Her coach was very laid back and I don't think she really pushed Lindy to be consistent like you're doing. I hope I didn't make a mistake selling you on her.”

I told her, "Debbie, what bothers me is she looked like she was trembling when I put her in after Marti got hurt there at the end. While you two were getting Marti up and walking, I looked at Lindy. She was shaking and wouldn't look at me. We're in trouble if she can't handle the pressure of a practice session. I can't do coddling. It's just not my style. What's she going to do in front of a noisy crowd in an away game? Is she going to fold the tent and slip away when one of the tough kids in this conference gets rough with her? She's going to have to grow up in a hurry. I'm not sure we should count on her for much of a contribution—at least not this year."

Practice the next day started with Lindy missing. We had our first real game in a few days and I didn't want to waste time running if, as I suspected, Lindy wasn't going to show up anyway.

I called my team together after they'd run for a few minutes. I could get no information about Lindy telling anyone she would be late. I started our warm up routine and asked Debbie to check the locker and the answering machine one final time.

I looked up and Lindy was hurrying toward the field. I asked her the obvious question and she could only stare at the ground. I had promised myself I'd go a little easier on her while Coach Ireland tried to work her magic on her. This seemed like such an obvious sign of disrespect toward her teammates and defiance toward the coaches.
I turned toward Debbie and said, "Please accompany her to the locker and if she has no explanation, send her home. I'll make a decision but believe me; I think we're beyond running some steps. An 18 year old shouldn't need baby-sitting. I think she's telling us she wants to be off the team and I'll be most happy to oblige. Get her out of here."

They left and we went on with an efficient, but subdued, practice. Our drills were crisp but obviously the emotional cloud of a teammate's fate hung over our enthusiasm.

No one likes to lose a player and as I watched my team, I second-guessed whether I'd done enough to reach Lindy. I calmed down a little. I try to project the General Patton image but honestly, these kids will melt your heart. I knew deep down I'd still give her a second chance if she showed us any kind of decent attitude. Most of the kids cut themselves from the squad early on. Most don't make it past the summer conditioning sessions. The kids we've recruited with scholarships generally find at least a financial reason to hang on. Lindy was looking more and more like our first possible roster cut among scholarship athletes.

We were well into practice when Debbie returned with a most serious expression.

"Coach, you need to go in and talk to Lindy and more than that, she needs to talk to you. She's waiting in your office. I don't want you to wait. I convinced her she can trust you, but I'm afraid she'll leave. Go now Coach."

I started to ask her for more but she cut me off.

"Right now, Coach."

The usually tough Debbie looked like she'd been crying and
could start again with the slightest provocation. I'd never seen such an expression on her. She'd also never given me such a direct order before.

I handed her the clipboard and started for the locker when our senior co-captains asked me to wait.

Caitlan Wells spoke first, "Coach, Lindy has a serious problem. Something is really bothering her, something really bad. She's really a good-hearted person, but none of us can get her to talk about it. We've tried. One of her roommates said they sometimes find her alone in the room crying. We know she's up late exchanging e-mails with someone almost every night and she sometimes gets real sad. Coach, it's more than homesickness or a boy friend. We were planning to come see you about her."

I looked around and other players were nodding and gathering around their captains.

Co-captain Kate Bennett added, "Coach, please don't kick her off the team. Let us help her. Please Coach. You told me this sort of thing would be my job as a captain. I think I speak for everyone—if you want to assign her to run the steps we'll all run them with her if you'll let us."

Others added their agreement and Kate continued, "We'll run after practices and on Sundays, Coach. Please give her another chance."

Intuition told me something else. Carrie and Madison were among those who were nodding in agreement about their troubled teammate.

"It was Lindsey's fault you two were late, wasn't it?" They both looked at the ground.

My kids are tough and they're not particularly gullible. It caused
me to think. Caitlan and Kate were in their 4th years with us and I'd
grown to believe in them. They were good athletes, but more than that,
they had character. Carrie and Maddie cared so much about their
freshman teammate; they silently accepted the ranting of their coach for
her. I promised everyone I'd do my best to be fair.

Lindy was in her street clothes standing in my office. An
official looking document was on my desk.

She blurted out, "Coach, I'm sorry I'm messing up everything. I
want to stay on the team but I have a problem. I just couldn't tell anyone
about it. I was late because I was talking to the prosecutor from my
hometown. You can check with him Coach. I have to testify at a trial
and he's been calling me to go over some things. A defense lawyer has
been here to talk to me also."

She paused for a quick breath and continued, “And Coach, I
have to be gone most of next week for court. I have to miss our game. I
can't get out of it. That's a subpoena he brought me. It says I have to be
there. Can you please give me another chance? I'll run the stadium as
much as you say. I'll do everything you tell me. I'll really try hard."

The eyes I was looking at were not those of a self-centered
athlete. They were those of a desperate person. I thought she was about
to cry.

I was taken aback. Trial? Testimony? It all sounded as serious
as it was and I had to ask the next question out of concern for her, but
also out of concern for the school and the reputation of my program.

"Are you in some kind of trouble Lindy?"

There was a long pause as she looked at the floor, very obviously
trying to decide what to say. She took a deep breath and looked straight
"Coach, my stepfather is going on trial for raping me and my younger sister. He's abused, raped and molested us since I was a little girl. On a good day he just screamed and threatened. On a bad day he'd get drunk and do awful things to us. My mother lived in fear and denial, but he went so far she couldn't deny it any longer. I mean, she finally saw him do something bad. The police have DNA evidence and a lot more, but I still have to testify against him. My mother left without telling anyone and they can't find her. Coach, I have to stop him. It's up to me. I'm afraid of him."

It was my turn to be silent. How does a game compare in importance to what this young lady had gone through? I almost felt guilty for being of the same gender as her tormentor. It was suddenly so obvious why she withdrew when I ranted and yelled. Oh God, I thought, the other day I said she wouldn't have her mom and dad to protect her from the mean old coach. I've even questioned her courage. I called myself an idiot and wanted to put my arms around this young woman, but I knew better. She's been touched violently and horrifically by another man—a man in whom she was also supposed to trust. It would be awful to give her the wrong idea.

I managed to say only a little of what I felt.

"I've been wrong Lindy. I just misunderstood how you were acting and reacting. I sincerely apologize. I should have been smarter and more compassionate. My yelling is just my way to make people play harder. I wish you could have somehow found a way to confide in me, but I can see where you'd see men as monsters. I bark a lot but in almost 20 years of coaching, I've never bitten anyone. In the future, I promise
you I'll listen. And believe me, Coach Ireland is the real deal. You can trust her. She wouldn't betray you."

I could see tears in her eyes and I added, "Before I came in here your teammates—every single one of them—said they wanted to help you. They asked me not to dismiss you from the team. And again, every one of them asked that they be allowed to run the stadium steps with you if I assigned you that penalty. They offered to run after practice and on Sundays. They know something is wrong. You don't need another chance; I didn't give you your first one. I'll make you a deal. Give me another chance. You get dressed for practice and we'll go out there together. You tell your teammates what you are comfortable telling them and I'll apologize to you in front of them."

I suddenly became conscious of a tear rolling down my cheek.

"Coach, you don't have to do that," she smiled, "you wouldn't be able to scare anyone anymore. Everyone thinks you've probably bitten a lot of people."

Here was this poor lonely young woman—still just a kid. She'd been hurt and abused most of her life and here she was trying to comfort me—trying to keep me from crying—trying to make me laugh!

I joined her in laughing and people who know me wouldn't believe what I said next. I told her if we had to, we'd forfeit our next game and charter a bus for the whole team to go with her to her testimony if she needed it.

She smiled and said, "You don't need to do that coach. I just hope I'll return to an undefeated team."

She headed to the locker room to change and I did what we big tough macho men do. I closed my door and fought back tears in private.
Ten minutes later I told the team that I'd made a big mistake and I apologized to Lindy.

"I wasn't much of a coach and certainly not any kind of friend and I am truly sorry. Yesterday I questioned Lindy's courage and commitment. I was just plain wrong. If I had her courage I would have kept my mouth shut."

I had everyone sit on the grass near midfield and I told them I'd been so wrapped up in being the tough guy I really hurt someone who didn't deserve it. I thanked the team for standing by their teammate and teaching me about loyalty. I told them Lindy might share some personal things with them, but that even if she couldn't, Coach Ireland and I knew enough to assure them she deserved permission to leave and take care of very important, very serious, business.

Lindy chose to tell her teammates of her whole ordeal. She went into details that would break your heart. Even an old dog with a loud bark found himself crying freely.

"One of my reasons for coming to DeMarr was it was the school that was the longest distance from my hometown."

She paused only for a second, took a deep breath and continued, "I have to testify in court against my step father. He married my mother when I was six and my sister and I lived in fear of him. Even as a little kid I knew what he was doing was wrong. Our mom worked at night and left us with this filthy man. He yelled and hit us for any excuse he could think of. When he was drunk he'd come to our rooms and do terrible things. He made us do disgusting things that we were too young to fully comprehend. To this day, I get a cold feeling when I smell alcohol on someone's breath. He tried to make us drink and he humiliated us. He
said we were bad kids and we were responsible for making him do what he did and we’d get in trouble and be sent away if anyone found out what we did.”

Suddenly she lost her stoic composure and started crying so hard it was hard to understand what she was saying. She stood sobbing with her face in her hands. Coach Ireland had already heard the story and she put her arm around Lindy and helped her settle down before she could continue.

"I was raped for the first time when I was 10. It was Christmas night and my mother was at work at the hospital and he was drunk. I was playing with dolls. I was still just a little kid. Sometimes he'd get drunk and tell me that if I tried to get away my sister would be next. When he was drinking, we'd just quietly go to our rooms even without eating because he'd always find something to get mad about. I'd hide in bed and pray he didn't come after us. I hated to go outside because I imagined everyone could look at me and know what was going on. I just knew I was to blame. My mother didn't believe me when I tried to talk to her. I tried to tell her what he'd done and she called me a liar. She didn't want to believe me and I thought I must have been just such a terrible person to deserve everything that happened.”

Lindy paused again to keep her composure before continuing.

“Once I had a dream where my real dad came back and beat him up for hurting me. I used to daydream that he'd come back and take us away, but when I got older I realized if he'd even just paid my mom support money for us, she wouldn't have had to stay with this man. The year after he raped me the first time, I was seriously thinking about suicide. Our gym teacher encouraged us to join the soccer program she
ran in the community. It was like she expected you to sign up, so I reluctantly joined. Soccer was like a miracle to me. Somehow, I discovered that if I played I could get away from the house a lot. I made the team and I was so proud of myself. I slept in my uniform and I'd wear it even on days we didn't have a game."

Lindy got more composed and even got everyone to laugh when she said she knows now that everybody made that first team.

"I should have known when I saw two dogs and a fire hydrant with uniforms but I didn't care. I did something. I was special. And I was pretty good. The girls all wanted me on their side when we had pick up games. Mrs. Crider was our first coach. She was so nice. She never yelled at us or made us run when we made mistakes."

Lindy looked over at me as a couple of my players made a sound like they were clearing their throats for emphasis.

She got very serious again.

"My sister is 14 now and this summer he beat up my mother and dragged my sister into his bedroom. I got home and found my mother sitting on the floor, her head bleeding. He'd locked the door and I pounded and banged. I could hear my sister arguing and crying. Mom wouldn't let me call 911 and I ran outside looking for help. I didn't care who saw me or heard us. All those years of hiding bruises or blaming them on soccer didn't matter anymore. I didn't care if the neighbors found out about us. I picked up some landscaping bricks and tried to throw them through the bedroom window—I was calling him names and was trying to distract him and get him to come after me and leave my sister alone. He owns a gun and I was really scared he'd kill her. A year
ago he threatened me with it if I ever talked about him to my mother again.”

She caught her breath and went on, “God bless the neighbors. I yelled that he was going to kill my sister and they called 911. There was a cop nearby and he came roaring up with his lights and siren going. He didn't hesitate for a second. He drew his gun and crashed the bedroom door open. My stepfather was passed out drunk in bed and my sister was sitting there sobbing hysterically. She was bruised and her clothes had been ripped up. Sirens were blaring outside. I won't go into details but they had her taken to the hospital. They promise me they got all the scientific evidence they need, but one of us still has to be available to testify. It's embarrassing and it's going to be awful to tell all of this in court and have him sitting there looking at me.”

She looked around and added, “My little sister is living with our grandmother in England and she's struggling to get her life together. She's trying to work out going to schools in Europe. We email a lot, but I'm not sure she'll be able to hold up to testify. She needs to get this as far behind her as possible. I worry about her a lot. She’s talked about killing herself if she has to come back. The prosecutor has been calling me regularly to make sure I'm ready. My stepfather’s lawyer has also interviewed me and he’s not been very nice. I just couldn't tell anyone. My mother just took off. She left. The prosecutor can't locate her so it's really left up to me to testify and I'm scared. If he gets off I don't know what he'll do.”

She paused and seemed like a weight had been lifted off her and she added, "So that's my stupid life story and I'm sorry I've messed up everything for everybody."
You'd have thought she'd just won a game or an election. I was so proud of my kids. Every player was crying and all of them were on their feet around Lindy.

It was the right place to end practice. I reminded everyone they needed to protect Lindy's privacy as best they could. I then tried to get the mood a little lighter.

"Lindy will be gone for most of next week. We're going to be thinking about her. We ARE going to welcome her back to an undefeated team. Right?"

They were wildly enthusiastic and they were cheering even as they were still wiping tears from their eyes. I concluded practice and gave them a humorous choice as we walked toward the locker room.

"Now you heard me admit some mistakes and get a little emotional. I have a reputation at stake. You can have a choice. You can promise to keep silent and forget what you saw and my admission about being wrong or you can run 30,000 laps."

I never did figure out who said it, but it got us all laughing, "You want us to start them tonight Coach Wuss?"

I think my coaching style changed that minute. You have to fear a bite before you'll fear a bark. Lindy did return to an undefeated team. And we stayed undefeated until the third round of the national championship tournament. The man who abused her will probably never see the light of freedom until he's hopefully too old to be a threat. I found out he broke down in court after Lindy testified. When Lindy’s sister entered the courtroom, the man told his lawyer to change his plea to guilty and after some discussion, the prosecutor and the judge accepted it. Her sister didn’t have to testify. He will serve a minimum of
25 years before he’s even eligible for parole. He will also get 10 years for using a firearm in the commission of felonies. There is no parole for that offense. A law professor assured me the man couldn’t even get a parole hearing for 35 years. Lindy returned to the team and acted as if nothing happened. The kid was a hero in my eyes.

The coach who had forgotten about such things as compassion and decency vowed to himself to never forget what he'd been taught. He often reeled his own temper in when he'd started one of his rants. But Lindy wasn't done with any of us yet.

Marty Weir replaced Debbie when she headed for a higher division team the next year. The kids took to Marty immediately. She had been a coach and recruiter at another good school and she stepped right in as my assistant.

For some reason, Lindy and I became close. Maybe I became the father figure she wanted. She certainly deserved a better one than me.

She especially hit it off with my wife, but here it was not a mother-daughter thing. They acted like sorority sisters when they were together. She confided as much to my wife as she probably did her roommates and her teammates. Looking back, I can see Lindy had become a part of our family soon after her return from her court ordeal.

All of my kids know that I have an open door policy and we frequently have players stopping by. My teenage daughter thinks Lindy should be president or something. My daughter is a vegetarian and Lindy and some of the other players were always toying with trying on the concept. They loved to stop by to sample the vegetarian recipes my wife and daughter frequently subjected me to. Lindy began spending her holidays with us when the rest of the team had gone back to their homes.
She spent a lot of time with us during the summer terms.

We won our conference and region. We had a great year, 23-2. One of those losses was in the finals of the national championship game, the farthest any team from our school had ever gone. Lindy blossomed as a player. I suspected there were higher division programs that coveted her abilities. Goalkeepers often get credit for shutouts and we had some excellent keepers. I believe Lindy was as big a factor as our goalkeepers in our shutouts. She was relentless.

As that season progressed, I guess I may have reverted a little to my old General Patton persona. Coach Weir sat me down a couple of times after I directed especially demanding practices. She made good points about me possibly being on the edge of pushing too hard. Of course mine was the age-old coach's lament about effort not matching potential. I think I first heard that argument when it was directed at me and my teammates when we disappointed our old football coach—you know, old school stuff again. Marty gave me a good lecture during the week we were preparing for the Mary Leconte College game.

You may never have heard of the school, but if you were a soccer coach, the name would be quite famous. It's an all women's school and they pride themselves on doing everything top notch. It's usually one of our toughest games. They were a strong again with a handful of top quality players.

I was on everyone the first two days of our preparation. The kids were dragging, but I was seeing progress. I imagine Marty Weir thinks she calmed me down for the remaining three days of practice before the big game. I'm sure her lecture helped.

After Wednesday's vigorous practice I taught my regular Sports
Administration class. I opened the door at home and was greeted by my smiling wife.

"Your co-captains just left. They stopped by tonight with a birthday present for you."

Michelle held a white box and laughed, "They had me in tears I was laughing so hard. They tried to be so serious at first and said they're worried that their play has made you far too tense. And they're so concerned about you they brought ME a present for your birthday. They said the whole team contributed in the hopes they can help you relax and not feel like you need to yell so much."

"They got YOU a gift for MY birthday—the birthday I won’t be having for over 3 months?"

"That's right and I’m supposed to wear it tonight."

Shelly reached in the box and displayed a skimpy, sheen nightgown that would make Frederick's Of Hollywood blush. We laughed every time we thought of the gift after that. Lee Ann Taylor is kind of shy but an excellent captain. No, this had Lindy Cole's signature all over it. She was starting to corrupt my whole team.

I had planned on another vigorous practice the next day and I went ahead with it, but I could not bring myself to yell at anyone. Every time I got upset, I caught myself and had to fight back laughter. I was starting to lose control. (We beat Leconte 1-0 in overtime.)

Lindy was elected co-captain her sophomore, junior and senior years. That was a first for our program. I’m fortunate we didn’t elect the coaches also—she probably would have gotten that too.

If was during the off-season after Lindy’s second season that we found her crying at our door one night. She had just been notified that
her mother’s body had been found. She left a suicide note and had been living in a homeless shelter. Lindy was devastated. She had not heard from her mother since her stepfather’s arrest.

Michelle, Terri and I flew home to Pennsylvania with Lindy. We paid for the trip and everything else. Maybe I was in technical violation of some rules about what a student athlete may or may not receive from her coach. I convinced myself the rules didn’t always apply to family. Lindy’s stepfather had sold everything he could get his hands on for his legal defense. And of course, Lindy’s mother was destitute when she died.

I guess that was the time we became irrevocably bonded with her. It was a sad trip and as usual, my wife was incredible. So was my daughter. She acted like a loving sister and I saw a side to her I was very proud of. She shared a motel room with Lindy and I think they became as close as sisters.

We met Lindy’s younger sister Sage. She flew in from Europe where she intends to live permanently. Lindy spent every spare minute with her and I think they came to a peace about their past life and what they needed to do in the future. Lindy later told us that she felt her sister couldn’t survive unless she stayed with her new life in Europe. Lindy was sad but Michelle was wonderful. There was a memorial service and before it, Lindy and Sage both listened intently to things I saw Michelle whispering to them privately.

I think our trip helped me put a lot of things in perspective. I developed even more respect for my family but I also began to feel that Lindy was becoming more like a daughter than a defender on my soccer team.
Lindy's junior year we went 18-5 and finished 2nd in the conference. We lost her before the season to an ACL injury that occurred in her off-season conditioning. It was a really bad injury and she spent the year rehabbing her knee and cheering for her teammates from the bench.

It was a rough year financially for her. Unlike the other ladies who received financial support and spending money from their families, Lindy earned her spending money and other expenses that weren't covered by her grant, by working on campus. Her knee injury greatly curtailed her work opportunities. She never complained and you would have thought everything was fine. She was granted a medical redshirt which meant we'd have her for a fifth year if she chose to stay.

My daughter Terri became even closer to Lindy. It was tough being an only child and I took a lot of pleasure at hearing Terri was helping Lindy with her rehab. We had her watching our practices to keep her in touch with the team and what we were doing. She had rehab instructions for her to follow on her own and in the weight room. Terri would occasionally give me a report on how Lindy was running and striking the ball in their private practices. I was really proud of Terri for being so considerate of her friend. I also was pleased to have Lindy as my daughter’s role model.

The best was yet to come. As school was starting at the high school, Terri treated me to a fashion show of her back to school collection. I really felt good about having a teenager who'd still allow me have even this small part of her life. She came out from her bedroom five times in outfits and Michelle and I were an enthusiastic audience.

"One more outfit Dad," she said and headed back to her room.
I looked up when she came back and her newest outfit left me speechless. She was wearing her high school's soccer uniform. She'd never shown much interest in sports and we had been very determined not to push her. Having a dad who was a college coach would certainly put pressure on a kid.

"I made the final cut today. It was all Lindy's idea at first. When she was rehabbing her knee she and some of the girls taught me how to move the ball. I'm not real good yet, but she says I've really improved a lot from the first day. Are you surprised? She said it was amazing how I've overcome genetic limitations to be an athlete."

We laughed at Lindy's dig at me.

"I'm flabbergasted. What position do you play?"

"Defense, what else!"

Lindy continued to become more and more like a member of the family. That could have been a formula for disaster with team chemistry; however, Lindy was so well liked by all of her teammates it didn't matter. Once she was again ready to go full tilt, I made a point of jumping on her case just like anyone else when she messed up—I may even have been tougher on her.

As things got back to what passed for normal, Lindy spent more and more time with my family. It also became clearer than ever that she had quite a self-image problem. I guess you'd agree with her description of herself as having a somewhat boyish figure. The more time she spent with my family, the more she shared her insecurities with us.

She once told us that she was teased a little in high school about her slim figure. I think you'd agree that she had a very pretty face. The further she got separated from the terrible times of those early years, the
more her great personality emerged.

My daughter Terri was already going steady at 15—much to my angst—and Lindy admitted she'd had exactly one "sort-of" date in her four years of high school. She'd done enough psychological research and introspection to know that she subconsciously may have been making herself as unattractive as reasonably possible without becoming too unpopular. It was a way of dealing with a fear of intimacy and betrayal. My wife and daughter began working with her about clothes and make-up. I stayed completely out of it. From time to time I’d still be commanded to choose between “this look” and “that look” on Lindy.

Throwing herself into athletics had also been a way to deal with everything. In high school, she had hidden from her abusive home life by attending every clinic and summer camp she was able to afford. She played pick up games between seasons. Her time consuming sport covered up for her lack of a social life in high school. She followed the same pattern at DeMarr. I don't think she had a date in college until her senior year.

She met Tim Martin in a summer school lit class and he asked her out. She said she woke up the morning after he asked her out and wasn’t sure it had really happened. The big date was on Saturday and she told us about it in advance. She promised to let us know Sunday how it went. I have to admit we both felt like nervous parents waiting for our daughter to return from her first car date.

She had told us her roommates were getting together to see that she was made up and dressed just right. She laughed that it was to be an emergency makeover.

She arrived Sunday while Michelle was having coffee and Terri
and I were preparing breakfast.

"Well," Michelle asked, "how'd it go?"

Terri tried to embarrass everyone: "Did he try to make out?"

"Terri." I interrupted and gave her my sternest father's look of warning. I need to have a serious talk with that kid instead of trying to play surrogate father to a bunch of gifted athletes who know more than I do anyway.

"I thought I must have been as boring as I am ugly," she started, and all three of us gently got on her about such a statement. She's not ugly and things are never boring when she's involved.

She was smiling though.

"He walked me to the door and said he'd had a good time. I guess he was a little nervous. I know my knees were shaking. He left pretty fast and I went upstairs to share the bad news with my friends. I mean, I thought the date went OK, but I don't have much experience to judge it by. He's really nice, but I couldn't put two sentences together. We must have set a world record for silence. I finally found someone who didn't think I looked like a boy and I must have been as much fun as a house plant to be with."

"There'll be other dates Lindy," I offered.

Terri chimed in, "Some guys are too dumb to know a good thing when they see it."

Lindy was not upset.

"Wait, it got better. While I was telling the girls what had happened, I got a message on the phone that a man had come to see me. I was kind of concerned and asked my friends to go down to the lobby with me rather than have a stranger come to the room. It was Tim. He
handed me a single red rose. He said he'd meant to give it to me when he picked me up but forgot. And right in front of everyone, he said he'd had a great time. Then he asked me to go to the play at the Fine Arts Center with him tonight! He said he'd meant to ask me earlier, but he was afraid I'd turn him down because he was such a dweeb on our date. I told him I'd had a great time and I'd love to go with him.

Lindy got the biggest, most wonderful grin and gushed, "Drum roll please. He kissed me. Right in front of the whole room full of people, I got kissed! My first kiss! After he left, I got teased all night and I loved every minute of it. I didn't want to go to sleep. Girls who dated a lot were saying things like they never have men bringing them roses and kissing them so romantically." She paused and laughed, "One of the girls said they'd all have to start keeping an eye on their boyfriends when I was around."

She looked like she wanted to burst. "So look, if anyone needs some advice about kissing or romance, I'd be glad to answer any of your questions."

Terri responded: "What should I do when a guy..."

"No Terri," I quickly interrupted, "you don't need any help, and you and I need to have a long talk."

Lindy was starting to corrupt my whole family. I was losing what little control I thought I had.

For most of the rest of the year, we lived in the Lindsey Cole soap opera. I kept coming back to one thought—what man wouldn't just thrill to be in her life?

Lindy and Tim became what people used to call an item. I have no idea what the term for a relationship is these days. The kids had their
spats and their very good times over the next few months. I heard about everything through Michelle. He was due to graduate early after the first semester and he had a job offer in the area and one in his home state.

Michelle confided in me that Lindy was having a very difficult time pressuring herself about intimacy with this guy she had grown to love. I begged out of the discussion because it was really not something the coach should be involved in. My wife disagreed and said Lindy really needed guidance from every source she respected. It really didn't take a genius to understand how a young woman who had been sexually and physically abused and humiliated, would find it difficult to trust someone enough for the next step in a relationship.

Talk about a soap opera! There were ups and downs to say the least. I found out from my wife that the star couple had broken up. A big part of it was Lindy’s insecurity and fear of intimacy and commitment. A bigger part was the fact neither kid had really experienced the ups and downs of love and relationships. Tim’s life hadn’t been much easier than Lindy’s. Michelle told me he had been raised by relatives—mostly an uncaring aunt and uncle. Neither kid had the typical adolescent experiences of dating, crushes and everything else young kids go through.

Tim usually attended our practices, sitting up in the stands. We had open practices but seldom had more than an occasional visitor. Boyfriends would sometimes attend but Tim was a regular. Local girls soccer teams sometimes attended and my players frequently put on impromptu clinics after practice. I said I had good kids.

For days, the entire team seemed off its game. The break-up seemed to affect everyone. Lindy was almost forlorn. At times, I really
had to get on her. I caught her twice staring sadly up to the vacant seat normally used by Tim.

I found out from Shelly and Terri that Lindy had said some joking “high schoolish” kind of things about dating and about Tim and other guys she joked about secretly dating. She was role playing like the high school girl she’d never been allowed to be when she was younger. Michelle told me later that Lindy almost seemed like she was trying to salvage her missed adolescence and crowd it into one make-up year. She had missed out on so much growing up in that abusive home. Tim had heard what was being said and he had probably no more experience at adolescence than Lindy. He stopped calling her and seemed to have broken off their relationship. There’s not much I can tell these young women I coach about much of anything outside of soccer. I could tell them a thing or two about the frail and proud male ego, but no one asked.

On the sixth day of this soap opera, I noticed three young women escorting Tim into the stands. One of them was my daughter. He was mildly protesting but he stayed after they left. Practice came to a stop. We’d been working on some passing drills. I blew my whistle and directed everyone back to the drill.

Lindy was running across the field toward the stands. I blew my whistle but she ignored me. Practice halted again as everyone watched Lindy kneeling on the bench in front of Tim. You could see them talking.

Suddenly they embraced and kissed. My team applauded wildly. The embrace and kiss lasted until I blew my whistle and yelled, “OK Cole, you’ve got 5 laps.”

I waited and as she pulled away only to kiss him again. I yelled,
“10 laps.”

I was about to up the ante when Lindy broke away and hustled toward the field. The mood was instantly better and we had a spirited practice. I have to say I wasn’t surprised to see Tim struggling to keep up with Lindy as she ran her laps after practice.

I later got the whole story from my wife and my conspirator daughter. Lindy told him she was sorry she had said the things she’d said. She told him she was just trying to be like all of the popular girls she’d ever known. She told him she cared about him more than any guy she’d ever met. Apparently, he told Lindy if he wasn’t careful he would fall in love with her.

My daughter said Lindy told him he should learn to be less careful. I, and the whole team, witnessed the rest of the scene.

The Lindy Cole soap opera dominated our practices and many of our conversations. The season went on and we were very successful. There were more ups and downs for Lindy and Tim but no significant breakups.

This looked like it wouldn't matter in this relationship because of events before the Standish College game. Everybody’s favorite drama looked like it had crashed again—this time irrevocably. We had been away for a week that included victories at Franklin Valley and Carson College. It was the longest road trip we make. Those games were part of a 3 game stretch that threatened our undefeated status. When Lindy returned with us to campus, she was told by friends that they'd seen Tim around campus with another woman.

One friend said, "Lindy, he had his arm around her and she’s really cute."
And then the big bombshell landed—teammate Anne Geary’s boyfriend lived in the same apartment complex as Tim and he told her the woman had stayed the last two nights at Tim’s place.

Of course Lindy was heartbroken to say the least. She wouldn’t call Tim and she refused to return any of his phone calls. She stayed in a friend’s dorm room to avoid Tim after she heard he and his “girlfriend” had come to see her. Her roommates had said the couple joked and laughed and teased each other like they were very close. I could only imagine how Lindy must have been somehow blaming herself. My wife had warned me again that Lindy was really struggling with her fear of intimacy. Most kids get a chance to fall in and out of crushes and true loves. For some it starts before junior high. Lindy never had those opportunities to know what such emotions felt like and she had all of this other baggage also.

My wife Shelly had tried to reason with me, "George, she's so conscious of her figure and then you think about what must go through her mind when her boyfriend puts his arms around her. I wish you could talk to her or maybe her boyfriend."

Of course I couldn't talk to either kid about that subject and of course, I'd end up feeling guilty about it. Now it appeared I had waited too long anyway. We coaches always talk about the team being family, but soccer coaches are usually dealing with middle class kids from very functional and supportive families. They weren't looking for surrogate parents. You can make snide remarks about soccer moms, but I wouldn't around me or any of the other coaches who have seen so many moms and dads who happily hauled the family members off to practice, games and those out of town weekend tournaments. I've met all the dads and step
dads of my players. To a man, they are just that, men—and dads. Lindy was so terribly short changed by two fathers and now even her coach couldn't be man enough to take a risk.

The next day, as we walked toward the field for the pre-game warm-ups, I asked Lindy how she was doing. You talk about the old stiff upper lip—she said she was fine but I knew better. I saw her boyfriend in the sparse crowd and he was with a very pretty young woman.

I'd have considered benching the old Lindy Cole. That woman would have faded into the landscape in the game. I had a hunch the modern Lindsey Cole was going to react like the champion she was. I was right.

We won 2-0 and Lindy was a holy terror on defense. It was 1-0 when she made a gutsy stop on a late corner kick. She jumped to head the ball away and she was pushed hard. The speeding ball hit her hard in the face. She quickly recovered and cleared the ball well out of danger. Standish had brought their keeper up in hopes of getting the tying goal. Lindy's pass sailed over their keeper and Callie O'Neill beat the defenders to the ball and scored a breakaway goal with seconds remaining. That put us ahead 2-0 for the win. Lindy must have been tortured as the teams shook hands. She quickly sprinted—head down and fighting tears—for our lockers the second her sportsmanlike responsibilities were finished.

The team walked with me.

One of our ladies said to me, "Coach, would we be kicked off the team if a few of us beat the hell out of some people?"

You know my answer and I'm sure you know I had to regret giving it. This kid and his girlfriend had the nerve to be waving at Lindy
as she ran by. What puzzled me was the fact I'd met him a few times and he seemed like a very nice young man.

We got together for our silent prayer and a few words from me. You would have thought we lost the game by some of the expressions in that room. I've had a lot of very special players, but I've never had one in whom everyone was interested. She was a combination of little sister and big sister—strong and yet somehow vulnerable. I know that doesn't make sense.

I headed for my sanctuary and waited. I was dreading having to see Lindy, but I also felt so much like a father that I was determined to think of something comforting to say.

About half of the players had changed and left and there was still no sign of Lindy at my door. I noticed that Kari Dean, one of Lindy's best friends, went outside and came right back in.

She was angry and I could hear her say, "They're still out there."

Lindy finally came into my office—her eyes still moist. She was holding an ice pack against the swollen and discolored side of her face.

"Why do you men have to be so mean? I really love him."

She looked up at me with her big sad eyes and whispered, "I've never had a boyfriend Coach. I know I must have done something wrong to make him not want to be with me anymore. What did I do?"

I started to tell her that maybe Tim wasn’t the person we all thought he was when I noticed two very angry looking women follow Kari out of the locker room and I excused myself from Lindy.

"Stay here, I'll be right back."

I didn't really expect trouble but those kids certainly appeared to be angry.
I stood at the door and heard Kari berate the couple who stood on the walkway.

"Are you real proud of yourself Tim? You hurt her—why are you hanging around? Do you need to see her cry too? Will that make you happy?"

Tammy Markham spoke. She was someone I worried about. She was tough enough to knock someone out. Tammy led the team in yellow cards. She'd been warned about rough play more than once by referees. I’ve had more than one talk with her about her aggressiveness. To make me more apprehensive, I recalled that her boyfriend played linebacker on the football team. I looked around and was relieved to see he wasn’t present. I thought I could restrain her—but not him.

Tammy confronted the woman and I edged into position to intervene. As a rule, soccer players don’t fight but that doesn’t mean they can’t or won’t.

"Why are you helping him hurt her? I can't believe Lindy ever did anything to you."

The young woman looked at her companion and said, "Tim, didn't you tell her I was coming? They think I'm your date."

"I wanted to surprise Lindy. With all the big games she had, I didn’t want to distract her with worrying about meeting you. I thought she needed to be alone to prepare," he answered.

The young woman smiled at my players: "You'll have to excuse my brother. He's an idiot. But he really is my brother. He got me up here to meet his girlfriend, not replace her."

Tim added to my utter delight, "Caroline is my closest living relative. I wanted her to meet Lindy before I did something important."
I'm sorry if I upset everyone."

His sister defended him—sort of. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "He's a male, they don't think. I've got one of my own at home."

I went back in and told Lindy she needed to come outside right away. She asked me if "they" were still out there.

"You need to be out there," I said, and when she balked, I put my arm around her shoulders and walked her out the door as she meekly protested.

Tim and his sister couldn't explain fast enough when they saw the sad expression on Lindy's face.

"Lindy, I'm so sorry. I wanted to surprise you."

Tim saw her injured face and hurried to her side. He hugged her and gently touched her face.

"Are you all right?"

When she nodded he gently kissed her injured face and added, "This is my sister Caroline. I told you I only had one close relative. I wanted her to meet you."

"Hi Lindy. I can tell by how your friends all want to beat me up for you that you're somebody special."

My three soccer hooligans all cringed and looked really sheepish. I loved it.

Caroline smiled at them, "If I were you, I'd have been mad at someone like me too."

She looked at Lindy and said, "He doesn't deserve you. I'd drop him like a bad habit."

Lindy started to cry out loud but this time I knew that it was joy
and not heartbreak.

I think Tim could benefit more from my advice than Lindy ever would. I don't think he understood why she was crying.

He blurted out, "I wanted Caroline to meet you first, but I just figured out what it would be like to lose you. I can't wait. Lindy, forgive me please. I thought I was keeping you from being distracted before these important games. I didn’t want you to worry. I love you. I want to marry you. Will you marry me?"

Lindy literally leapt into his arms. That was my clue to go back to my office and close the door. It took me over two years to rebuild my reputation after the last time this kid had me crying in front of my players and I wasn't going to go through that again. Hopefully it will be an outdoor wedding and the macho generals can wear sunglasses.

Of course Lindsey Cole wasn't going to slip into anything, even engagement, quietly. Michelle waited until after a great meal to lay the next part of the saga on me. Terri was at a friend’s house.

"Your daughter wants you to talk to her boyfriend,"

"Terri wants me to talk to her boyfriend? Why am I suddenly scared?"

"No," she laughed, "it's not Terri, she still thinks you're from some other century. Your good daughter, Lindy, needs you to talk with Tim about her problem."

I groaned with an audible shrug, "Shelly, I don't know if I should be getting involved in that kind of stuff. There's supposed to be some kind of wall there. We’ve been through this before."

"Well, if it's not you it'll be nobody. What if it really was Terri, wouldn't you hope the coach she looked up to would help her?"
Checkmate. That appeal will work every time.

"Look, she's going to ask him to come see you. She is still so worried he'll be offended and think she's rejecting him. You just need to tell him to be kind and gentle. She needs you to tell him what happened to her. Honey, you know Tim doesn't have a father he can talk to either. And besides, I think she wants Tim to ask "her father" for her hand—she likes the old fashioned stuff and Honey, she just wants to feel normal."

I'm pretty sure General Patton would have caved on this one if it were put that way. Some day I'm going to have to figure out a way to get even with Debbie Ireland for recruiting this kid.

Actually, my little talk with Lindy's fiancé went very well. I had thought she'd convinced him that he needed to do the old "ask for her hand in marriage" thing and she relied on me to do the rest.

If ever I had fears about our Lindy making a mistake, he put them to rest. Michelle and I had had a few reservations about the marriage. I guess we were just worried that Lindy had never really had a serious date before Tim. Together and separately, we had inched around the topic with her. I know I didn't want to plant any doubts and my wife felt the same way. Still, we wanted to make sure Lindy, and Tim, were going into marriage with as much opportunity for success as possible. The kid—well, neither kid—needed to get dealt another disappointment. They seemed mature and caring but Lindy’s problems were major league. Lindy always assured us things were great but we were still very concerned.

As we talked, something began to dawn on me. I started to mention something about Lindy's rough family life and this kid surprised me. Not only did he know all about it, from Lindy, he'd gone to a lot of
counseling alone and with Lindy to help her overcome her fears.

"Mr. Pattman, the first time I put my arms around her, you know, well, she was like a little shivering kitten. She was actually trembling."

I smiled and tried to reassure him.

“I knew something was wrong, Mr. Pattman. I thought it was me or something I’d done. She’s the first girl I’ve ever been serious about.”

“You picked a good one for your first,” I said and he smiled.

“I talked to a counselor at the student health center and she told me it was possible Lindy was abused. She gave me some good advice. I finally got the courage to ask Lindy if anything was wrong. Mr. Pattman, she started crying and told me the whole story. She was so frightened. I’ve never felt so protective or so much in love. Yes, I can't imagine what that must have been like for her but we found this great therapist.”

We talked for awhile and Tim said, “Lindy has a goal of overcoming her nightmare and mine is to be the kind of husband she deserves. She’s getting better and better and it finally dawned on me that she must really love me to try to put away all of those horrible fears and memories just for me. She makes me laugh and I love it when she's happy. Things are going great. See, Mr. Pattman, we figure we've got a lifetime ahead of us. Why hurry?”

How did she find this kid? It went on like that and it soon became clear, even to a dinosaur like me, that Lindy didn't arrange all of this so that Tim could ask for her hand in that old corny ritual. And it had nothing to do with counseling him. This kid had his life together as much as Lindy did. They were already successfully working with a
therapist. No, this was her way of counseling us—of reassuring us that everything was OK.

I thought back to the day in my office when I first learned of her plight. She should have been an angry and bitter young woman given the hand she'd been dealt and the coarse way I had treated her—yet she was saying things to comfort me when she saw how upset I was.

Our season ended and did I mention we were undefeated and won the national championship? With Lindy around, things like an undefeated season just seemed to pale to insignificance.

I knew something was up when I returned from a meeting and found Lindy and my wife and daughter waiting. I've learned that's not a good situation.

"Lindy wants to ask you something."

"Coach, will you give me away at my wedding?"

I couldn't resist the straight line, "Give you away? Lindy, I've tried to give you away for years but no other team would take you."

My wife and daughter just glared at me.

Lindy said, "OK. You don't have to do it. I'll of course have to take my incredible skills, sparkling personality and unmatched beauty to another team—probably one in the conference—one that will surely beat DeMarr because I know all your tricks and schemes and besides..."

"Ok stop, stop I'll do it," I said.

"No, I'm not so sure now."

My wife said, "I bet that nice young coach at Standish would give one of his players away."

Lindy nodded and said, "Coach Biehl at Franklin Valley is nice too, and they say he doesn't yell at his girls."
"OK, please, I'd be honored to give you away. Please let me do it. Please, I'll do it."

"What about your yelling coach?"

"Ok, I won't yell at the wedding."

She asked Michelle, "Do you have the phone number for the coach at Franklin Valley?"

"Ok, I'll work on my yelling at practice if you'll let me give you away."

She turned to my wife and daughter and said, "Do either of you need anything while I've got him here?"

I just groaned, closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair as they laughed.

"Lord help me," was all I said.

I got pecked on the cheek and was told, "I love you."

Do you think Bear Bryant or Bobby Knight ever had a player do that?

Lindy and Tim got married over Spring break. Her sister Sage flew in and stayed with us for a few days while the newlyweds went on a short honeymoon. Sage is also quite a young lady and I think she'll be all right. Tim is working in town and he's turned out to be the kind of guy we would have hand picked for our special daughter.

Lindy became one of the few married players we've had when she helped us win our opening match 2-1 in the fall. It was her fifth year of eligibility. Because she had already completed her degree, she began graduate work.

She had to leave practice on the following Saturday due to illness. Lindy said she had an appointment with a doctor. There are
some very dangerous viruses circulating and I’m constantly warning my players about letting their resistance get weakened with poor nutrition and a lack of sleep. One of our players had been hospitalized with a virus. I could tell Lindy was scared. I was very concerned, She later called and left a message in the office that the doctor told her not to practice until he got some test results back later that day.

We practiced until almost 5 p.m. and when I got home, I found Lindy and Tim in the living room with Michelle and Terri. Tim knelt by Lindy’s chair and Shelly and Terry had tears in their eyes.

"Coach, the doctor says I can't play soccer anymore."

"Are you all right? Lindy, what's wrong?"

"It's my stomach Coach."

I instantly went into full panic mode even before she could continue. I looked quickly at Michelle for a clue. I was surprised to see her smile.

“It’ll be OK Lindy,” I said.

Lindy grinned. “The tests say I've got a little person growing in there and the way you make us play wouldn’t be safe for the little guy.”

I think the rules allow a coach to hug his favorite player and her husband in such situations. I would have anyway.

“Is it a boy or girl,” I blurted and realized at once what a stupid question it was at this stage.

Lindy patted her husband’s head and said, “This one asked the same question. You don’t suspect it’s some kind of gender defect?”

I’ll be looking into the redshirt rules again. This is an extraordinary situation. I’ve also been promised a third assistant by the AD and I think I might look into that even if the redshirt thing works out.
Lindy just has that effect on you. I'm hoping there'll be an opening for surrogate grandparents on her team. I'm coachable.

Don't let anyone kid you. There really are angels among us. You just need to slow down and look for them. There's a little of the angelic in all people who'll take the risk to love. It's been said you don't know what you've got until it's gone. For two men that's probably true. One deserted some little girls and doesn't even know how close he was to paradise. The other made the lives of these same two a living hell. He's got a face to stare at in a stainless steel prison mirror for the best of his remaining days. I'm the fortunate one. I guess some will always gather what others spill. I was so lucky. I almost wrote her out of our lives too. My wife loves her like a daughter and a friend. My daughter adores the sister she always wanted. Me? Her teammates? Her husband? If you don't know by now how we feel, I can't explain it any better.
SIX

WHAT GOES AROUND
A Grift For Those Who Have Everything

I’m a grifter. If it’s possible, I’m an ex-grifter. I’m not sure it is possible. Some of you may have to look the word up. Maybe I can help. Have you ever seen the movie, The Sting? It kind of glorifies my “profession.” I am a con man.

I’m currently employed by the Witness Protection Program. They would resent my flippant claim that they employ me. I get complete identities when I need them. I am banned from the part of the country where I grew up and conducted my crimes. On my own dime, I had some plastic surgery and some hair implants. That was 2 identities ago. I secretly visited my hometown (a definite no-no) and walked past my cousin and his wife in a tavern. Nothing. Not even a second look.

The good news is I don’t have a wife and kids for whom I’m responsible. The bad news is, I don’t have a wife and kids. I may never.

I lost my parents at an early age. I was raised by elderly grandparents who were no match for my conniving soul. I believe they passed thinking they had raised a good Lutheran boy. I learned at an early age to “get over” on people. My grandparents were no challenge at all. I conned teachers, neighbors, clerks and just about everyone I had to deal with. I hope the plastic surgery didn’t do permanent harm to my trustworthy countenance. I think I’m still good to go if the need arises. The nerves are still good.
I’m even conning the Witness Protection Service. The Federal Marshalls are still paying me a stipend as I slowly learn to be a professional investor. They didn’t like my choice of professions and have audited my “books” twice. What they can’t seem to audit is the sizeable stash I brought with me into the program. For all you young grifters out there, moderation is the key. When playing your mark, don’t get overwhelmed and try for the big score. Even in school, when I learned how to hack into school records, I would only change a failing grade to a “D.” I certainly wasn’t going to have the school suddenly discover I was the valedictorian when some of the teachers would think they had once failed me. Moderation is the word children, moderation.

I was what you would call a petty thief at first. I was good at it. The street kids I hung around with called it boosting. I was calm when cohorts were panicking. I learned to go it alone eventually. I learned bluff is important. You have to believe. I’ve been able to con the guy with the lie detector. I can usually get at least an “inconclusive.”

I graduated to more elaborate cons. I worked a scam on a dry cleaning company that had the misfortune of hiring me as the drive in clerk. I had an elaborate scheme where cash payments found their way into my pocket. Check paying customers were instructed to make checks out to initials that just happened to be the initials of a bank account I had opened. I “cherry picked” likely credit card customers and managed to acquire names, numbers and whatever else I could get. There is a market for such things and I made money without getting greedy and using the numbers myself. A set of false records and invoices covered my tracks at the clerk’s position. I worked scams just about everywhere I worked.
So how does a grifter get into a situation where he needs witness protection? As I got older I got into things like the Pigeon Drop and other cons. I passed a little bad paper. I prided myself in the victimless crime or more often, the crime where the mark is so greedy to cheat someone else, he sets himself up. There’s always a victim in a con. Maybe it’s the taxpayers. Usually it’s just some man or woman who thinks he or she is conning you while they are set up.

Grandma’s little boy got a bit greedy and found himself working with what you’d call organized crime. We did some investment scams and they got too greedy. I found myself looking at hard time. I ended up wearing a wire—just like TV. And that is nerve wracking. I did some time in a “Club Fed” prison after turning over a ton of evidence. I never had to actually testify in court. But believe me, if “they” find out the extent of my contribution, and they could, you wouldn’t want to be my life insurance company.

I got religion while in Federal custody. No, I didn’t go down the sawdust trail but I did come to the realization that I’d probably end up dead if I didn’t make some changes. Today, yes maybe I’m still playing the Feds with my unnecessary stipend and my hidden accounts, but improvement takes time. I’m not planning any other scams at the moment.

I eventually found my way to a medium sized town called Standell in the state of...you don’t really think I have a death wish, do you? I’ve never heard of a Standell in any state. It fits with the rest of the names in this story—I made them all up. The story isn’t made up though. I was living in a very average apartment. It was a brick building with 8 rental units and ample parking. It was ideal for my low profile.
The Feds saw no red flags. I drove an older Honda and I spent enough time away from the place to convince any observer that I was working.

Mrs. Henley owns the building and lives in unit 3. She inherited the building when her husband died. She cares for it as if it were her private home in the suburbs. She and her son Tyler can be seen caring for flower beds, sweeping halls and generally being good landlords.

I talk to Mrs. Henley frequently and sometimes I talk to her son. Ty is starting his junior year at the high school. He describes himself as a geeky kid and he spends a lot of time with his geeky (his word again) friends. Ty wants to study computers and he and his friends play these complicated computer games that feature elaborate rules, levels and steps. I’ve been there when he and several of his friends gushed about this or that game. They might as well of been talking Martian—and I’m not sure they weren’t. They are good kids.

I’m no slouch with the computer. When I did my 13 months at Club Fed I had to have a work assignment or an educational program. Knowing its value to a modern day con man, I chose to take every computer course offered.

I was surprised to find Mrs. Henley in a very somber mood. I like her. She seems young to have a kid Ty’s age. I think she really needed to talk to someone and like I said, I like her. I don’t think it’s been easy being a single mom although I’ve always thought she had a good kid. She invited me in for a cup of coffee.

I was shocked to hear her son was considering quitting school. I knew he was a good student. She didn’t know what was wrong but lately he had asked her repeatedly that he stay home. She found out he has also ditched school a couple of times. She was worried that he was using
drugs. She’d confronted him and he convinced her he was sober. She said, “All he says is he hates school.”

I had no business saying what I said next. Listen, I ought to be able to spot a con and like I’ve said twice already, I liked her, Ty and his friends. I’ve been around enough drug users. It just didn’t fit. Anyway, I asked her if she’d like me to talk with him. She quickly agreed. I thought she must really be desperate because she obviously doesn’t know much about this stranger she’s asking to help her son.

It was kind of awkward. She actually had him come up to talk to me. We exchanged nervous small talk about my computer and finally I verbally sucker punched him, “Your mom is scared to death you’ll quit school.”

I think he almost could have cried. I felt like a jerk for bringing his mother into the mix but it was obvious that would be my hook. A con man always needs a point of contact to get the confidence of the mark.

We talked for almost 4 hours. The problem is simple yet it’s complicated. Standell Senior High School is a hell hole of bullying. It is a throwback to the days when athletes and “cool” guys could do no wrong. The school has produced championships and great publicity. We used to call them jocks. I’m told modern athletes wear compression shorts rather than athletic supporters today. It doesn’t matter. No matter what they wear, male athletes at Standell can do little wrong. They tease, bully and belittle kids like Ty and his friends. He says it has recently gotten very bad and one or two students are the most oppressive. We were into our 4th hour when Mrs. Henley knocked. She had unbelievably bad news. The mother of one of his friends had called. One of the boys
in Ty’s little circle was in the hospital after a very serious, and real, suicide attempt. Gary was a chubby and likeable kid I’d met once in Ty’s driveway. Mrs. Henley volunteered to take Ty to the hospital but he turned to me with a look that said he had trusted me now it was my turn to do something. I talked his mother into allowing me to take him.

On the way, Ty told me that Gary had been the victim last week of a “depanting” in the cafeteria. The perpetrator was an all-state football star named Stan Merrill. He had been bullying Gary and others since the start of the school year. He was a senior and already been recruited by big time football programs. He had wrestled Gary onto a table with the help of his major accomplice, a star player named Greg Benton. This time they went further than they’d ever done with others. They lowered the jeans and undershorts of the mortified boy and they’d pushed him around the cafeteria before their sport was interrupted. The offenders were punished with an in school suspension and each was told he would not start that week’s game. Ty told me that both boys quickly entered the game soon after the first quarter started. Gary became the object of ridicule by some of the lesser wannabe bullies. Quitting school wasn’t an option with his parents. Apparently, quitting life was his only option.

Ty knew of kids who were afraid to venture into the cafeteria or anywhere the “supermen” held court. He named a couple of people who had actually quit school out of fear of being ridiculed and humiliated. He said teachers were generally either afraid to confront the troublemakers, actually supportive of them or unconcerned.

OK, being in witness protection does afford one some protection.
My “handlers” are not going to let me get into too much trouble before moving me to a quieter location. It’s kind of a low level get out of jail free card. Another relocation wouldn’t bother me. Part of me wished I was 17 and could confront the punks. The more realistic side reminded me that at 17, I would have avoided the bullies or probably gotten abused like everyone else. I guess I was never a fighter.

The victim named Gary is going to survive for now. I wondered if there was another who was near the same despair. I had a decision to make. It was easy in the end. I was about ready to move on again anyway. I asked Ty to bring his friends over for a talk. I promised them I had some influence in the town. I didn’t, but remember, I’m a con man. And they wanted to believe. I got them to promise to give me 2 months.

I had been to a novelty store and purchased a small vial of an incredibly foul smelling liquid for each of them. The vial had a small squirt attachment. I instructed them to scout the hallways and discover the location of the lockers for the main troublemakers. I guess you know what happened. Two all American boys were pariahs for a few days. Ty and his friends were bursting with their secret. I had to talk them into keeping their secret with the promise of much more later.

Our football heroes next came out to their cars to find a small paint can sitting on each of their roofs. I had shown the kids how to place an open can on an object by using a piece of thick paper and quickly pulling the paper out from under the upturned can. We practiced in my kitchen using water instead of paint. Our jocks removed the cans only to see yellow paint flood across their car’s roof and windshield. I had instructed the culprits to watch from a safe distance. These weren’t cons. I was just trying to buy some time and patience with the kids.
We planned several other stunts and I guess I was hoping the miscreants would back off in their bullying. If anything, they got worse. I got almost daily reports of hapless young kids getting humiliated and even occasionally injured. Ty reported hearing the bullies making jokes about the hospitalized Gary.

I had been accumulating supplies for my coup d’ grace and was debating whether to go ahead with my trump cards when I attended a school board meeting where several parents were complaining about the climate of bullying. They were countered by the parents of several of the bullies. They spoke of a “boys will be boys” mentality and accused the complaining parents of envy. The father of Stan Merrill is a local hero. He was a college star who played pro ball for 3 years before an injury ended a storied career. You would have thought he was granting an audience by the way the board and several observers greeted him. He had the Board members eating out of his hand. They allowed him to address a question about the hospitalized boy. The man belittled the questioner and ridiculed what he called “sob sisters” and “bleeding hearts.” All I could think was, OK, it’s out of my hands.

I continued in depth studies of everything printed about our 2 heroes. I went beyond Googling and even pretended to be a member of the media to make contacts. Each punk had signed a letter of intent to attend his chosen football powerhouse. I pumped Ty and his friends for information.

I wrote letters to the high school and the parents’ businesses and offices to receive return letters with proper envelopes and letterheads. A good con man can erase the original address on an envelope and anybody with the right computer programs can even counterfeit money—a
letterhead is a piece of cake. A police detective’s carefully laminated ID and business card isn’t much more difficult. An ID for a non-existent “public health investigator” just required imagination. How devious are you? Do you see where I’m going?

I was able to ascertain the name of the quarterback’s girlfriend from Ty and his friends. One of them even knew the name of the library where she worked. I borrowed a yearbook and made copies of photographs. This became an elaborate con and I have to admit I was starting to experience the rush I’d always gotten when playing a scam. It’s hard to explain but I was beginning to understand what a shrink at Club Fed had meant about the strokes I was seeking that had nothing to do with money. She said it was a kind of addiction to excitement.

I visited the library branch and located the young lady at work. In hushed tones, I showed her my picture ID and asked to speak to her privately. I was never better. As far as I know, no board of health or public health agency or whatever, still sends out investigators to track down possible intimate partners of known STD carriers. I’m not sure they ever did but I can remember old stories. I opened my file and made sure she could see a document that had her photo. I have to admit it looked very official. I perused it and a similar one featuring Mr. Quarterback. There was a small stack of others. I easily convinced her that I was for real and that one Stan Merrill had agreed to list his intimate contacts in exchange for receiving anonymous treatment at the public health department. I promised her total anonymity and gave her a business card. It listed a clinic where she really could receive free and totally anonymous testing. I had researched that thoroughly. I felt a little twinge of conscience as I noted her response. She wasn’t my target but I
consoled myself with the knowledge that she was probably at least a supporter of the bullying.

“Excuse me,” I asked as I pretended to be receiving a cell phone call. I turned aside as if trying to achieve privacy. Obviously, she would listen when she heard her name. “Yes, I’m with the Watkins girl…yes, I met with the Benton boy. He denied sexual contact with Merrill at first but he finally agreed to seek testing when I showed him our files. He postured a little at first but he came around. Ok, look I’m going to visit 2 others after I leave here. OK.” I closed my phone and turned back to the shocked girl.

“I would urge you to seek testing and discuss this with your parents.” Yea, fat chance about the parents, I thought to myself. I drew her attention by scribbling some words on her file and I retrieved one that featured Benton’s name and photo to make similar notations. Like the slick dealer I am, I dealt Merrill’s file on top of my deck. It featured large red letters H I V followed a plus sign. I quickly closed the folder as if I hadn’t wanted her to see the last file. I repeated my suggestion about testing and again promised her total anonymity.

The following week, Standell’s principal received a personal and confidential letter on the stationary of linebacker Benton’s father’s office. I smiled at the odds of the letter remaining confidential or personal. It mentioned certain “adjustment” problems young Greg was being treated for with a psychiatrist. It casually mentioned that this “aura of bisexuality” was nothing more than an adolescent phase. It asked that, as far as possible, the Benton boy be kept away from Stanley Merrill. I hadn’t planted seeds, I was pretty sure I was dropping huge bombs. Telephone, telegraph, tell the girlfriend or the school secretary. I had told
both.

The next part was a little risky. Impersonating a cop gets you into the big leagues quickly. It takes an experienced hand. Your props have to be first rate. A phony badge is an easy find. The picture ID isn’t hard if you’ve seen as many as I have. Keep it simple, official looking and carefully laminated. Make sure you hold it out long and steady as if you want the mark to really check it out. Make sure the ID holder is well worn. We’re called confidence men for a reason. The cop ruse is a scary step in a con. If someone chooses to call the department to check on your identity, the con is dead. You have to fold and get out of there. It’s the riskiest part of a con. Making initial contact outside used to be the safe route and it’s still safer. Cell phones now give someone a chance to call from anywhere so your initial presentation has to be perfect.

I did a little reconnoitering and gauged the schedule of the coach of a football powerhouse about 80 miles upstate from Standell. It was the school with which Merrill had signed a letter of intent. I’m not going to mention names. The coach and his program were going to be innocent victims and I’ve told you already that all of the other names and places I’ve mentioned are pseudonyms.

I popped into the athletic building just as the coach emerged from his office for his morning jog across campus. It was as much PR as exercise for the popular coach.

“Coach Willard,” I said as I offered my hand. I handed him my leather bound Standell police ID. “I was hoping to catch you for an informal chat.”

He got serious and took me back into his office. In this day and age, a big time athletic coach or official views a police visit with all of
the enthusiasm as a visit from the Mothman.

“Coach, I want to put you at ease immediately. I hope you remember my name. I’m an ’84 graduate. Fillburt Hall. I was a great intramural flag football player. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.” We both laughed. (Confidence man, remember!)

“Coach you have a recruit who is likely to take a big fall as part of a steroid drug ring. As we have closed in, he has tried to protect his sources. He listed you as a supplier of a large quantity of steroids. He allegedly picked them up during his official visit.”

The coach immediately protested and I raised my hand to relax him. “Coach, he doesn’t know it, but we made an undercover buy from him from this shipment 4 days before his visit with you.” I was careful to accentuate the words 4 and before. “He could not have gotten anything here. We know that. Coach Willard, the purpose of my visit is an unofficial heads-up for you. We’re sure of his supplier, we need this kid to turn on him. We’re just eliminating his stunts and lies. We intend to take them all down. We don’t want you implicated in any way, shape or manner and you won’t be.”

“Merrill,” he asked and I gave him a rueful smile.

“I’m not at liberty to talk names.” Here I had to be careful not to look like a buffoon or make him think I was treating him like an idiot. “He has a teammate going to (I have to omit this name also). He is part of this ring but he hasn’t tied in Coach (anonymous) although we would anticipate he will blame everyone he can to avoid fingering the guys he is afraid of. The real suppliers play rough and both suspects will probably name everyone they ever knew to avoid fingering the real suppliers.”
I paused and added, “If you know Coach (anonymous), you might want to give him a heads-up. Without an accusation from one of the suspects, we won’t be visiting him.” I knew from my research that they were good friends and had been college teammates.

I drove home happy. I’d never performed better. I stopped a few times and carefully destroyed and disposed of my false ID.

A strange thing happened a short time later. Two large university football programs announced their decision to cancel scholarships for two outstanding Standell players. Neither school would elaborate on its decision. I smiled at the thought about coaches warning their friends and those friends warning their friends. Yea, our big bad stars were now damaged goods.

Ty told me that rumors of scandals were rampant in the school. He mentioned a few of the whispered rumors and I kept my con man’s straight face. He said the whole tone of the school seemed different. The bullies seemed preoccupied. The football team missed the state play-offs for the first time in recent years. They ended the season losing 3 straight games in a row for the first time under the current coach.

I was really debating telling the story to the disgraced students and their families. I changed my mind when I talked to Ty and other friends of Gary, the boy who attempted suicide. They told me they were starting a peer counseling and support club. “We’ll call ourselves Gary’s Geeks.”

I have one regret. I played the homophobia card a little. It was important to my STD scam but I still felt bad. Maybe I’m getting a conscience. I wasn’t proud of using HIV in my scam either. You have to
know your mark and I knew this was something that would be effective with the macho types and their parents.

Mrs. Henley walked up to me while Ty and I talked in the yard. “Did Ty tell you he has a date for the dance?” she asked. It was more of a proud announcement than a question. Ty was a little self-conscious, but not much. I’d say just about right.

The two supermen and their friends and family will have to figure out what happened on their own. Did I go too far? I worried about that but then I thought about the boy who tried to kill himself and the kids for whom life in school was a living Hell. My rarely exercised conscience was clear about the bullies and what they deserved. They will land on their feet; they’ll just find themselves on everyone else’s level. It’s too much to think they’d learn from the experience. I’m not sure they’ll realize fully what happened. If I tell them, I’ll have to move on and there’s no guarantee they’d learn anything anyway. It might even cause an angry retaliation against innocent people. Besides, after a good con, the mark doesn’t even know he’s been played. A good grifter leaves his ego in the car. Gloating is for losers.

Anyway, I’m starting to like it around here. Besides, someone may need to keep an eye on next year’s crop of super stars. And dance night? Yeah, well I just thought if Ty had a date, maybe it was time his mother went out. She said it has been years. Maybe we’ll start with dinner and a movie. I wonder what it’s like to be honest with someone.
I met Amber in prison. I work there. I’m the warden. I only expected to work here for a few more years until my husband was ready to join me in early retirement. I thought Amber was probably facing the rest of her life there. That’s the model for people with her sentence and her background.

A Women’s prison, like its male counterparts, sometimes has difficulty finding adequate staffing. Conditions also prevent guards from relaxing their attitudes in order to counsel. Money is tight. These aren’t
correctional institutions—they’re warehouses for unfortunate humans. I guess there is a constant need to address both quantity and quality of supervision. Quality usually comes in a distant second.

I belong to a professional women’s support group. We share concerns and suggestions. It was out of this group a suggestion was formulated that I should take advantage of the great corps of retired professionals in the area. It’s a women’s prison so I naturally assumed they were talking about women as mentors and counselors. My friend Liz Wyatt, and a few others, convinced me not to overlook men—like I don’t already have enough headaches.

We have some male guards and while their gender can lead to problems, we’re very glad to have their size and athleticism when we have a disturbance or need to extract a resident from her cell. I’ve had to remove male employees who fell victim to the manipulation skills of my residents. My women have had a lifetime of trading “favors” for favors. If you succumb once to temptation, male or female, I can’t trust you. You’ll always be subject to blackmail. You’ll end up as an illicit currier for contraband or messages, Drugs and cell phones aren’t difficult to smuggle.

I reluctantly agreed that the new program should be open to all genders. I think my friend Liz had an ulterior motive and I’ve kidded her about it. She eventually recommended her husband Ted, as a volunteer. He took early retirement and was looking for somewhere to volunteer. He would become one of the few men who proved very valuable to our staff. My volunteers are highly screened, patiently trained and frequently warned about pitfalls. I see great wisdom in having men become mentors, yes, even friends, to women who are facing long periods of
confinement. Some might say I’m walking into a potential minefield. And granted, most of the time, the women reject the offers of friendship, from men or women anyway. Some aren’t interested. Others lose interest when they see no opportunity to play the situation for some advantage. However, when it works, it really seems to work well.

There are a million pitfalls associated with having male prison guards and counselors for women. Most are pretty obvious. As I said, some of my “clients” are master manipulators and men have to be very careful. As a result, we NEVER allow volunteers to be alone with prisoners out of camera view. Even when separated by bars, they maintain a discreet distance and are always aware of the cameras that support them.

Males are required to announce their presence on the floor. The reasons are obvious. Unfortunately, the “man on the floor” warning is the signal for those who want to entice or merely flash, a man. You have to be very careful. Such actions can be a diversion for some other activity. We’re forever receiving reports about such things.

I always tell an old parable at the first volunteer orientation. Someone told me it was an old Buddhist story. I’ve since discovered it may be of more recent origin. The last I could research, it was credited to Loren Eiseley, a modern philosopher. It is about a young man who goes to the shore after a bad storm has washed dozens of starfish out of the water. He gently returns a starfish to the water and goes on to the next. A man approached and laughed at his efforts. He told him there were 1000s of miles of shoreline and he couldn’t possibly make a difference. The young man returned another starfish and said, “I made a difference for that one.”
My volunteers think it is a compelling story even with the caveat I add. I tell them they won’t change the world and they probably won’t even change one person, but they could maybe make one person’s living hell less despairing and less miserable. If you find that motivating, I want to give you a chance to participate in the program.

I have a dream of exposing the women to men who were not like the men they’d always encountered. Some of these women will get out some day. I’m just trying to give them a fighting chance at developing healthy relationships. These are days of tight budgets and at the least, this program puts more eyes, albeit unpaid ones, in my facility. I’ve tapped a number of sources to pay for the training I’ve created.

I’m not sure why Amber Anchelle ever opened up to Ted Wyatt. It took almost a year for her to even speak to him. Like many of her prison mates, her attitude toward men was not good. Why in the world would they respect and trust a whole group of people who’d abused, manipulated and used them for their entire lives? How could you appreciate people who viewed you as a throwaway object of their pleasure and amusement?

Amber arrived as one of the angriest and most self-destructive inmates we’ve ever had. She would pick fights with the toughest women and then not fight back. We had her on our highest suicide watch level from the beginning. She was at first under the mistaken idea that we had snipers on our roof. We are maximum security but we’re not into that Hollywood kind of thing. On her first day in the yard, she pushed a guard and ran across the field as if escaping. On the street it’s called suicide by cop. There were no snipers and no shots.

I think some of the women see sincere men such as Ted Wyatt as
father figures. “Maybe because of the gray,” Ted said, laughing, when I discussed it with him. I may be right, but then there is the factor of the poor, or non-existent, relationships most of them had with fathers. We finally concluded that it’s possible to want something you’ve only experienced in your imagination. I’d like to ask a psychiatrist if you could be homesick for somewhere you’ve never been.

Ordinarily, Amber had huge anger issues. She had to be housed alone due to the numerous assaults. It was felt no one would be safe asleep and unprotected in her cell. For whatever reason, Ted Wyatt apparently had a calming influence on her. By the 2nd year he knew her, her rages would calm dramatically when he arrived. Ted and Liz joked that women like Amber see him as non-threatening because he looks and act so thoroughly domesticated.

“It’s not ‘thoroughly’ domesticated,” Ted added, “it’s ‘hopelessly’ domesticated.” In any event, the experimental program that has placed older men and women in positions in women’s prisons has so far been viewed as a limited success. Our volunteers are heavily screened and we actually interview their families. And of course, there are polygraphs, drug tests and the local and FBI background checks. The truth is, we have to be convinced beyond a doubt they don’t have any sinister motives.

Amber Rene’ Anchelle first went before an adult court judge when she was 16. He called her a pariah and a one-person crime wave. Her record as a juvenile was probably worse. She admitted to Ted that she was guilty of robbery, theft, larceny, prostitution, drug dealing and drug abuse.

According to Amber, her mother used her as a decoy and also an
accomplice in shoplifting and various larceny schemes. A frequent ruse had her mother picking up an item in a department store and trying to return it without a receipt. When Amber was young, she was ordered to begin a loud crying tantrum on command to con the harried clerk into approving the return. It usually worked but when it failed, the angry mother could storm out of the store threatening to return with her husband. It was a bluff designed to get out of the store without getting arrested. In any event, Amber would be blamed whenever they failed.

As the child got older, the ruse changed to having an irate mother bring in a pre-teen who had “purchased” some suggestive, or overly expensive clothing. The tearful youngster was required to sob that she’d lost or thrown away the receipt. It almost always worked and Amber would be punished severely if it failed. They would travel the country with a small group, pulling off various scams. The nights would feature drug and alcohol abuse for the adults and despicable abuse for Amber and any other children whose parents fell in with the group. When Amber was about 12, her mother and her accomplices used Amber as a prostitute and as bait in sexual blackmail schemes. She got her first STD while still 12.

Amber eventually found herself in the big leagues of crime. She was convicted of murder. She was all of 19.

Amber thinks she was born in Pennsylvania. She’s never seen a birth certificate. Like many young people involved in the criminal justice system, she has no clue who her father is. She’s known several men who cohabited and traveled with her mother. To a man, they were losers and worse. She has never had a date although she’s attractive. She never attended school but with Ted’s encouragement, she has
improved on the reading and writing she had somehow picked up over the years.

Her mother had used her like a moneymaking commodity. She admits to having had 2 abortions and several STDs. She is HIV positive and because of another serious disease, Chlamydia, she may never be able to bear children again. That’s right, I said “again.” The topic makes her very quiet. It might also be a moot point; the criminal justice system doesn’t want her to leave this prison alive. She has a child somewhere. She gave birth over 3 years ago. She thinks her mother sold the baby. She also acknowledges she’ll probably never know. That secret probably died with her mother.

Maybe I should say the secret was killed with her mother. Yes, the murder for which Amber was convicted was the murder of her mother. She slashed her to death during a fight. A gung ho prosecutor insisted on a first-degree murder charge with death penalty specifications. It was an election year and such cases will keep a politician’s name in the news if he plays it right. At her sentencing, a judge called her crime the worst of all crimes—killing the very one who gave you life. He said it was an unpardonable act.

I’ve researched the case. Some might argue that the public defender was severely over matched. Ted’s wife Liz, who is an attorney, pointed out that the public defender joined the prosecutor’s office shortly after the trial. She said it was highly likely he had applied even before Amber’s trial. The judge limited input about Amber’s life during the trial and her attorney raised no objections. During the sentencing phase, the judge took an active role in questioning, and some would argue, attacking the witnesses who came forward asking for mercy for Amber.
The case is being appealed. From time to time, lawyers arrive to talk privately with her. The death penalty thing was a stretch from the beginning. It may have originally been a bit of “over-charging” designed to elicit agreement to a severe plea bargain. Liz practices mostly civil law for the corporation she works for, but she conceded to me that it would almost certainly be overturned. She then got a little pensive and said, “But you know, given the attitude of some of our Supreme Court justices, maybe the death penalty wasn’t that big a stretch.”

Anyway, much to the obvious disappointment of the judge, the jury did not give Amber the death penalty. In this state, a judge cannot overrule a jury on a penalty phase decision. Most judges will thank a jury for their service. This judge gave them a stern lecture.

Liz did a little research for me about Amber’s trial. She was astounded to find her court appointed lawyer allowed what happened in the courtroom. The judge would not allow mention of Amber’s burned face or the terrible scarring on her back. Her back reminded me of old photos I’d seen of slaves who were brutalized. Amber told me that her mother had burned her with boiling water and cigarettes. She burned the side of her face and threatened to burn her whole face if she was not cooperative. I believe she was a classic example of someone who’d been brainwashed and tortured into submission.

Liz discovered the judge even retired the jury to another room and rearranged the courtroom before Amber took the stand to testify in her own behalf. The idea was to keep her burns and scars from being visible to the jury. The witness chair was moved away from the jury and turned so that only Amber’s uninjured side could be seen. Again, her lawyer raised no objection. The judge even instructed the court bailiff to
escort Amber to and from the stand lest she show her wounds to the jury.

I’ve read studies, or at least opinions, that there could be some people who just seem to attract bullying. When I first encountered that idea I was a little angry. It sounded like blaming the victim for being the victim. On the surface, that idea is ridiculous but then there are people like Amber. Is it possible that people with a propensity toward bullying in their personality may pursue jobs that afford them the chance to bully the vulnerable? Maybe there is a sadistic thread in them that has them seek positions of authority as judges, cops and God help us, wardens and guards. Maybe it extends to some teachers, coaches and even parents. Predators are attracted by motion. Survival manuals teach you to avoid running from bears and mountain lions because such activity will trigger attack. These thoughts are frightening. It’s hard to look at someone with Amber’s record as vulnerable. But who profited from her crimes? Some were crimes of survival—shoplifting food and clothes for example. They were all crimes ordered by her mother—under penalty of great harm.

A known felon and drug dealer testified against Amber in exchange for a plea bargain. He denied Amber had acted in self-defense. In this state, a convicted felon such as Amber, commits a crime if she possesses an object that is commonly used as a weapon. It is further recognized by law that the act of acquiring such a weapon by a felon can be evidence of pre-meditation. Pre-meditation is a key element in asking for capital punishment. Another element requires the murder to be committed during the commission of a felony. The judge instructed the jury to consider her possession of the knife to be such a felony. Amber’s attorney did not object.
On the stand, Amber admitted buying a large knife to defend herself against some of the men, including the one who testified against her, who were entertained by her mother. Her attorney didn’t pursue the point.

Amber told Ted Wyatt she slept in the apartment’s bathroom because it had a lock. She was so frightened about getting pregnant again. When her mother, or one of her “visitors” wanted to use the bathroom; they had to pound on the door. Amber would thus be awakened and could get out of the room with her knife ready. On the night she killed her mother, her mother had awakened her. The man with her had purchased Amber’s “services” with a drug delivery and had come to collect. In the ensuing struggle, Amber slashed her mother and she bled to death. The “boyfriend” fled the scene. He became the main witness against Amber.

Liz Wyatt and her husband Ted and I, aren’t exactly flaming civil libertarians. Liz practices corporate law and Ted has retired as a regional supervisor for a bank. Liz said it was stories like this that made her wish she practiced criminal law. Prison wardens have heard it all before so we’re not too gullible. It’s not my job to advocate for an inmate but justice is the concern of any citizen.

I certainly had delved further into Amber’s case than any of the other residents I encountered. According to Liz Wyatt and the other attorneys I’ve talked with, there is an overwhelming case for Amber to be released. One lawyer sees her acquitted in a new trial and even suggests charges would be not pursued at all. Others see a plea bargain and release for time served. All else failing, I think the stars may be aligned for Amber for the first time in her life. A very sympathetic
national media figure is about to pursue the story. The governor who appointed me will leave politics soon. A pardon wouldn’t surprise me. In a rare move, he’s asked to meet with me AND Amber. I’m going to include Ted Wyatt if I can.

Amber remains in what we call "ad seg." That’s administrative segregation. She stays alone in a cell for 23 hours. She leaves her cell for a shower and a brief time in a very secure outdoor section the women call a dog run. It’s not much but it is outdoors. She is able to talk through the fence to other inmates although she rarely does. I encourage visitors for my ad seg inmates and even try to arrange for people to visit with the women who have no family or friends to visit. It’s all part of my attempt to humanize the conditions. I have given Ted Wyatt carte blanche to visit with Amber. He often takes his lunch with her. I encourage visitors to join their loved one for lunch in ad seg.

When her appeal began to look promising, Ted sometimes asked Amber what she’d like to do if she ever got out. He would then share the conversations with me.

“I’d like to find my daughter,” she once said.

She interrupted him when he started to speak, “No, it’s not what you think. I’m never going to have a child of my own. I just want to make sure she’s being treated all right.”

He’s asked her at different times what else she’d like to do. Her answers were always sobering.

“I’d like to go to the ocean.”

“Didn’t you once live in Florida?”

“Yea, but I was never allowed to go to the beach.”

“What else would you like to do?”
“I’d like to sleep in a real house and have a bedroom.” She laughed with an embarrassed laugh and added, “I’d like to swing on a swing and go down a slide…”

He said he didn’t act surprised or express amusement. That’s important when you’re dealing with people like Amber. And her answers were NOT funny. He waited and asked her what else she’d like to do.

“I’d like to have a Barbie Doll.”

Ted had tears in his eyes as he told me that story. Well, wardens aren’t so easily moved. We’ve heard all the stories. Prison movies have inmates claiming they’re all innocent. It’s hard to read Amber’s rap sheet and use the word innocent. I didn’t cry when he told the story. Wardens are tough. I waited until he left.
Professor Bryce was a kind of role model to a generation that was busy rejecting role models. Professor Conley Bryce really wasn’t even a full professor. Having always been an academic gypsy of sorts, our favorite professor had never stayed anywhere long enough for a shot at tenure. Technically, Dr. Bryce, who was only just a few years older than us, was listed as a history instructor. No full professor had more of our respect.

Conley was a captivating speaker. Words rolled off our teacher’s tongue like poetry and lectures were enlivened with great humor. The discussion was once about a professor from an old highly regarded college in the 1800s. He had graduated at 15. Professor Bryce summed up and dismissed the man’s achievement by saying, “They have since become a better college.”

Class bells meant little to the instructor, or really, to us. The students who were there because they were grinding out course work to score the paper they sought, would leave at the bell. Some of us weren’t painting by the numbers and we would gather around to enjoy the real class. There were usually about 12 of us true believers. Some of us actually were in the class. The others had had a class previously with Professor Bryce and simply showed up for the lectures and after class exchanges they knew would be coming. Someone once called us “The Regulars” but Conley quickly dubbed us “The Irregulars.” Our guru
deadpanned, “I’ve seen regulars and you guys ain’t it.” We were hooked for the duration.

These sessions were times of open exchange where you could risk stupid questions. They were really a serious critique of American culture. You left these impromptu sessions feeling fed but wanting so much more.

We talked about religion and even then, we were warned about the trend to wrap religion in the flag—a trend that dirtied both. Conley mocked the hypocrisy of modern religionists and even named names.

The phony patriotism of those days was also held up to ridicule and we learned Conley had on occasion been the victim of a kind of blacklisting.

One particular day we were off on some theological or spiritual errand. Someone ventured to ask if it could be proof of eternity if he could not imagine himself not existing.

“Aren’t you the ego?” Conley responded. No one laughed harder than the original questioner. We then were captivated to hear about our guru experiencing something akin to enlightenment and salvation on a cold, lonely starlit night while backpacking alone in the mountains. Conley described the pain and poignancy of love and uncertainty. It was the same pain and poignancy we were experiencing and it was clear that Professor Bryce was also still experiencing. Such things were described as the birth parents of the soul. There followed a long, delicious silence. The original questioner gave it his best southern accent, “Well shut my mouth.” We roared and Conley laughingly threw a paperback book at him and said to our laughter in an even better southern accent, “You are going to Hell, son.”
During one session someone said he’d read the university guide and found that Conley was from a place called Bloomer, Wisconsin. We smiled. We heard a sometimes sad description of the pleasure and pain of growing up in northwestern Wisconsin. It was a bucolic place that was still a good place to be, or be from. There was a plaintive quality to Conley’s voice as simpler times and forgotten folks were lamented. We were told to cherish our hometowns and our roots because the days for such times and places were numbered, “The time and the times will pass in the blink of an eye.”

And just like that the pace changed and we were absolutely slain, “Listen, can you imagine the burden of growing up in a town everyone thinks was named for an article of old fashioned lady’s underwear? It’s responsible for whatever it is that I am today.” We roared. “Can you imagine the fixations a youngster had to deal with? I’ve been obsessed with chasing girls ever since.”

Before the laughter died someone asked if a fixation was like a perversion. More laughter. “Well, that depends on whether it’s being defined by your attorney or the prosecutor.”

Sometimes we adjourned to Conley’s place—an old farmhouse just outside of town. We drank Burgundy wine, sometimes way into the night. You slept wherever you dozed off. Conley wasn’t afraid of much and had no qualms about sharing smoke with us. Many a night we passed around the pipe. It was kind of like a time warp to an earlier time in America. The power of flowers had long since faded but Conley often said that first fruits may well still be eternal truths.

Weekends would find a lot of us helping Conley tend the huge garden and cut and split firewood. The greatest weekends were the times
when Conley’s girlfriend Mishy flew in to visit with her lover. And there was no doubt they were lovers. Where we worshipped Conley, we adored Mishy. It was short for Michelle and Conley was constantly befuddled, captivated, entranced and thoroughly enamored around and by her. I think we each had a crush on Mishy and she would go for walks or simply sit on the porch swing and entwine each of us in her web. One day Mishy nuzzled the back of Conley’s neck and announced she was going for a long walk with one of her boyfriends (me). Conley embraced Mishy in a long passionate kiss. Mishy emerged and breathlessly said, “Maybe we’ll just go for a short walk.” We roared. I think we all wanted a relationship similar to what Conley and Mishy had. In retrospect, I can see that my later successful marriage is at least partially a result of the example set by Conley and Michelle. At the time, no legal document bound them to each other. They appeared bound by something deeper that I think each “follower” was encouraged to find for himself.

My girlfriend and I were on 2 separate campuses over 1500 miles apart. We had partial grants and significant student loans mounting. We had both changed our majors late in the game and had incurred heavy class loads and an expensive extra semester to complete our degrees. We didn’t get to see each other often. She had a rare Saturday event called “Professional Shadowing” every week. As a result, I had to do the traveling if we were going to get together.

One weekend I was sitting on the huge porch glider writing a poem to my girlfriend. I missed her a lot and we emailed daily. Mishy came out and sat on the glider.
“Hard at work?” she smiled. No one could ever be too busy to talk to Mishy.

I told her I was writing a poem and I hesitantly told her I was thinking about asking my girlfriend to marry me. As we sat on the porch swing and she turned toward me and swung her leg up onto the seat between us. She held my hands and asked me to tell her about my girlfriend. She listened intently and nodded a few times. I told her about our time together and how much it hurt to be apart. I told her about a dream I’d had that we were married and I had awakened with such a feeling of peace. I was a little self conscious but I let her read my poem. Worried about her critique, I waited. She suddenly put the poem down and leaned forward to kiss me on the cheek. “That’s for your girlfriend. She’s a lucky girl. Conley writes things like this for me and my heart melts. Boy, keep this girl.”

She talked to me about commitments and how to know you’d met “The One.” She told me of her feelings for Conley—she talked of soul mates and how her feelings “tingled” at the thought of her true love. I told her of my belief that I had found the woman with whom I wanted to spend my life. Mishy leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek again. I think it was her way to give me her blessing. It was funny, I felt even more deeply in love with my girlfriend from that moment on.

Both Conley and Mishy urged me to try to arrange a visit to the farm for my girlfriend. They offered to help with plane fare but my girlfriend and I managed to scrape together the funds for a flight and she was able to avoid one of her Saturday sessions. She knew all about my friends and she was anxious to meet them. It was a wonderful weekend. I picked her up at the airport and she literally jumped into my arms.
Conley and Mishy loved her immediately. It was like they’d known each other already. The rest of the Irregulars were as accepting and friendly as I’d expected.

It was Friday night and our sacraments had been passed around until all were tired. Those who were staying began working on where they’d sleep. Mishy insisted we take the 2nd bedroom “Because it has the only other double bed.” She added that she didn’t want to hear a crash in the night from some guy leaping from one twin bed to another. My girlfriend kind of blushed and Mishy whispered something to her and she laughed.

“Something I should know?” I asked.

“Girl talk,” Mishy said and I knew enough to drop my questioning.

It was a great weekend and it culminated with me asking Rachel to marry me. We decided to wait until just after we graduated. Her mother, and my family to a lesser degree, had long ago expressed a desire that we two old high school sweethearts get married in the old hometown church. Conley, Mishy and the Irregulars threw a makeshift party before I took Rachel back to the airport.

It was late in the spring when we were gathered at the farm. Classes were finished for the semester and the university was dispersing for the summer. Conley and Mishy were planning a vegetarian meal for us and we were all helping put it together. The Burgundy was flowing. After we cleaned up from the supper, the smoke was making its rounds. Conley told us about an impending relocation to the West Coast. We were most saddened. We had all heard the rumors. A former student was disgruntled by his “A” in the class. He was complaining because
Professor Bryce only had one test in the entire semester. It consisted of one question: “What is the purpose of America?” Everyone had written furiously and at the end of the period Conley simply said, “OK, please take your paper with you and let your actions finish your own purpose. Let me know if your grade is less than an A.” Apparently, the angry student was upset that others would receive the same grade as he. It wasn’t the first time someone had complained about Conley and, of course, there was no protective tenure. There were rumors that Dr. Bryce once gave out more A’s than there were people actually in class. The professor told the dean to distribute the extras out to anyone needing them.

Our guru had always approached teaching with the assumption that we were there because we were pursuing an intellectual journey. Grades were an irrelevant nuisance. For “Bryce’s Irregulars” it was true and our relationship was an island sanctuary that would extend beyond college. Conley promised us we would always be friends.

We’ve stayed in contact and I’ve realized that Conley, Mishy and the Irregulars are part of my ground in reality. Rachel likes my friends and they like her. She “gets” what I see in Conley and Mishy’s relationship. Conley and Mishy came to our wedding from their new home on the West Coast. The rest of the Irregulars were there and we learned that Conley and Mishy are expecting. Conley was happier than I’d ever seen her. She and Mishy had gotten married. They had found a Native American nation in the Pacific Northwest that recognized and performed same sex marriages. Conley was very close to her brother and he had volunteered to be the donor for Mishy’s baby and Mishy’s cousin happily agreed to do the same for Conley.
NINE

THE GIRL FROM COPPERHEAD MOUNTAIN

"Don't refuse to answer God's call to minister..."

Fiona McKee was born in Eastern Kentucky. She was the 11th of 12 children of Collinsworth and Juliet McKee. By the time she came along, Ellsworth seemed like a typical Appalachian town in the mountains.

Ellsworth Coal and Lumber once owned the mines, saw mill, the cabins and the company store. They didn't own the town—they were the town. Fiona's parents first experienced money in the form of company script and coins. Their fathers deep mined coal and were paid in paper and coins that could only be spent in the company store. They were frequently in debt to the store—the practice of buying on credit against future earnings kept everyone working and tied to the job. The company even owned the three-room school.

No one could save up money to move away. Even if you accumulated some of the company script, it was not honored at face value anywhere else and no bank would offer an exchange for real money at anything except a ridiculously low exchange rate.

Every year in those days, Wellington Ellsworth would visit the camp from his home in New York. It was on one of these inspection tours when Ellsworth and his accountants discovered the men of Fiona's grandfather's mine had built a rustic looking shelter by the creek. Here the men of Liberty Mine Three would change clothes and shower in the
icy water piped up from the creek by hand pumps. The men had built and paid for the shelter and used it so that they didn't continue to bring home the coal dust that permeated their clothes and lungs every day. Mr. Ellsworth agreed with his accountants that, though a nice idea, it constituted a fringe benefit and an intrusion onto company property. Ever concerned about his workers, Wellington Ellsworth agreed to allow the facility to operate but ordered that all workers be docked $1 per shift to use the facility. Ellsworth paid its miners by the ton and not by the hour. A dollar a day could sometimes be a foreboding charge in those years. Most men chose to avoid the facility.

Fiona was lucky. Her grandmother had inherited a few acres on Copperhead Mountain. Her grandfather worked every extra hour he could (there was no time and a half) and the family scrimped and saved. Saturdays, he worked at the mill until noon and took his pay in lumber. On evenings and Sundays, he would drive to the mountain property and continue building the family dream house.

The mines eventually closed and Ellsworth switched to strip mining what coal remained. Fiona’s father managed to work the last few years the mines operated. Her father later worked for minimum wage—standing ankle deep in various solvents as he rebuilt small engines in a large factory that came to town chasing low wages. By then, normal currency and stores replaced the company stores and script. Many of the people fled to the cities the first chance they got.

Fiona left Ellsworth for Chicago at age 16. It wasn't the call of the big city. Her father died at age 63 after a lifetime of a heart destroying diet, cigarettes, the ever-present coal dust of his early years
and the solvents of his latter years. Four months later, her mother succumbed to the Black Lung disease she may have contracted from an early life of breathing coal dust.

Fiona had always dreamed of New York City, but her dislike for Mr. Ellsworth's record convinced her she didn't want to live where he lived. She had $137 in her pocket after purchasing her bus ticket. She carried a used cardboard suitcase stuffed with her meager clothes.

Chicago was serious culture shock. She was overwhelmed by elevated trains and subways. She spent three days walking city streets and dozing in the waiting room of the bus station at night.

She lied about her age and got a job as a waitress in a diner. It was her first job and she narrowly escaped being fired as she struggled to adapt to the pace of lunch hours and the confusing accents of customers. The diner provided a uniform and she kept her suitcase in a locker at the bus station until she could afford a place in a rooming house.

She would eventually get a (poorly) furnished apartment and enroll in a free night school program at the Salvation Army. Armed with an actual high school diploma and newfound confidence, Fiona McKee soon found both a better apartment and a better waitress position.

It was on a Friday that a slickly dressed stranger circulated through the restaurant, passing out business cards for a local church. Peter Penland introduced himself as the "Singles Class" pastor of his father's church—City On a Hill Cathedral. It was a huge church and, at Peter's persistent invitation, Fiona agreed to visit. He came back after her shift and gave her a ride home. Along the way, he elicited from her the story of her background.

Fiona dressed in her Sunday best and soon found herself greeted
and escorted by the young assistant pastor. The Sunday school and service were not unpleasant. It was nothing like the little Baptist congregation on Copperhead Mountain. Senior pastor, Paul Penland was an entertaining speaker and laughed along with his huge flock as he referred to himself by what was apparently a favorite nickname—"Prosperity Paul" Penland. He preached a gospel that God wanted his followers to be successful, happy and prosperous, tithe paying saints. She was introduced to the pastor after the service.

The following Monday, Fiona was surprised to see young Peter Penland and his limousine waiting for her after work. He offered her a ride home and she welcomed a chance to avoid the "EL," as she'd learned to call the noisy elevated train.

Pastor Peter convinced her to call him Peter and he instructed the driver to head toward Joliet. He told Fiona that he would insist on treating her to a nice dinner as a way of welcoming her to their congregation. The dinner was excellent and Fiona tried to pay for her share but Pastor Peter would not hear of it.

As they entered the limo, he told her she would really encourage his father if she'd stop and say hello. Peter told her his father had been praying lately for the Lord to help him minister to young people such as Fiona.

"Dad's in our Joliet office, do you mind if we stop and see him?"
Fiona felt as if she owed her guide the effort and agreed.

The office was in a condominium building and it appeared quiet when they entered. Fiona marveled at the expensive furniture. Peter said his father would be with her shortly and he entered another room.

He soon returned to summon her with a smile and a motion.
"Pastor can see you now." It was a bedroom and not an office. Prosperity Paul stood in front of her wearing only his boxer shorts and a toothy grin. She backed away and Pastor Peter interrupted her retreat by putting his arm around her.

"Fiona, each should give of what he or she has to serve the kingdom. Pastor and I want to help you find a better job—we are in need of help here in the church. The job pays well and you could live and work in this very condo. It is your chance to minister to Pastor and to me while you serve the church."

Pastor Paul stepped forward and began to unbutton her blouse. She pushed him away.

Peter spoke, "Don't refuse to answer God's call to minister. Pastor and I have needs—we have pressures and tensions from doing his work. He brought you to us. The Lord has told me he has chosen this service as your ministry."

"I want to leave," she said.

"Child," Pastor Paul said as he approached again, "each of us has gifts to share. The Lord has given you gifts of beauty and sexuality. He has given me wealth and an opportunity to help others. We can help each other."

Unfortunately for Pastor Paul, Fiona McKee had a gift of her own. And she'd been taught to share. It was a strong leg and a kick that was more mule-like than lady-like. She kicked the preacher with all of her might. Her shoe landed squarely between his legs and he was immediately grimacing on the floor and having trouble breathing. Fiona spun around and ministered to the surprised young pastor just as strategically and powerfully. He doubled up across the bed.
That's how I met Fiona. My parents are the resident managers of the huge condominium complex. Fiona had come to their office for help when the senior pastor appeared to be going into unconsciousness. She was afraid he was going to die. He probably felt like he was dying. We called an ambulance and I talked to Fiona while we waited for it to arrive. She was not the first young female “parishioner” we had observed taking part in the Penland plan of salvation.

Both men refused medical help and the ambulance left quickly. The medics were fighting back laughter after hearing Fiona's account of her missionary efforts. I gave her a ride home.

She told me later that the father and son team of lecherous preachers had angered her. She said she thought of the preacher she’d known on Copperhead Mountain. Like most all of the men in the area, he worked in the low paying jobs and his garden all week. On Sundays and Wednesdays he preached. He didn’t always pronounce the old Biblical names perfectly and his limo looked more like an old dusty pickup truck. He didn’t preach a gospel of riches but you could trust him with your little sister and your big sister.

Of course, we were eventually married. Prosperity Paul and his son Peter would both do time for income tax evasion and grand theft. Young Peter also made headlines for trying to procure a prostitute. Unfortunately, instead of getting his kicks as he had with Fiona, this time he was dealing with an undercover policewoman.

Reprinted from BUT I WAS JUST PASSING THROUGH
TEN

FIDDLER POINTE

The networks are always looking for that human interest story that means little in the scheme of things but will be titillating enough to hold viewer interest until the next diversion comes along. Throw in some scandal about ill behaving high school girls exposing (so to speak) some privileged males to their comeuppance and your story will get air time.

Fiddler Point is a fairly affluent Mid-Atlantic Coast suburb. We certainly have an upper middle class element, some of whom, probably should be classified in an even higher socio economic class. Many wives serve on school and civic boards and organizations. Our husbands are the proverbial movers and shakers who lead communities and corporations.

We also have our middle class and lower middle class. It all works. Even those of us who own the businesses readily admit we need employees and customers for those businesses. The local schools reflect the class divisions but we like to think we've created a school system that works amid diversity.

The college preparatory program within the high school rivals any prep school in the country for its record of placing graduates in prestigious colleges and universities. Our grads are no strangers to the Ivy League. The program is called Fiddler Pointe Day School and it is like a school within a school. We refuse to accept guilt or blame for
passing on our advantages to our children. Any student can be admitted pending an acceptance based on a combination of test scores, life experiences, recommendations and interviews.

The cost is quite significant. The poor need not apply although we have provided a few equal opportunity scholarships and athletic grants. The day school program actually turns a nice profit for the entire school system and enjoys frequent fundraisers and a significant endowment. As a result of the financial input from the Day School, teacher salaries, for all programs and grades, attract the best and brightest to lead our classrooms. Students from the regular program are also no strangers to higher education.

Day Schoolers, as they are called, have the advantage of attending accelerated classes (we call them Advanced Placement) that see our Day Schoolers graduating with college credits. It's a flexible program that is driven by the needs of individuals. Students can take fewer than 4 years or as long as they need to graduate.

Our kids are immersed in nationally recognized cultural programs while still enjoying all of the extra curricular activities of a traditional high school.

Many schools have field trips. Our kids have visited all of the continents and a serious visit to China is on the drawing board. Our regular program includes trips, programs and equipment the envy of any public school. Classes are small and our two separate buildings are state of the art. Teachers need not apply. We recruit our staff.

The Pointe, as it's nicknamed, enjoys a hugely successful athletic program and all of the other amenities from a famous marching band to those prestige sports such as rugby, lacrosse and field hockey. The
football, swimming, tennis, golf and soccer teams enjoy national rankings most years. Day Schoolers and regular program students comprise the sports teams and other award winning extra curricular activities and all students benefit from the positive publicity generated by their school. These extra-curricular activities unite our two programs even as the programs and separate facilities divide them. It works.

We're presently borrowing the services of one of the public relations powerhouses (whose CEO has a student in the Day School) to find a more prestigious name to replace "regular program" to describe the majority of the students. It is in many ways, the best of both worlds. We’re intent on raising the status of the regular program without lowering that of the Day School.

The great success and prestige brought to us by those in the Day School is not without an occasional problem. The current difficulty was born out of resentment toward some of the kids in the Day School. I would think a certain amount of envy toward a successful class of people is to be expected. It's sort of the American way. Maybe some people see a Day School sticker or decal on a nice car and react as if they were seeing some kind of "My kid is better than your kid" bumper sticker. It's not our intent. It's also not our intent to apologize for our success in school, life or the marketplace.

This particular story started through the rumor mill. Soon, some revealing and embarrassing photos and videos made their way through some of those trite Internet sites where such things can be posted anonymously. A couple of networks—without showing explicit photos—picked up the story. Girls behaving wickedly against an affluent background will always sell. This story was destined to have
"legs" until something more significant would surface locally or nationally. That's the 24 hour news cycle.

Several girls from the regular high school had hatched a plot that would see them seducing young men from the Day School—athletes, school leaders, band members, etc. Instead of carrying out the seduction, they would quickly photograph and video tape the male students in the most advanced states of arousal and/or disrobement. These images are now circulating on the Internet. One web site calls it: “Today's Preppy—The Long And The Short Of Success.” You get the idea. It's real funny unless your child is one of the ridiculed students.

School and law enforcement officials are trying to find actions to take but this may have to be weathered and not quickly destroyed. This is, after all, the age of Internet sites that shelter anonymous affronts to moral standards. This scandal had the added draw of a little class warfare. For the most part, cooler heads are advising us to allow the scandal to die quietly while officials—state, federal and local—pursue punishment. Silence is not an easy task for a proud parent who has become successful by being proactive in the face of adversity.

All of this background leads up to explaining why I found a teary eyed and apologetic fifteen-year-old girl at my door. Our son, Richard, was apparently one of the original targets of this crude stunt. Rumors linking him and the girl to the scandal did make the rounds over the past month or so. Fortunately, our son was able to handle the situation and avoid the embarrassing results that have so humiliated some of our finest families. The young lady insists she changed her mind and decided not to take part in the plan. In any event, no photos or videos have surfaced that feature our son. The girl promises that none exist.
Her name is Alana McClain and I had already talked to her mother on the phone. I can't say that I was particularly friendly but I'm also not one who believes the parents are always to be blamed when kids go bad.

Her mother assured me the girl would be punished. I was upset when she told me, with some remorse, she was so enraged at her daughter she actually struck her. I wanted our satisfaction but not like that. When her mother suggested the girl come to our house to apologize, I readily agreed. I guess I wanted to know more about this kid before I formed more opinions or made further demands. I also guess I was still worried about photos and videos actually existing. My son has a lot at stake.

When she arrived I invited her as far as the foyer and I lit into her, "I hope you understand the seriousness of this situation. My son has spent his school career building a record and reputation that will open doors for him. Neither his father, nor I, will stand by and allow you to harm what he has worked so hard to achieve. Your mother said you are here to apologize."

"I am sorry for what happened."

She went on to tearfully admit she was in on the original plot but later backed out. "I wasn't sure they were serious at first. We were a little bored and we were joking around a lot. I guess the more I believed they were serious, the more I knew I just couldn't do it. Mrs. Wedman, I promise I didn't even take my digital camera when I went out with Richard the second night."

"I hope you are telling the truth because I want to assure you that we are prepared to use everything at our disposal to make your life,
and the lives of your cohorts, the kind of living hell you attempted to subject Richard to. My husband has reminded me that both of your parents work in positions particularly sensitive to entities that my family controls. He's into revenge and he's angry."

"I am sorry."

"Look, she told me she slapped you. I wish she hadn't. No one deserves that but believe me, when I first heard of this scheme I would have been tempted to slap you myself. You disgust me. You acted like a common whore. If slapping you would bring you to your senses, well, I can understand your mother's frustration and disappointment in you. You have embarrassed your family and the fact your mother was so upset should really make you think. I hope your parents ground you for the rest of the school year and the entire summer. I hope the school suspends you and your group. Maybe having to attend summer school will serve to make our point."

The kid looked in my eyes and I'm not exactly sure what I saw. It wasn't anger or resentment. I've learned to recognize those expressions in the mirror lately. I was expecting those emotions from her. No, this kid had a kind of despair, hopefully sorrow, to her countenance.

"My son is almost assured a spot in The International Boy's Governance Conference to be held this summer in Europe. He applied over a year ago. It is one of the most prestigious networking opportunities available anywhere. It could open so many doors for him in the future. Your thoughtless and selfish acts could easily have derailed that. You could easily have ruined the rest of his life. Even being linked to this can kill his invitation. Did you and your friends think about things like that? Could you live with ruining people's lives?"
She looked as if she wanted to speak but instead, hung her head slightly. She whispered a quiet no and again told me she was very sorry. Crying, she turned for the door.

"I hope you've learned a lesson," I said as she hurried out the door and ran down our steps in tears.

My tirade was particularly unsatisfying and I began working on myself to get over my resentment. I was feeling a little like a bully. In other circumstances, I could have probably liked the girl. Bullying was something my husband and our attorneys would be more comfortable with. I assured myself that would come next if Richard was further harassed. Though angry, I had been successful at convincing myself, and everyone, that it was best to keep a low profile as long as Richard was not defamed. We discussed the situation over supper. My husband Stan was almost as angry as Richard with the girl and her friends.

"Don't trust her," Stan warned.

Richard added, "I wish you could run her and her loser friends out of town."

Three days later, I received a phone call from my sister-in-law, who is an administrator at the local hospital. "Sally, that scandal at the Pointe may have claimed a victim. Alana McClain is one of the girls they investigated. They found her behind a dumpster at the mall with her wrist cut. They found her by accident and from what I hear, she was touch and go throughout the night. She did it right and had lost most of her blood."

"Is she going to make it?"

"She could. It's hard to tell, but I've heard she's stabilized. She's lucky she was found. She really was hidden from view."
I found out later that she'd left a simple typed message that said:
"I'm sorry."

Stan and Richard weren't very sympathetic to the news. I guess they'd mellowed a little from the other night but neither expressed a lot of compassion. Stan went so far as to say she'd made her bed and now had to lie in it.

Richard spoke in a voice so familiar it startled me. I'd heard both the self-righteous tone and manner before from someone else—his father. He again expressed resentment and distrust for the girl.

"She's a proven liar. I don't really care what happens to her. I tried to be nice to her and she was setting me up."

Selfishly, I couldn't help worrying that this incident would not only keep the scandal alive, it could drag Richard more deeply into it. I didn't like myself for thinking about that as if it occupied the same level of importance as a child's very life. I wanted to call her mother but I couldn't get past the fear that I'd be viewed as simply fishing for more information. I'm still a mom and I really felt sadness for that mother and daughter.

I had to do something. I visited the girl on Wednesday. She wasn't having visitors but I'm not without influence. She was sedated and her well-bandaged wrist and her uninjured wrist were held in some kind of restraining apparatus. My sister-in-law arranged the visiting privileges and I guess that gained me some influence with the nursing staff. They shared what they knew. She was in serious condition—more for psychiatric reasons than from her injury. Her wrist was cut deliberately and severely and the best assessment from the psychiatrist
indicated she would try again. I learned her mother had visited but the nurse didn't think the visit went very well.

The nurse related that she heard the shrink tell her mother, "This is the real thing and not a cry for help. She wants to die. She hid herself and was found only because an old man with a weak bladder just didn't think he could make it all the way into the mall. He walked behind a wall, thick landscaping and the dumpster before he found her. As luck would have it, he is a retired Navy medic. This wasn't a message or a cry for intervention. She had checked out for good. Her lifeless body would have been found sometime the next day."

It sounded like the mumbling girl was stirring and asking about a baby and I looked quickly at the nurse.

"She's lucky she and the baby survived. The ER said they'd never seen someone survive such a bleed. The pregnancy is probably only around a month along as near as anyone can guess without talking to her. I heard they found a pregnancy test kit in her purse. She's mumbled about a baby often so we're pretty sure she knew she was pregnant before the attempt. Sad. She's just fifteen. Her mother argued with her about being pregnant and I, for one, heard her tell the girl she was on her own if she kept the baby. I really felt sorry for the kid."

The nurse shook her head and said, "That child needs a friend."

My head was reeling. Richard had said he'd had two dates with the girl and she had aggressively come on to him but he'd been wary of her intentions. I wondered if I was looking at a real harlot. I wondered how many men she was seeing. I also wondered if my son was lying.

The nurse left and I suddenly whispered to the girl, "Did you take Richard Wedman's photo?"
She was still a little groggy and confused. I didn't think she even recognized me. "I liked him, I just couldn't do what the others planned. I didn't think it was funny. They're all angry with me but I just couldn't do that to someone. It wasn't right."

She pulled at her restraints and whispered, "He just wouldn't stop. I begged him and he just held me down. I was a virgin and I begged him to stop. He said he had protection and when he got rougher I was scared and just gave in. Girls have told me he was like that but I thought he liked me. He didn't have protection and he just laughed when I begged him to stop."

Suddenly, my son's tirade against this girl echoed through my mind. The tone and temperament belonged to his father—I could hear Stan denying one of his affairs with the same self-righteous anger his son had demonstrated.

Alana writhed silently and opened her eyes. She looked confused at seeing me sitting at her bed. I smiled and patted her arm. The next time she started to doze off I quietly left after looking at her. Her face looked so innocent and I had trouble taking my eyes from the thick bandages and restraints on her wrists.

I had a long, and sometimes angry, talk with my son. He denied any kind of contact with the girl beyond a simple date.

"Richard, do you know why that girl tried to kill herself?"

"Mom, the kids say she was just faking—just trying to get attention and get out of trouble."

"Richard, the authorities say she was lucky someone found her. She was hidden well out of sight. It was a real suicide attempt. And son, she tried to kill herself because she couldn't bear to have her parents find
out she is pregnant."

I got nowhere with him. I arrived at the hospital the next day to find she had pulled violently at her stitches. She had to be wrestled from leaping against a window when her restraints had been temporarily removed the previous night. She was sedated. The restraints had been returned to her wrists. Similar restraints now held her ankles. I only stayed about twenty minutes but I held her hand. She sought out my hand and squeezed it when I first tried to leave.

As she groaned and tried to move against her restraints, I watched her. I thought of a young woman who is now 25. I hadn’t seen her since her birth. Over the years I had forced myself not to think about her. In my mind, I also saw a 14-year-old girl—a scared and intimidated 14 year old. It was 25 years ago. That girl was a scared little kid from a prominent family. They would not accept a baby trying to raise a baby. A family member, an uncle, had repeatedly raped her at knifepoint. He was never prosecuted although he did leave the community. They preferred a rapist go unpunished to the thought of scandal. That child had no one and they even took her baby away. She had learned to put all of that out of her mind just to survive. It was too painful to think about and there was absolutely no one to talk to. It was like her whole little world had conspired against her.

I pulled up a chair. I somehow felt suddenly reborn—somehow suddenly awake and aware. Some kind of fog was lifted. I held Alana’s hand and waited for my new friend to awaken.
ELEVEN

COMMUNITY CHURCH

My husband was the pastor. He did everything by the numbers. Bible College. A divinity degree from a proper seminary. We met in Bible college but waited to wed in deference to the rules of the school. We signed on in a church in our main line denomination. The exact sect isn’t particularly important. We were in a church with enough fundamental theology that our youthful zeal was satisfied.

Darren started as a youth pastor. We soon found ourselves invited to visit another church with a pulpit vacancy. He was ready and I had no hesitation about being a pastor’s wife. Both my mother and grandmother played similar roles. Darren and I had a lot in common. My parents died while I was in college. My father died first and it seems like my mother lost her will to live. She followed him within a year and of course, I have always been troubled by the events. Darren’s parents died in a small plane crash the year after my mother died. They had been missionaries in South America at the time.

I’m not sure if that information will help or hurt in getting you to understand how and why we left our mainstream church and ended up as the pastors of a community homeless shelter. I won’t give you a name or city. They aren’t important.

Darren suffered a blow to his faith. He would eventually explain to our congregation that he had “lost his prophetic edge” and needed time away from a pastor’s position. That was code for the spiritual crisis he
was dealing with. It was a fundamentalist church. The idea of me taking over the position would be a violation of denominational rules. It violated the concept of where they thought a woman could serve. Until Darren’s fall from faith, it was a concept we readily accepted.

It all started with the son of a leading church member. The young man was a quiet and handsome senior in high school. He was a fair athlete. He was to be his class valedictorian. He also believed he was gay.

Jonathan came to Darren for counseling. Our denomination considered homosexuality to be both sinful and a choice. Darren is a good man. He was raised by parents who were so zealous; they gave their lives as missionaries. He gave Jonathan the party line on the subject. He was kind, I’m sure.

One Sunday night, this lonely and beautiful son of a church deacon missed a curve at high speed. His car virtually disintegrated upon smashing into a large live oak tree. He was pronounced dead at the scene. This terrific kid had simply made a mistake. Drugs and alcohol were later ruled out as factors by the autopsy. Teenagers drive too fast—even the responsible ones.

Darren preached a funeral just as the boy’s parents requested. It was a celebration of life and finished with a stirring altar call. Several of the young man’s classmates “came forward” to rededicate their lives to their faith.

We returned from the cemetery and Darren was more emotionally drained than I’d ever seen him. He was exhausted. For several days he could barely function. Nights found him sleeping some but mostly tossing and turning. He would get up several times a night
and retreat to his den. The night before he was to hold the first service since Jonathan’s death, he was up and in his den. The clock said 3 am and I was very concerned about him getting enough rest before what would be another draining experience.

Darren was at his computer and looked up as I entered. I guess I assumed he was working on his sermon. He took a deep breath and motioned me to look at his screen.

It was an email from young Jonathan. Darren said, “He wrote it just before he got behind the wheel. I didn’t see it until the next morning.”

The young man expressed his gratitude for Darren’s counseling. He then said that he had really tried but had come to realize that he was Gay, not by choice but by his most innermost nature. He asked Darren to never reveal his secret to his family. He used the pet name the kids had for Darren, “Pastor D, I can’t live in my parents world. Their God isn’t mine. I want them to remember me happy and as the person they will always be proud of.”

Darren was never the same after that young man’s death. He went through the motions of his position. He was exhausted from the emotional struggle he faced almost daily. I’m afraid his once heartfelt sermons were now close to being theatrical performances.

We were raised to believe hard work is the answer to many problems. At my urging, Darren and I threw ourselves into a new ministry. I was hoping it would spark his pastoral psyche back to what it had been. We began an outreach program in the county jail. We started with the women. It was a smaller core group and we figured we could get our program up and running without being overwhelmed. We used
the county jail web site to begin a visitation program. We traced residents as to their charges and tried to create some sort of program to follow them after release. Sadly, most women rejected our offers and some simply fell through the cracks of the system and we were unable to make even an introductory contact or evaluation. There was enough of a response that we continued the program. Enough of a response? Well, the number was 3 but for Darren’s sake I was desperate for the program to succeed.

Then a very odd thing happened. Darren was in the church office late one Saturday night. We’re in a quiet neighborhood. I’m told the church has never been locked. Darren heard a lot of noise and told me later he was hesitant to approach the sanctuary. The fates must have conspired on this one. Yeah, I know, fates aren’t exactly an element of Christian theology. Darren was in his favorite black tee shirt and dark slacks. He encountered a very, very drunken man. It wasn’t until he twice called Darren “father” that Darren figured out the man thought he was in the Catholic Church located on the next block. The man was barely coherent as he tried to make his confession. Protestant ministers don’t usually have a confessional or much use for one for that matter. The story he heard from the man bordered on the preposterous.

Darren did all he could do to keep the man from leaving after his “confession.” He tricked the man out of his car keys and managed to get him to the motel where he stayed. He got the man in his room and left after secretly placing the keys in the man’s suitcase.

Darren called me to pick him up and take him back to get his car at the church. He had a wild story to tell me.

The man whose “confession” he heard claimed to be a former
deputy sheriff. He related a bizarre story about the local officials using the jail to trap young women into a sex slave ring in a Central American country. We at first wrote off his claims as a product of extreme alcohol intoxication and an over active imagination. Even a little paranoia was evident in his claim his life was in danger because he knew too much.

We were mildly intrigued when we noticed there were rare occasions when young women seemed to be held with unlisted charges and then suddenly the record showed them released on their own recognizance or released without charges. Oddly, we found a situation where occasionally, a young woman was released on her own recognizance and the record of her incarceration was removed. In each case, she had been held several days without charges being listed or booking numbers assigned. In the short extent of our jail ministry, we encountered 4 such releases.

We were considering approaching the authorities with our questions when the former deputy who had visited Darren, was reported to have been shot and killed upon leaving a local bar. His photo in the paper left no doubt as to him being Darren’s visitor.

We met a young woman we’ll call Karla. She had heard about our ministry on the street. Karla’s most prized physical property consisted of a small album of photos of her infant twins. She had their birth certificates and also papers recounting their adoption. It was an open adoption and she had been promised the right to be a part of their lives. She told us how grateful the adoptive parents had been. She had promised them she would only come around when she was straight and sober. She asked our help in getting herself straightened out from her most recent bout with alcohol.
We found her a job and safe place to live. We gave her the rent money for a furnished apartment and she went to work in a fast food restaurant. She asked us to hold onto her treasures and her extra money as she worked. We put her on an allowance that would make alcohol difficult to afford. Her goal was to save enough for a plane ticket and some presents. She was motivated big time.

Other than her twins, Karla had no living relatives. Death and drugs had removed everyone from her life including the father of her children. Karla was a transient. She traveled the country, getting into occasional alcohol fueled scrapes with the law. She periodically got herself presentable and visited her kids. She told us the adoptive parents were good people who have offered to set her up near their home and include her in family life. They sounded almost too good to be true.

Her alcoholism was always a stumbling block. She once mentioned that she respected the fact that the adoptive father was in politics and had talked to her about how scandals could hurt his career and the children’s future. She had a long-term goal in the back of her mind to someday pursue the invitation. She seemed to be winning her battle.

It was with surprise that our weekly check of the county web site revealed a booking photo of Karla. No charges were listed and the date of her arrest was not listed. We had just seen her the day before. She and I had shopped for a present for her girls and we were storing it for her. She was getting excited about her trip.

We tried to visit Karla in jail. We were told that she had been released three days earlier. That was disturbing. She had visited with us during that time. We were told charges had been dropped but the clerk
said the record was incorrectly filed and that probably had something to do with her release. “It happens,” the woman said with a bored shrug of her shoulders.

Before we left, a deputy came out and asked us some questions about our relationship with Karla. We simply told him she had attended our church and we were hoping to sign her up for our rehabilitation program. The deputy told us that she had mentioned she was going to leave town and stay with relatives on the West Coast. “It was a sister or aunt or something. L.A., I think,” was all she said.

We left confused. Karla had never talked about relatives or California. We knew that the adoptive family she wished to join was in Washington DC. We went to her apartment and found it for rent. We asked the landlady if she talked to Karla before she left. She looked a little confused.

“I never talked to her. The law came with a warrant. They took her clothes and said she was heading downstate to a prison. Look. I don’t need trouble. Good riddance.”

We returned home and tried to sort things out. It didn’t make sense. We searched the county site again and found no mention of Karla. We checked the section on active inmates and released inmates. Nothing. I think Darren was thinking what I was thinking. Suddenly, the confession, and later mysterious death, of Darren’s late night visitor took on an ominous aura.

We went through the papers she had entrusted to us. We found the name and address of the adoptive parents of her twins. I vaguely recognized the father’s name. He was a congressman from a district in an eastern state. I couldn’t recall his party affiliation or anything else
about him. Karla had left $109 and the gifts for her children. Certainly, she’d have needed the money for any kind of travel. And if she were going to DC, she certainly would’ve wanted to take the presents.

Darren prepared his Sunday sermon and included a mention that we were going to take a few days of vacation the following week.

We used the phone number we found in Karla’s papers when we got to DC. The adoptive father was indeed a congressman. We told the woman who answered who we were and how we knew Karla. She invited us to visit that same night.

The parents were young and seemed very sincere. We met the little ones just before they headed off to bed. The father joined his wife after tucking in his children and we told them about our experiences and concerns about Karla. The color drained from his face and there was a long silence. He drummed his fingers and pursed his lips as he obviously was thinking of what he wanted to say.

The congressman asked us the name of our county and county sheriff. He asked a lot of questions and actually wrote notes in his small notebook. He asked us who all knew about our concerns. He was the only person we’d ever mentioned anything to. He asked us to keep it that way and promised to talk to us in two days. We gave him our word and he seemed very trusting. We left with even more of a mystery than we’d arrived with.

True to his word, we were invited to again visit in his Georgetown townhouse. There was a stranger with him. The man had that bearing—that posture that said military. The congressman introduced us to the man, simply calling him Joe. He asked us to tell the
whole story from the very beginning. When we were done, the 2 men looked at each other and “Joe” nodded to the congressman.

We were told an almost unbelievable story of abduction, sex slavery and intrigue that reached into places of power. A most famous politician was involved. Both the congressman and his investigator agreed that we had just supplied the last piece of a disturbing puzzle.

The powerful politician they were after was part of a cabal that supposedly maintained a brothel in Latin America. We recognized his name immediately. The clients didn’t pay for the services they received; they paid with other people’s money. They were influenced for their votes and their cooperation on projects that benefited the politician and his friends. If needed, the clients were even blackmailed.

Joe was a former Navy Seal and veteran of Navy Intelligence. He was near retirement when he first came to the congressman from his home district with his suspicions. He had been secretly investigating for the congressman ever since. Darren told me later that it was then that he recalled what he knew about the congressman—he was a Navy veteran. That might have explained why the two men were working together.

The congressman trusted us with the whole sordid story. The big name politician took people deep sea fishing as a front for visits to the brothel he maintained in Central America. He was bribing local officials and used the brothel to reward people who provided the political and economic favors I mentioned. The brothel was disguised as a private residence for a rich retired American businessman. Payments to corrupt local officials kept it safely uninspected.

That was bad enough, but what followed was even worse. No one had known who was involved in the procurement of young
American women to be sex slaves. The suspected compound was located a few miles up a river from the coast in a thick jungle setting. No one knew what would be done to women who no longer were attractive or cooperative.

The congressman had learned that some local American official probably kept an eye out for attractive young women who came into his jail on somewhat minor charges. Great effort had probably been made to select women who had few local friends and no close family ties. According to their working theory, young women were probably targeted and re-arrested without charges. Their backgrounds would be investigated and if all checked out as hoped, they would be “released” into the politician’s pipeline of sex slaves.

Of course Darren and I asked why the Justice Department and the FBI weren’t pursuing charges. The congressman intimated that the politician was a ruthless man of great influence. He doubted if the information about an investigation could be kept from the man. The congressman looked squarely in our eyes and said, “Those young women are dead if he learns of any inquiry. We want to rescue them BEFORE there is an investigation. We really aren’t sure how high up his client list goes.”

He paused and said, “Look, these young women will be able to identify this politician and his friends. Do you honestly think they will ever be freed? These are sinister people. When they are deemed too old for what this man’s friends are after, well, we just don’t think their future…” His voice trailed off and he added, “When this guy runs for president, these women will need to be eliminated.”

“Who is ‘we’ congressman,” Darren asked.
He wouldn’t tell us who was involved other than to mention it included some retired military and Justice Department people. He reminded us that he was of the same political party as the other politician and assured us there was nothing political at work.

He paused for a few seconds and then said, “That’s not the exact truth. Look, he is lining up support for a run at the White House. I can’t imagine him as president—no, I can’t imagine this country with him as president.”

The story got really cloak and dagger at this point. We learned we had been quickly investigated by the congressman. He knew about our ministry and he knew about Darren’s missionary parents. We were asked if we would join the rescue.

I was hesitant but must remind you of Darren’s spiritual crisis. He wanted to join the rescue from the minute we were offered the opportunity. I think he needed to get involved and I agreed. We were still scared.

It was quite a plan. We were to return home and Darren would arrange a leave or vacation. When Darren and I talked later, I knew it was time for him to give his resignation.

The plan was for Darren to contact some of his parent’s old friends in their mission organization. He would secure permission to visit some of the Central America assigned missionaries who were in the field. This would be our “cover” and explain why we were in the region. We were invited because they wanted some witnesses who did not have military or political backgrounds. If the deal collapsed, we would have a chance to escape using our cover. We were just 2 innocent wannabe
missionaries who signed up for a deep-sea excursion on a large charter boat while we were exploring the area.

When the time came, a boat would leave a small port in southern Texas, ostensibly on a deep-sea fishing excursion. Hidden on board would be several inflatable boats and small outboard motors. Four ex Navy Seals would be disguised as tourists. Darren and I would fly to an agreed upon destination where we’d interrupt our missionary observations to take a fishing trip.

The congressman will have already infiltrated the politician’s potential “fishing” guest list. He was to play the role of a “straying” husband. There was a key vote looming in a few weeks in Congress. He was chairman of a key committee on a bill that the politician’s supporters wanted badly.

If all went as planned, the congressman would fly to the Central American country to be picked up for his so called fishing charter. He would be taken to the brothel. He would “reconnoiter” the target and even activate a GPS type signal device. It was James Bond stuff. He had a capsule hidden in a way that would clear airport security. Once in the brothel, the capsule would render him very ill with flu-like symptoms—extreme flu-like symptoms. It would fool local doctors and despite his “desires,” he would be unable to be entertained by the politician’s women. He would jokingly accuse him of poisoning him. He would have several other capsules. In our preparation meetings he laughingly described them as “miracle” cures. When the 4 Seals roared into the riverside compound, the congressman was to accost the politician and force him to relinquish all of the videos and records. Darren asked how he would force him to talk. The one-time Naval officer said, “Do you
really want to know?” When Darren nodded, the man quickly grabbed Darren’s hand and gripped just one finger in a debilitating hold. Darren cried out in agony and said, “Ok, Ok,” and dropped to his knees, laughing at how easily he was subdued. The congressman added, “I’ll also ‘explain’ to him that he’d probably have the information leave with us rather than with reporters.”

We were going through our deep sea fishing ruse when the radio crackled the code words we’d been waiting to hear. Our boat raced toward the pick-up point and we soon saw 4 inflated boats roaring towards us. We helped the congressman and 6 thoroughly frightened young women into the boat. Karla was among them. The Seals were busy deflating their boats and sinking them and their weapons. Pulled by the outboard motors, the deflated boats sank quickly out of sight.

We quickly explained what was needed to the 6 women. I gave each the fake passports we had for them and I had them quickly change clothes in the lower cabin as I continued to explain what was happening. I instructed them to study their new identities while I took their “working” clothes and the extra faked passports up to the deck. One of the Seals put the clothes in a weighted bag and dispatched it to the bottom. He quickly cut the passports into tiny pieces. He burned these in a small container and scattered the ashes into the sea as we continued to speed along. I was just totally impressed by how these men had planned this to the slightest detail. They even had a place to hide the hard drive and the small stack of computer discs the congressman had. We continued to race toward our target in Mexico. One of the Seals leaned over the side and peeled off the numbers and name on the side of the boat. New numbers were revealed, as was a new name for the boat.
He deftly cut the old stickers into tiny pieces and scattered them in the ocean.

Suddenly, two Navy planes appeared racing above the open sea. Both planes dipped their wings in an obvious gesture.

“You didn’t see that,” the congressman smiled.

Darren picked up quickly, “See what?”

It dawned on me that no one had mentioned the politician or any of his guests. The congressman had a grim look on his face. He told us that the man had produced a weapon and had to be disarmed. He was led off into the jungle in the company of his 4 remaining “guests.” They had no clue that government law enforcement personnel would soon come upon a scene containing illegal weapons and drugs. The local employees were given the money that was confiscated from the guests. They were advised to “take the money and run.” They did, happily. It was presumed that the local officials would require some sizeable bribes to smooth things over.
TWELVE

FATHEAD AND SILLY’S
A Convergent American Tragedy

It would be obvious to anyone who talked to him for very long that Thomas Merrell would always be known as Tommy and not Tom or Thomas. It just sort of fit.

Many who met him considered him a character. He was the life of every party and the comedian in every conversation. If you got to know him better, you soon realized there was more to him than what you saw on the surface.

We met in college—my first, his fourth in two years. Credit-wise, he was still a freshman. Some housing official placed us in the same dorm room. Tommy was something of an athlete. Basketball was his passion. He was kind of a “Gypsy” in pursuit of the sport. He’d attended several high schools and had played in a few different summer leagues.

He had been attending what most would consider “mid major” colleges the previous years. He was unable to make the teams as a walk-on. He craved stardom and had reluctantly enrolled in the Division II school where we became roommates.

Tommy had been a big fish in a very small pond in his last high school. He had a scrapbook. There were about 150 boys in the school and it was in the lowest division of state championship competition. He
had gotten the nickname “Tommy Gun” for his shooting. We spent a couple of days on the outdoor courts near the dorm and Tommy was good. I wouldn’t say “great.” He could shoot and he was pretty fast—compared to me and the others in the pick-up games. However, we weren’t athletes. We were wannabe accountants, engineers and teachers. He was about six feet tall and not a great jumper. He said he’d spent hours in the weight room trying to improve his jumping.

Of course, he didn’t make the university team as a walk-on. I’m sure you saw that coming. The assistant coach was kind and advised Tommy to join the intramural program for the rest of the year and try a school from a lower division. Crushed at first, Tommy became the star of our dorm team in the intramurals. Tommy Gun always scored in double figures. I think he was waiting for the school team to call him back. It wasn’t going to happen as he wasn’t even close to being the best player in the intramural league.

Our dorm team finished in 4th place. Tommy acted like he’d been in the real Final Four. I saw him drink for the first time as we celebrated. He was normally “in training.” We sat around and downed more beer than we should have. One by one, our friends dropped out of the marathon. Tommy and I were to the word slurring stage.

I learned about Tommy’s most tightly held secret as the alcohol removed his final inhibitions. There was a reason we never saw Tommy with a date or ever heard him express the lothario-like comments the rest of us routinely utter. There was a reason having nothing to do with basketball for him having attended 3 high schools. I was glad it was only the 2 of us left in the room. Most of us brought our intolerance with us to college. We packed it in the box where we had our insecurities. I
wasn’t going to say anything belittling. Maybe Tommy knew that. Maybe he knew there was no coup to be acquired by a young guy making homophobic slurs without a jury of his peers in attendance. Maybe he was just too drunk to care.

“I really tried to be interested in girls…I mean, I like them, it’s just that…” His voice trailed off into silence. “My parents…my mother…” Again his voice trailed off. This time he slipped off into an alcohol induced sleep.

Tommy’s “secret” remained safe with me for the remainder of the semester. We became good friends. The next serious conversations we had weren’t fueled by alcohol. He taught me a lot about things like tolerance and the difference between sexual orientation and the myth of sexual preference. He eventually left school in pursuit of still another opportunity to play his sport.

We kept in touch over the years. I got married and my wife and I exchanged visits with Tommy over the years. Of course I shared his secret with Vickie. She laughed at me. She reminded me she worked in the fashion industry.

“Do you think I’m a complete idiot,” she laughed. I sometimes wonder if I am the last naïve person on earth.

Tommy now lives in a state that is debating gay marriage. He’s met a man with whom he wants to spend his life. It was early morning when Tommy called me. He was in the emergency room of the local hospital. He and his boyfriend/fiancé Larry were jumped as they left a nightclub. The club was called Silly’s and he had told me once that it was like a second home and meeting house for the Gay Community. It had recently come under attack from political entities because it was the
organizational center for the local Gay Marriage movement. One media figure in particular, a man Tommy and his friends nicknamed “Fat Head,” had been calling for a holy war of sorts against all things gay. He had expressed his wish that a kind of Christian Fundamentalist-based law be invoked to drive away gays, liberals, Muslims and socialists. He was gaining quite a following through wider syndication of his program. Fat Head had once been detained under suspicion he had travelled to the Far East to engage in child prostitution. Fat Head had been stopped by airport security with a variety of sexually related objects. He was alleged to have been carrying condoms, various poppers, lotions, male E.D. drugs and some photos of him sitting in his underwear with several Asian boys similarly attired. Fat Head defended some more controversial photos and drawings as “art work.” The evidence mysteriously disappeared from a property room and he eventually denied anything other than typical tourist snap shots ever existed. The story garnered its period of interest in the news but it was widely rumored that Fat Head had some strong political connections and apparently the Attorney General even intervened. No charges were ever brought.

Fat Head had announced he was on a mission to return America to what he called its no compromise Christian heritage. He had begun by “outing” a number of locally famous people in Tommy’s city and surrounding areas. He had listed the names, addresses and phone numbers of several of what he called “Queers and Queer Sympathizers.” He refused to use the term “Gay” or even Homosexual on his programs. His latest stunt was to list the addresses of known gay nightclubs and bars. There had been several incidents of people being confronted at
their houses and nightspots. Fathead was urging his movement to become a nationwide movement.

Larry was in a coma and on life support. Tommy was knocked nearly unconscious with a concussion but got less seriously injured because his partner had shielded him with his body as an angry mob threw bricks at them while shouting things about stoning “Queers” for God. Fat Head had begun using what he said was a satirical chant—“Kick a Queer for Jesus.”

The hospital would only allow relatives in to see Larry and Tommy was beside himself with angst. Larry had been shunned by his family when he announced his sexual orientation and there was no one to contact for him. The hospital would share very little information with Tommy. He was not permitted to enter the special trauma unit where only relatives and spouses could enter. After I hung up and relayed the news to Vickie, she held my hand and said she can be ready to leave immediately.
THIRTEEN

UNDERGROUND

So I live underground. What’s your big flicking problem? You live in a damn house of cards but I don’t send my social workers and reporters around to poke into your flicking slip. They tell me there are people with our accommodations under just about every flicking city in your wonderful world.

I like to ride a horse up in the park. I’m not sure I like it as much as I used to but I do it more. Nirvana is expensive but I can always buy some weed and cut it a bit to sell to the cool guys up near the fancy hotels and nightclubs. I can make enough to spring for a horse ride. I like to ride up in the park and lie in the grass watching the clouds. Sometimes Jim Dandy wants magical powders and I can help him out with a visit to where he’s afraid to go. I’ll step all over his treat but he’s usually so flicking stupid he’ll thank me the next day and ask for more gruel. I’ve had the slick dudes complain and even threaten me when they realized I had previously screwed all over their parade. The last time it was big athletic slick Joe College. I’d let him test a bag and he smiled at the almost instant numbing. What he hadn’t seen was how the man from underground had switched bags. He confronted me 2 days later and I tossed a little white bag at his feet and apologized. He bent to pick it up and I apologized again, foot to face…and again foot to ribs…and foot to
face. I don’t think flicking athletic slick had ever seen a street fight. There is no three knockdown rule where I live. No one is saved by the bell.

It’s sometimes a little damp underground. It’s usually warm enough. When the winters are really brutal, there are steam pipes and we know where fires can be tended without attracting too much attention. Every once in a while the big blue bullies are sent down to clear us out. It’s fine. They’re slow and clumsy and we know how to stash what we need and give up what we must.

I’ve been up and down Main Street. I’ve been on many of your streets. Fourth and Walnut once beckoned me with come hither eyes. Skid Row and Cannery Row remain merely sideshows. Wall Street and Main Street are illusions.

I’ve seen the sun kiss the ocean. I’ve stood emotionally naked before an expanse of mountains that would cool hell and melt the same sun that will scorch the dessert floor. I’ve seen glass and steel and brick mountains where commerce was the language and the manna that fed fools. I’ve been everywhere and learned everywhere is nowhere. I know of cathedrals, temples and sacrificial altars where spirits are routinely divided from souls. I’ve seen most all of everything…and it’s all a house of cards.
FOURTEEN

EVIL TOWN

“Mon, Ja is collecting his saints.”

His name was Nevil Townsley. On paper his name sounded typically British. People don’t exist on paper. Nevil was Jamaican— Jamaican from his strong African features to his colorful Jamaican accent. On the stage, he was a Reggae singer with potentially a good commercial upside. His stage name was Evil Town. Some glad handing British record producer had suggested he take the name. He became my friend through a mutual friend. When I met him he was in kind of a spiritual crisis. The commercial side of music was troubling him. He wasn’t sure he wanted a future in it.

Nevil came accompanied with his own ganja. We sat every night in my family room as Nevil held court with me and trusted friends.

We learned a lot from our Rasta man. It was late August of 1995. Friends and I were in mourning for a great man we’d followed. Nevil commiserated with us. He told us of his exact location the week he heard Bob Marley was dying. He was saddened even further as he lamented another death just over 6 years later of a man he called Stepping Razor.

“Mon, Ja is collecting his saints,” he said. We got nightly homilies about the religion he said was as much a way of life as a religion. We learned of Zion-Africa and the all-knowing greatness of Ja. Nevil said his life as a Rastafari was to give Ja praise.

The fact Nevil even befriended us broke down a stereotype for us. To the Rastafarians we were “Bald-heads.” I think the term
originated as a description of someone without dreadlocks. Nevil was increasingly finding disillusionment with some of the self-proclaimed Rastas he encountered. Such people represented Babylon, just like the Bald-heads, but there was an inquisitive side to Nevil. He wanted to know what drove us—what got us out of bed in the morning and what allowed us to sleep at night. He expressed great sadness about people who lived lives built on illusions.

When Nevil talked about himself, he didn’t use the word me. It was always I and I. He said it was the way of honoring and recognizing the God who was in all of us. God was a trinity and the Holy Spirit dwelled in men’s hearts.

Life was everliving rather than ever lasting. After 2 weeks the Townsley traveling stash was decimated and we were smoking what I could gather. The smoke was a bit harsh but Nevil was the good guest. He was a vegetarian and would not touch alcohol either. He said it was Babylon’s poisonous trap. He then apologized for insulting those of us who were products of Babylon. Several times he told us about Amagideon. He was surprisingly up to date on news and told us often of things that illustrated the ongoing decline of modern man. His arguments were sound and difficult to refute.

Eventually, it was time for Nevil to leave. “Mon, we are smoking trimmings. Babylon’s laws are too strict for me to allow you to risk your very life to supply me gonja. No mon. I must now be on my way.” At the airport put his hand on my head and gently rubbed. “Planting dreadlocks,” he smiled. We embraced and he slipped away.

We never heard from or about him again.
Diego Enrique and his wife Maria Alicia were tired virtually every night when they got home. They worked hard. Maria Alicia would pick up their little girls from daycare and the three of them would ride the bus to the little apartment.

Diego found he could save several dollars a week by walking to his jobs. Despite being tired from his regular job, his part time work at a little mom and pop market, over in a tough section of town, was a financial necessity. Maria Alicia always worried about the dangerous neighborhood where her Diego worked at his 2nd job, but the money allowed them to afford a much safer neighborhood than they’d had when they first moved to America.

His main job was in an assembly plant for cheap furniture and he worked with several men who relied on Diego to translate English instructions into Spanish. The 2nd job was in a bad neighborhood and Diego had been robbed and beaten once as he walked home.

Maria Alicia anxiously awaited Christmas because Diego’s final night at the 2nd job was the night before Christmas. He was starting a new position with his main employer. The promotion included a good and much needed pay raise. There would also be the opportunity for overtime work so he could give up the part-time job.
Despite trying to obey the rules in their new country, what little savings they had brought with them had been used up for an immigration lawyer. It was a records snafu but it was still costly to straighten out. Also, the two illnesses their little girls had experienced not only took their meager savings, they were still making payments. The doctor had kindly discounted his charges but the hospital expected full payment.

Anarosa and Daniela were both under 5. They didn’t understand a lot of things that went on but like the few little friends they had, they were mesmerized by Christmas excitement.

By scrimping and saving, the parents were able to put the girls in an excellent day care center and pre-school. Mrs. Jean Watkins owned a group of these very popular centers. As Christmas approached, she and her office staff filled in for workers who were allowed time off for shopping. She spoke fluent Spanish and enjoyed talking in both languages with the Enrique girls. She helped them and the others write letters to Santa. She’d often do this and then secretly share the letters with parents before the letters would be “sent off to the North Pole.”

Anarosa and Daniela were wide eyed as they heard more stories about Santa. Their letter to him explained that they still had the very special dolls he’d brought them last time and didn’t need anything new. They asked Santa if he could bring warm gloves and hats for their parents because they both had to stand out in the cold waiting for busses or walking to work. They told Santa they really liked their new country but it was very cold compared to Mexico. Anarosa added that their Daddy had a hat but it was lost the time he was hurt and robbed.

“They took his gloves too, Santa.”
Mrs. Watkins had a tear trickle from her eye as she wrote what the girls explained. She didn’t share this letter and she smiled at the thought of not wanting to risk it getting lost on the way to the North Pole. She knew the Enriques were struggling financially. She went out and bought 4 hats and 4 pairs of gloves. She made sure 2 of each were adult sizes. She hatched a plot to deliver the gifts on the doorstep, ring the doorbell and run.

Maria Alicia opened the door and found the present addressed to all of them. She suspected Mrs. Watkins had done it. They really didn’t know anyone else very well and the kids talked glowingly of her.

Maria Alicia couldn’t wait for Diego to get home on Christmas Eve to tell him of the package. She had hidden the package from the girls along with the sweatshirts they had bought as presents for them. That afternoon she had purchased a little Christmas tree from the store near their bus stop. She told the girls they would make decorations for the tree.

“This is the best Christmas there could ever be,” shouted Anarosa.

Maria was mildly concerned when Diego didn’t arrive at his regular time. Her apprehension grew when he became over an hour late. Suddenly there was a knock and she hurriedly went to the door. She didn’t even check the little peephole as she undid the security chain. Her heart pounded as she opened the door and found Oliveira, one of Diego’s co-workers.

“Maria, it was a sweep. ICE raided the plant and took everyone.”

“But Diego is legal, we have cards and he has ID.”
“They took everyone’s wallets and purses and everything and threw them in a bag…and Maria, Diego and some of the men tried to explain and they used those Taser guns on them. They dragged everyone off an’ no one knows where they took them.”

Reprinted from BUT I WAS JUST PASSING THROUGH
Growing up, if you said anything about my mother, we fought. I went to war. That was many years ago but I remember it as if it were yesterday. My mother was never around when I grew up. I know now that she was a wandering free spirit. She rambled around the country—at the tail end of all things we now call the Beat Generation. I had, and have, no clue as to the identity of my father. My birth certificate says his name is “Unknown.” No one in my life has offered even a rumor as to his name or location. “Bastard” was more than just a mindless epithet in those days. It was a stigma.

I was raised by various combinations of my grandparent’s brothers and sisters. I think they meant well but they were all older than any of the parents of my few friends. I moved around a lot. Truth is, I was passed around a lot but all in all, it wasn’t a bad life. I was never abused unless you count indifference as abuse. I don’t. Times were hard and none of my guardians were rich or legally required to take me in. I think I was kind of the family embarrassment. I guess I was a charity obligation of sorts but no one rubbed my nose in it. That’s Ok. I survived. I missed having a mother and to a lesser degree, a father.
My various care providers would never tell me about my mother. She visited me a few times but I was not yet 7 or 8. Her last visit was the occasion of my First Communion. I remember her a little. I have a vague memory of a stranger who put her arm around me and kissed me on the cheek. I think I only remember her because she gave me a $50 bill. It was the largest gift I was given on the occasion. I think there was some arguing among my relatives and I’m certain I never heard from my mother again. I didn’t know it was my mother at the time. Maybe I would have paid more attention had I known but truthfully, the $50 was quite a distraction at the time. Over the years my inquiries were always answered with some version of an “I don’t know” and the subject was changed.

Kids would say evil things about my absent mother. I wasn’t the toughest kid—by far, but on this topic I was relentless. I’m not sure why. I got in trouble a few times for exceeding the unwritten rules of schoolyard fights. I hit people with anything I could find. Sticks and stones do hurt people but so do words. I’m lucky, and so are several others, that guns and knives were not readily available in those days. The anger was partly, I think, directed at my mother as much as the person who was baiting me. The incidents declined in high school as maturity and other interests captured teenage imaginations.

I’ve learned to deal with all of this and while there is pain, it’s more like a yearning or curiosity. I believe I had stored the anger. I think I’m happy. I have a good life and a family of my own now. I married later in life. Well, it was a second marriage. This one was to a woman 4 years younger. I’m seeing 50 approaching and my 3 children are in or near high school age and I’m determined to keep them closely in my life.
Having a family has been wild. My kids have been spoiled rotten by my wife’s parents. I don’t mind. I wish I had a grandparent for them from my family but I am amazed by the contact and hope to experience it myself when my kids start families.

All of my early years came back to me when I met an old friend of my mother’s. Mrs. Johnson was an older widow, probably in her mid or late 60s or 70s according to my wife’s estimate. The woman moved into a house 3 doors down from us. Our street is a cul-de-sac type and the neighbors have frequent block parties. It’s been going on for years and we’ve come to enjoy them. Mrs. Johnson endeared herself to me and my family by immediately hiring my kids to frequently work around, and in, her house. She paid well and the kids were delighted with the independence the money afforded. She picked my kids even though there were a few older ones in the neighborhood.

It was while we were in a discussion where she expressed such appreciation for my kid’s work that I made a stunning discovery. She said she was having a health problem and would be hospitalized for some procedures. She wanted to pay my kids to maintain her property for “a week or two.” I knew my kids would be irritated but I voiced my approval only if she paid them LESS than the exorbitant figure she had in mind. At first, when I heard the reason for her coming absence, my wife and I had tried to insist we merely look after her place for free as neighbors. She was adamant and argued convincingly that she was an old, independent woman who took pride in paying her own way. We gave in but I felt guilty.

I think she was pretty scared about her pending medical concerns. We spent some time talking to her. She casually mentioned
that she’d once known a woman by my rather unusual last name. None of my guardians had ever adopted me so I kept the name Heyerdahl. It is an old Norwegian name. There was even a famous explorer and writer by that name but he was not even a distant relative. She mentioned she had been friends with the woman but didn’t know her whereabouts or even if she was alive. When she said “Lainie Heyerdahl,” my jaw dropped. There couldn’t be that many people on earth with that name. I immediately asked her if she would tell me about the woman but I noticed how tired she looked. She was going into the hospital the next day and I forced myself to rein in my curiosity for then.

I visited Mrs. Johnson in the hospital. She’d had an operation and I wondered if she would be having family members visit. I asked her nurse if family was expected and she told me that the old woman hadn’t mentioned anyone. That saddened me and I determined to bring the family and also talk to some of the neighbors about visiting.

She was in good spirits but did not offer information about her operation or her condition. I didn’t pry. Eventually the conversation exhausted the few things we had in common as neighbors and I asked her to tell me about the Lainie Heyerdahl she’d mentioned.

Lainie was born to a couple of barnstorming entertainers who came along too late for Vaudeville but without the talent to make the breakthrough to the medium of television.

I knew we were talking about my mother when she answered my question about relatives by mentioning three names of some of the people I was raised by. She said there were others but she couldn’t remember them.
Lainie’s parents were named Elaine and Lane. They performed under the catchy, but corny, name of Elaine and Lane. They sang and danced in a poor man’s version somewhere between a Steve and Eydie and a Fred and Ginger. They traveled across the country and occasionally stayed in one city long enough to rent a studio and eke out a living teaching singing and dancing. They were somewhat talented but they were in a field of little demand.

Lainie was born on the road. It was a tough life for a family and as soon as she was old enough, the little girl found herself singing and dancing in her parent’s act. They were worse than stage parents. The little one would cry herself to sleep almost every night. She was cajoled and even physically abused to make her practice for hours each day. She paid a high price if she messed up in the act.

Advertised as “Elaine, Lane and Lainie,” they enjoyed some minimal success. The little girl was pushed hard to perform as the family played state fairs and the few small venues that still existed.

When times were particularly difficult, Lane assumed the identity of a blind evangelist named “Jeremiah Lane.” Elaine would play whatever organ or piano that was available and Lainie would perform the hymns and gospel songs she would spend tearful hours and hours learning. When the revival ended and the evangelical team headed for the next engagement, blind Jeremiah Lane would not drive the van until they were a sufficient distance out of town. He would relinquish his driver’s side when they approached the next revival site.

It was a miserable life and Lainie was used in more and more sinister arrangements as the trio played seedier and seedier gigs. At times, the now young teenager wasn’t much more than a prostitute. She
danced illegally in topless bars and was made to take “limo rides” with various paying customers. Her parents were by then full blown alcoholics and drug addicts.

As Mrs. Johnson told her story, I was certain that if she really was talking about my mother, any ill feelings I had for my mother were evaporating.

“Did she have a family?” I asked.

She had one son when she was still 16. He was raised by relatives because she was going to be forced to give the child up to strangers if she failed to allow relatives to have the boy. She had concealed her pregnancy into her sixth month and had briefly run away to avoid being forced into a back alley abortion. I was debating telling her that the person we’d discussed was my mother. She looked like she was getting tired and I excused myself, telling her I’d visit the next day. She seemed pleased.

The next day I stopped at the nurse’s station to check on her condition before I went to her room. “She’s doing well,” she said and added, “she’s been talking about seeing you.” She turned to a young doctor, “Dr. Weller, here’s Mrs. Johnson’s son.”

The doctor offered his hand with a smile. “Your mother had a cancerous tumor removed from her intestine. We still need some tests but my gut feeling is we can treat her. The worst case gives her a year. If her stars are aligned right, we can see more successful treatment and remission.”

I tried to explain that I wasn’t her son and only a neighbor. “I’m Joseph Heyerdahl.” I told them I wasn’t aware she had any relatives. The doctor looked at his clipboard and thumbed through a couple of
pages before saying, “I’m sorry Mr. Heyerdahl, here’s the problem.” He then showed me her official record. It listed her name as Lainie Heyerdahl Johnson.

To say the least, I was stunned. I stared at the paper and then the doctor. I wasn’t confused for long. Yes, we had a tearful reunion. I learned that my mother had given me up to give me a life. She stayed with her parents until she was in her mid 20s. She had no formal education. She was trapped. Her parents, my grandparents, died in a drunken crash from which she was saved only because she slept in the back of the van. She had crawled, burned and injured, from the burning wreck. She had kicked around the country living by her wits. Her attempts to see me had always been discouraged and she was eventually convinced to stay out of my life for my sake. She eventually got an education and met, and married, an older man who had given her a good life before he passed away. She had inherited a comfortable life and had searched for me. She’d made several attempts to contact me but got scared each and every time. She was making one more attempt to visit me when she got cold feet again. As she was leaving our neighborhood, she saw the for sale sign on the house she would buy to satisfy what she called her “rapidly chickening out” plan to contact me.

So what do you do with someone who gave you all the life she could…twice? Maybe I can occasionally dump some spoiled grandkids on her. That ought to help me get even. It’s a start.
SEVENTEEN

FOR LOVES LOST

Maria Gretchen Miller was, in many ways, a victim. Life was not easy for a little girl who was sure the ridicule she suffered was well deserved. Gretchen is a pretty name today. It’s gained a resurgence among parents. In Maria’s day, she cringed whenever the nuns insisted on using her full name. It brought snickers from some of the mean kids in class. Maria didn’t have any serious friends and tried to avoid the situations that make a child feel like an outcaste. An early growth spurt left her taller, and a little more awkward, than her classmates. She was an easy target.

The indignities weren’t always intentional but they hurt none-the-less. The nuns insisted Valentines cards could only be given out if every child received one from the giver. Maria worked hard the night before, placing the name of each intended recipient on the card along with her signature. In return she received several blank and unsigned cards dealt to her desk with indifference. Yes, life was difficult for a child known derisively as “The Gretch” by the class bullies and the popular girls. By the 8th grade, there were parties. And just like the sleepovers from earlier years, the nuns couldn’t require that all children be invited to events outside of school.

Her parents dismissed her hesitant attempts at getting advice or even sympathy. They were busy. She had three older brothers but they
were never close enough in age or caring to be available. They were popular kids, athletic and personable. Maria’s parents just seemed worn out by the time she arrived. Indeed, they were older than most of her friend’s parents. She tried to have a party once but the first three people she approached thought they wouldn’t be available. An evening with “The Gretch” wouldn’t exactly be a social coup for 8th graders.

Things got a little better in high school. The baby fat disappeared and the other kids caught up and surpassed her early height “advantage.” She did have a few acquaintances if not actual friends. She even had a couple of dates and high school had clubs and activities that took in all comers. Though secretly somewhat athletic, she was far too shy to risk trying out for teams or cheerleading squads. Besides, her parents were far too tired and busy to haul her around to different activities. They were just going through the motions to complete their long string of parental obligations.

These things and more from long ago raced through her mind as the now adult Maria stood in her living room looking at a note. She’d just put her 2 children to bed. She may also have just lost the real love of her life. She glanced into a mirror and uttered the name she hadn’t heard in years, “The Gretch.”

Her thoughts went back to what she once first thought was the “love of her life.” She’d met Darrell in the community college they both attended. She was there because it was cheap and she could work her way through. He was from another state and had come there because his grades and playboy attitude couldn’t get him accepted at any other school let alone a more prestigious one. Darrell was spoiled to say the least. Handsome, he was the youngest child of wealthy parents who had
indulged all of their kids. He always had the best car and clothes. Maria fell for him hard. On their second date she willingly gave in to his amorous intentions. She felt popular and pretty for the first and only time. He was the first person who seemed to pay attention to her. Over the next weeks, Darrell talked of marriage whenever her affections wavered and then Maria discovered she was pregnant.

Prince Darrell dutifully married his girlfriend. Eloping was the answer to hiding her pregnancy. His family was irritated at being denied a big “social event” wedding. When the pregnancy became known, they resented Maria even more. Her Prince Charming had only married her to delay or avoid scandal. That backfired and he had little reason to try to build a family with her. Indeed, he soon chose to encourage his family to label Maria with the accusation of being a money-digging tramp. Almost from the beginning, he began plotting his escape and vindication. His inheritance was the prize he eyed. Maria was just a convenience he soon tired of when it looked like the demands of family life could interfere with his pursuit of pleasure and excitement. It was months later that Maria discovered he’d never slowed in his pursuits of other women. In fact, she later learned he had been in a one-night stand while she was in labor with their child.

Things unraveled quickly. She was pregnant with their second child when Darrell accused her of having had an affair resulting in the pregnancy. It was an absolute impossibility. She had been totally faithful to him. He was her first and her only. He rewarded her with divorce papers. His family was easily convinced that neither child was his. Maria offered to have the indignity of DNA tests but Darrell rejected her plea. He crushed her with the revelation that he’d never
loved her. He agreed to child support payments but told her privately that he would not make the payments if she opposed the divorce. His family shunned the young woman and even her own family was told of her alleged indiscretions. They had retired and were in the process of moving to a warmer state where 2 of her older brothers had relocated with their growing families. A friend of Darrell’s even came forward to claim he could confirm the accusations from personal experience. He said he knew of others and they were also prepared to swear under oath that Maria was unfaithful. Her husband was assembling a formidable case against her. Faced with all of this in pre-divorce negotiations, and having no finances of her own to contest the divorce, Maria agreed to it. She gave birth prematurely 6 weeks later—alone in the hospital. Her parents kept her older child while she gave birth but it was an awkward situation. Never close to begin with, they had become even more distant after the ugly accusations that surrounded the divorce.

Darrell left with his latest girlfriend for Colorado where he died in a drunken accident on his way home from a skiing weekend. Somehow, Maria was blamed for having disgraced her husband and driven him away. The truth is, she’d never stopped loving Darrell, even after she learned of his infidelity. There was an ugly scene when she tried to attend the funeral for the father of her children. She was told that had she been anything but “a cheap whore” their son would still be alive. Maria fled the church in tears.

His pregnant girlfriend was seriously injured in the crash that killed Darrell. She survived and eventually gave birth to a child. Maria met with the woman who had asked to see her. Maria was touched by her financial predicament. She was convincing in stating she knew nothing
of Darrell’s earlier marriage or existing children. Not only didn’t Maria choose to go after Darrell’s estate, she secretly gave some of her own meager savings to the woman. When her family learned of her not trying to acquire support from Darrell’s estate, they saw it as proof of her infidelity—that she really had had affairs. The parents literally disowned their daughter. Darrell’s family reacted with anger. She found herself alone and disowned by two families.

Maria briefly relied on government help and used her business degree from the community college to land a good job with a firm in another state. She loaded her kids and her belongings in her old car and left her hometown to start a new life. There were no going away parties or even goodbyes. She was determined to be the best single mother she could be. Her two children became her life.

She met Matt at work. Actually it wasn’t at work; it was at a weekly TGIF get together for some of the firms that shared the building where Maria worked. She seldom attended the get-togethers because she hurried home to take over care of her little son and daughter. Her co-workers constantly tried to convince her to attend but it wasn’t until her boss strongly suggested occasional attendance at social functions could be of networking advantage to the company and her career. She’d already had one promotion and a nice pay raise and job review. It was a job she valued. After that, she arranged to have her babysitter work an extra hour or two on Fridays. She always managed to slip out quietly after making the rounds at the weekly party. She’d leave quietly after she’d made sure her boss had seen her.

It was at one of these gatherings that this man named Matthew introduced himself to her. She wasn’t looking for involvement but she
soon looked forward to seeing him on Fridays. She was still very afraid of developing a relationship with a man. Her track record with men was dominated by her heartache with Darrell. On two occasions, Matt asked her out but she politely convinced him that she had other plans. She hated lying but she was scared about exposing herself to more disappointment.

Maria missed two Friday parties in a row and Matt was very disappointed. He got up the nerve to ask one of her co-workers if Maria was OK. They struck up a conversation and the woman, possibly having a little too much to drink, told Matt everything she knew about Maria. While never too talkative about her personal life, she had confided different things to different co-workers and they had talked among themselves about the shy and likeable young woman in their office.

Matt saw his interest in Maria become one of appreciation and concern for her plight and to his surprise, one of infatuation. He had to remind himself that he hardly knew her. For all he knew, he reminded himself, she could have a boyfriend or even a fiancée. Still, he persisted in his “pursuit” of his new interest.

Matt became aware of Maria just after Christmas. That holiday is sometimes an emotional mine field for lonely people. He always felt a sigh of relief when the holiday was past.

He always convinced himself that Christmas was for kids. He’d believed that since he was one himself. His mind drifted back. He was 11 and in the sixth grade. He was probably the youngest kid in his class. He was pretty well the smallest too. He didn’t have many friends but he did get to hang out with some cool kids. Two were in his grade and one was in the seventh. He always laughed during his reminiscence that cool
for a sixth grader isn’t exactly world class cool. These kids were already into music. They each wanted to learn to play the guitar and one of them had an uncle who once played in a band. He was willing to teach them how to play if they each got their own guitar/. All Matt needed to belong was a guitar. Visions of status had flashed through his head. He asked his parents for a guitar for Christmas. There was some opposition. Guitars aren’t necessarily cheap but his family was probably better off than most. They eventually found a used Fender guitar and he discovered the hoped for prize hidden with the presents for his 2 brothers and sister. It was missing a couple of strings but it was his passport.

He thought about his parents. They weren’t the warmest people in the world. He could look back and see that now. He didn’t have children. He’d never married. He’d like to have a family but had just never met anyone. He knew his parents weren’t warm but from what he’d seen, they’ve changed a little—at least around their grandchildren. When he talked, with them, they have had a ton of things to say about the little ones. He didn’t get to visit much but when he has, they’ve had a bunch of pictures and stories. He has exchanged emails with his brothers and sister but they’re busy people and they’re all older than he. He went “home” for Christmas a few times but since the grandchildren started arriving he hadn’t been too keen on being there. He always sent some nice gifts. He made decent money and anyway, he thought, coworkers really appreciate his holding down the office on Christmas. They needed a token “live human” on call 24/7 and he didn’t mind keeping busy. A couple of the Jewish guys in the office took turns with him and a Buddhist co-worker to cover the office for younger Christian family men at Christmas.
He had learned some things at 11. He liked a girl in his class. She had a twin brother and Matt tried to accidentally find himself at their lunch table and various places around school. He was naïve and knew nothing about anything but he felt kind of intrigued about being with her. He wasn’t sure she cared one way or the other about him but she wasn’t hostile. To a puppy love enthralled sixth grader, anything short of open hostility was a look of love. And open hostility was only a minor setback.

They had a school bully at St. Johns. Every school is required to have at least one. Theirs was Booth Boone. Matt laughed as he recalled the name and the image. With a name like that you’d have to be a bully. He was a foot taller than everyone and he seemed to thrive on beating up people. The nuns tried to control him and they did pretty well. The bully would select his victim du jour and announce he would be waiting at an appointed place after school. You couldn’t avoid your appointed beating by taking a different route home. You could do that once but after that, Booth Boone and his entourage would pick up your trail at the dismissal bell. Once out of range of the nuns, your hell would break loose. Matt had been pretty successful at avoiding Booth’s wrath by avoiding Booth.

They learned that Booth’s father was being transferred. It was December and he had only to the Christmas break to finish his list of recipients for attention before the family moved out of state. It seemed like he had a victim once and even twice a week. It was the week before Christmas break. To be more specific, it was the last day of school until January. Booth was picking on Matt’s “Sweetheart’s” brother in the cafeteria. The kid was near tears and his sister was trying to stand in
front to protect him. Sir Galahad made the questionable move of speaking up. It had been years but Matt still felt a little discomfort whenever he recalled the memory. Some would argue love can get you killed. Matt had said something about Boone’s tooth. Boone had this gnarled tooth and kids secretly called him “The Tooth.” Matt knew from watching the fate of others who got caught that staring at it was to be avoided. Someone had written something on the restroom wall about how many days were left until “The Tooth gets pulled.” It had enraged Booth and he’d stormed around pushing and threatening people. Emboldened by his desire to look like a big man, yet scared half to death, Matt tried to talk to the bully and distract him from the terrified boy. It’s funny, Matt thought, how you can be so cautious about not saying something that you’ll slip and say it. He said, “Hey Tooth, how’re ya doing?” He really had meant to say Booth, not tooth. It drew laughs of ridicule that Boone silenced with a hard stare. The ogre announced that Matt was going to get his teeth smashed after school. He meant it. It hurt even when he poked Matt’s skinny chest with his stout finger. The lunch bell summoned them to their groups to meet their teachers for the return to the classroom. His appointment with destiny began to sink into his brain immediately. He was scared to the point of his knees shaking. Booth didn’t just knock you down, he hit and hit and humiliated his victims.

Matt hatched a plot to escape his fate. He asked Sister Martin for a restroom pass telling her he was feeling sick. His plan was hastily made. Kids had skipped school before. The nuns would send a letter home with you when you returned and they’d inquire about an excuse. He figured he would get in trouble in January when school restarted. In
the mean time, he could run toward home and somehow hide out until school ended. He’d have a 2 week reprieve, Booth Boone would move out of town and maybe the nuns would forget what he’d done anyway. He guessed in his juvenile logic that missing a day of school was similar in seriousness to lying to the nuns and leaving school early. It wasn’t. His offense merited a phone call that same day. He had made the mistake of telling the nun he was ill and she wanted to check on him.

His parents weren’t warm but they could be angry. And while he looks back and sees them as aloof, he can also see them as consistent and unyielding. He’d never been in any kind of even near serious trouble but they confronted him as if he was Al Capone. He couldn’t offer any kind of mitigating circumstances. What was he going to do? Admit to cowardice? How about saying he did it for love? No, he had embarrassed them in front of the nuns and the whole church. Suddenly they were raising a guitar playing hoodlum. It was an unpardonable sin. He was grounded for the entire Christmas break. Needless to say the guitar went back to the music store. With it went his one shot at cool. He sat glumly on Christmas Eve as his siblings and parents opened presents while he learned what they said was “a lesson you’ll never forget.”

His 3 friends became just guitar playing acquaintances and they got to eventually entertain the school one Friday afternoon with the 4 or 5 songs they could manage to play. He watched with the other commoners.

He sighed and guessed there really are lessons one never forgets. Truthfully, what happened that Christmas was not an isolated treatment from his parents. He always took time out at work to call on Christmas
Day. It gives him a chance to say hello to everyone and he can get the quick rundown on how the little ones are doing. He’ll hear a few “wish you were here” comments but they’re busy and there is a lot going on.

His thoughts returned to the present.

He eventually convinced Maria to accompany him on several group outings for his office co-workers. The “dates” enabled him to exchange phone numbers with the excuse that some last minute emergency on either part could interrupt their plans. They attended a dinner theater program and he had a great time and was trying to convince himself that her laughter and conversation were evidence of her interest in him. As with all of their “dates,” he didn’t pick her up at her home but instead, at her suggestion, they met at the venue.

The most recent meeting was a concert at the local arena. They met in front of the arena and she tried to pay him for the ticket. Just as with the dinner theater and other events, she was insistent on paying her own way. The concert was by a local rock band that covered numerous famous songs and Matt’s group of friends had a great time dancing and singing along. Matt believed Maria was again having fun but she declined an offer to join the group at a local bar because she’d promised the kids they could stay up until she got home. It was a plausible, and basically true, explanation. Matt was disappointed and was wondering if she had any feelings for him. Ostensibly for her safety, but really because he wanted to squeeze every minute out of his date, he accompanied her to her car in the lot with all the nervousness of a schoolboy on his first date.

“Well, goodnight Maria, I had a great time. Can I call you?”
She smiled at him and said, “Yes, that would be nice.” She quickly kissed him on the cheek and said before he could react, “I had a good time too, thanks. Night Matt.” She got in her car and drove off into the night leaving him as confused as she was. He stared in the direction she drove long after her car disappeared into the night. “I love her,” he said aloud and looked around embarrassed to see if anyone had heard him. He got in his car as he chided himself out loud, “Why don’t you be a real idiot and see if you can scare her off. Love? After what? A couple of almost dates?”

Matt managed to arrange “lunch dates” as often as their schedules allowed in addition to their meetings at the Friday get-togethers. Maria was confused about her feelings. On one hand she really enjoyed being with him. He was considerate and seemed genuinely interested in her and her kids. She wondered if her constant prattling about her kids was boring him. It didn’t seem to. As a matter-or-fact, he seemed very interested in her parenthood adventures. He’d bring up the subject and say little things like he’d see a family at the mall and it would make him think of her and her kids. Still, she was afraid to let herself go. The only man she’d ever been close to was a man who was selfish and deceitful. So were his friends she’d known. She felt she needed to keep her guard up and avoid being misused and hurt again. Even after little Bobby arrived, her husband continued to go out every night, supposedly with the “guys.” She later discovered the “guys” were a smokescreen for the numerous affairs and one night stands he pursued. Maria was naïve and had attributed the beer fueled behavior of her husband to immaturity. He’d stumble home at late hours and sometimes not until the next day. His friends acted with the same frat-boy
indifference to commitments. He went through several jobs during their short marriage. His family showered him with money and excused his attitude. They never seemed to accept Maria. She carried on with the hope that her husband would change. If anything, he got worse.

Matt seemed different. She found out by accident that he occasionally volunteered at a local orphanage and coached soccer at a local YMCA. He downplayed it when she asked him about it.

Matt had dated several women since college in another state. None had ever intrigued or infatuated him like Maria. It had been like love at first sight and he constantly had to remind himself not to pressure her or seem over eager. He wondered if he had already scared off the vulnerable woman or if she simply didn’t find him as interesting as he found her.

Maria and Matt had more group dates before Maria found herself sitting on Matt’s couch after they had gone to dinner and a movie on their first date involving just them. He had at least been able to pick her up for the recent dates and had met her children. All went well she thought.

He put his arm around her and she tensed. She felt like a schoolgirl wondering how far she should go or how far he’d want to go. She wondered if he found her attractive or was he just like one of those men who’d be content to just find a woman available. She wanted to yield to his intentions but was fighting this internal battle when she was miraculously rescued by her cell phone. It was the sitter and Bobby was sick. He’d thrown-up twice and the young girl was unsure of what to do. Maria assured her she’d be right home. Of course Matt heard Maria’s part of the conversation and had their coats ready. Maria apologized all
the way to her house. She leaned over and kissed Matt on the cheek and thanked him for being so understanding. He sat in his car for a long time after she’d disappeared into her building. He was confused, not about his feelings, but about Maria’s. He felt like he did as a kid when a girl would play a kind of hard-to-get game. He wasn’t exactly the most popular or athletic kid throughout his school years. He shook his head at the thought he should be beyond such feelings. He gently rubbed the side of his face she’d just pecked. It could have been worse, he thought, she could have kissed me on the top of my head or shook my hand. He laughed at himself and muttered, “Idiot.”

Two weeks later, they were to have another date. Matt had planned a visit to a museum opening followed by dinner in a spot near his apartment. Unbeknownst to Matt, Maria stopped at the women’s clinic on her way home from work. She had an appointment to receive the latest in birth control techniques. She was almost late for her appointment as she sat in her car agonizing over what she was about to do. She finally convinced herself—she actually promised herself—that she didn’t have to go through with what she was preparing herself to do. “It’s just a precaution,” she actually said aloud, “I don’t have to do anything.”

Almost as if on cue, Matt’s well planned tryst was again interrupted by Maria’s cell phone. They arrived at his apartment and Maria called her home to check on the kids. The phone continued to ring and she hung up when it went to the answering machine. She waited a minute and tried again. The babysitter was a little panicky. She had allowed the kids to do some roughhousing and little Teresa had banged her head hard on a door. She was crying in the background and the sitter
said she was trying to hold ice on the rapidly swelling lump on the child’s head.

Maria was totally self-conscious. It seemed so much like she was using the phone call to again rescue herself from Matt’s intentions. They were both silent as they drove toward Maria’s. She was wondering if she should invite Matt in to see the “evidence” for himself. It was awkward to bring up even though the phone call, like the accident, was totally unplanned and innocent.

Matt was afraid to say anything for fear it would reveal the doubts and suspicions he was trying to drive from his mind. When they pulled up he took the initiative and said, “You need to give that poor little girl a big kiss from me and tell her I hope she’s alright.”

“Do you want to come up?” she asked.

“No, I think you’ll have your hands full. Please call me if you need anything.” For still another time, Matt’s attempt at a date was ended with Maria quickly kissing him on the cheek and hurrying to her apartment. He drove around for an hour, thinking about this woman who had so captivated him. He’d met her kids briefly on a few occasions. He wasn’t sure but they may have equally strong hooks in him. They were as cute as puppies and rather than being intimidated by dating a woman who was raising another man’s children, he found himself thinking about them as if he thought they could some day be his own. He’d often thought about having his own family. He once looked into adopting a child as a single parent. It was legally possible but he wasn’t sure he was capable of being the kind of parent a child deserved. He thought about it often before he met Maria. Meeting Maria and her children had rekindled an emotion he’d begun to think would never materialize into reality. All
of that now seemed kind of remote following the second interrupted date. He wondered if she had feelings for him and the phone calls really were coincidental. Given what he’d been able to piece together about her past, he wondered if he had frightened her away.

When he called the next day he found that Teresa had a very mild concussion at worst. Maria had called the pediatrician who advised her to simply observe the child for a time.

The next Friday, Matt had arranged for the two of them to take a dinner cruise on the local river. It was a romantic idea and Maria’s friends had told her about the cruises and the great times they’d had. She was really looking forward to first the cruise and hopefully, an uninterrupted romantic encounter with Matt. She had decided to pursue the relationship, promising herself that she’d be careful to not expose her heart to being broken again. She found herself thinking about him often. She soon realized her thoughts were increasingly tinged with very powerful desires to be intimate with him.

The cruise idea started with the aura of disaster their dates had been lately. It was like a comedy of errors, part three. Maria’s babysitter called and announced she wasn’t available on Friday. Maria called Matt and he was very understanding. He called back to confirm he was able to switch the reservations to Saturday and Maria arranged for a new babysitter.

When Matt showed up on Saturday, a very embarrassed and apologetic Maria announced that her sitter had just called and had to again back out of her commitment to sit with the kids. She invited him to stay and have dinner with her and the kids. Little Bobby yelled happily to his sister, “Mommy’s not going out!” The little girl came in
jumping up and down saying, “yea, yea.” Matt looked at the kids and Maria with a look she’d never seen on a man. She had no idea what it meant. She didn’t know whether he’d storm out or say something angry. She thought it looked so much like she was pushing him away—avoiding him—like she was avoiding any kind of intimate encounter.

“I’m so sorry Matt, I’ve tried to call other sitters but anyone I trust isn’t available on such short notice. I didn’t have time to call you.”

Rather than sounding upset, Matt said he had an idea. He asked if they could take the kids to a local pizza place that had a huge old fashioned penny arcade for kids. It was like a little one’s amusement park and it featured pint sized rides and games. He knew about it because the orphanage where he volunteered sometimes took groups of kids to the attraction.

The kids had a great time. Matt was enthusiastic and playful with the kids. He was funny and the kids were happier than she’d seen for quite some time. Both kids wanted to hold his hand and she again saw that look on his face she’d seen back in her apartment. She thought he looked happy, really happy. They literally pigged out on pizza and soft drinks. They gorged on cotton candy and they managed to get themselves and a laughing Matt covered in the sticky stuff. He took Bobby into the rest room to clean up and she did the same for Teresa. The 4 of them attacked the arcade and by the time the exhausted kids were carried to the car, Matt had won them each several prizes.

When Maria was concerned about the amount of sweets and junk food the kids had ingested, Matt had agreed and then went right on stuffing them.
“You’re right Maria. Kids, we’ll just get us each a little piece of this fudge.” Maria just shook her head in resigned amusement. “Why do I feel like I’m watching 3 kids,” she laughed. Matt grinned at her.

They got the kids home and Teresa was thoughtful enough to wait until they got in the door and out of their coats to throw-up from all the excitement and weird foods. Maria was surprised to see Matt go for paper towels and go about cleaning up the entry way while she hung up coats and headed the kids toward the bath and bed. She bathed the kids in the regular procedure complete with boats and floating toys. She dressed them for bed. She tucked Teresa in and told her a story until she was sleepy. Maria waited to make sure her stomach seemed settled. She sat and watched for some time. She hurried to Bobby’s room and he was sitting up. He wanted a longer story before he drifted off. When he got sleepy she went back to check on Teresa and found she’d gotten sick again. She bathed the girl again, got her clean pajamas and changed her bedding. It took another story to get her sleeping. She sat with the little girl until Bobby was standing at the door saying his “tummy” felt funny. It was soon time for a floor clean-up, another bath and change of clothes. He had gotten sick in bed too and she changed his bedding. She got the sleepy boy back to his bed and sat until she was sure he was OK.

She looked in on Teresa. She was sleeping peacefully. She quietly eased the door shut. She quietly checked on Bobby and was gathering soiled clothes and bedding into her laundry basket to begin a wash when she was suddenly startled. In all the confusion and work she’d completely forgotten about Matt. She had ignored him, without so much as a word for almost an hour and a half. She suddenly realized how much she cared for this patient man. It just hit her.
She called to him that she’d be right in, “Matt I’ll be right out.” He didn’t answer but she wanted to get into some clean clothes before seeing him.

Maria went into her bedroom and quickly changed out of her stained and bath-wet clothing. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought about undressing completely and inviting him to her room to show him of the love and desire she now realized she had for him. She finished undressing and was instantly self-conscious as she looked at her fully exposed form. She looked at herself and wished she had found a way to shed the 5 pounds that always seemed to be on her stomach and childbirth widened hips. Her thought quickly embarrassed her. “No point in making him run off screaming in horror,” she laughed to herself.

She dropped the naked idea and opened a drawer to choose a nightgown. She thought about it and decided either plan made her look like either a whore or a desperate whore. Instead, she put her underclothes back on, put a little cologne on and arranged her hair. She went to the closet and quickly dressed in slacks and a blouse, making sure the top buttons on her blouse were opened. She removed the decorative bedspread from her bed and turned the light out. She put on her shoes, took a deep breath, and went out to Matt.

It turned out she didn’t really need to hurry. Matt was gone. He had left quietly sometime while she was tending to the kids. The entryway was thoroughly clean. She was confused at first and then she began thinking about how it must look like she was avoiding him. She thought about the previously shortened dates and how it must have seemed that tonight she was delaying coming out to the living room as long as she could. She wondered if she’d scared him off or hurt his feelings. She
wondered if he’d had the second thoughts any man would have about someone like her. She actually lectured herself out loud, “He has to think you avoided him all these times, what would any man think?” She was looking at herself in the mirror and thinking of the miserable, lonely days of her youth when she noticed the note he’d left on the table.

Maria,
I’m sorry that I’ve pressured you. You must have thought you were being pursued by a lecherous schoolboy with his first girlfriend. I know you’re not ready for a relationship and I’m sorry I pushed you so hard. It was very sweet the way you tried to let me down easy. You are truly the most beautiful and intriguing woman I’ve ever dated. You’ll find a good man you’ll love and trust. You were the easiest person to love I’ve ever met. You’re quite a mom. Bobby and Teresa are wonderful and they are what I’ve always wanted to have some day. Any man would be an idiot not to want to be a part of your life and their life. Some day you will find that man you deserve. He will inherit and love an instant and wonderful family. I envy him a lot.

I hope you and I can be friends in the future. If you ever need a babysitter, so you can go out with Mr. Right, I’m available. I’ll not even fill the kids up with junk food. Well not too much.

I know you’ll find love and happiness. You’ll find them when you’re ready because you deserve it.

The note was signed with a little heart and the name Matt. Maria put down the note and looked back in the mirror. She saw a woman with tears in her eyes. She saw a sad, shy girl in grade school again. She saw a ridiculed girl. She called herself “The Gretch.”

She quickly saw someone else. She saw a determined woman. She saw a competent, decent woman. “I love him. Darn it, I’m not bad looking. Heck, I’m kind of cute and I’m a good person. I’m a good
mother. I’d be a good wife. He SHOULD love me. We should love each other.” She was almost defiant as she lectured the face in the mirror.

She turned and went to her children’s rooms, putting the note in her pocket. She got them up and in their slippers. She led the groggy children by their hands to the front closet. She got their coats and got them outside the apartment. She locked her door and picked up the kids. She carried them to her car and got them situated in their car seats. She drove quickly out of the parking lot and into the cold night.

She soon pounded on a door and it opened to reveal a man who looked quizzically at Maria and the 2 sleepy children.

“Get your coat,” she ordered in an authoritarian voice. When he complied she said, “You take the big one. Lock your door and come with me.” She ignored his question. They each picked up a sleepy child and he helped her get the kids in their seats. She drove silently as he stared at her in confusion. She again ignored his questions. Inside her apartment she locked the door and laid the kid’s coats on a chair.

“You tuck Bobby in and come in to kiss Teresa goodnight. And take his slippers off, children don’t sleep in their slippers.” It was like another order and he smiled in amusement as he complied. She made it sound like he wasn’t bright enough to know about slippers. It was cute. He’d never seen her like this and he had no clue what was going on. Bobby closed his eyes almost at once. Matt gently caressed his head and smiled. Teresa was already asleep when he went to her room and bent to kiss her.

Maria took him by the arm to her bedroom. She locked the door and waved his note at him. “No one walks out on me or my kids. You got that? I know it looks like I’ve been avoiding you but I haven’t been—not
even once. Now get your shoes off, I don’t want them on my bed.” She kicked off her shoes and he did the same with his. She turned out the light and stepped into his embrace, kissing him passionately. They soon sank to the bed in each other’s arms.

They awoke sometime in the night. He awoke first and awakened her with teasing kisses on her chin, lips and ear. She smiled and kissed him.

He kissed her again and said, “I love you.”

She pressed close to him and whispered, “I Know. I love you too, with all my heart.”

“Well I love you the most,” he joked and she giggled. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone or anything had made her feel like giggling. She felt like a young girl—a very pretty young girl.

He kissed her again and said, “Can I ask you one question?”

“Sure.”

“Will you marry me?”

He couldn’t remember ever being squeezed as hard as she squeezed him.

She raised herself on one elbow, “Do you promise you’ll never walk out on me or my kids?”

“Our kids,” he gently corrected, “I promise.”

“Then here’s your answer,” she said as she rolled over on top of him. She kissed him all over his face. After each kiss she said yes and he laughed when she asked, “What took you so long to ask?” They both laughed but their kisses turned from funny to more gentle and finally, more passionate.
Six hours later, four people enjoyed the best breakfast of their lives. Two children roared with laughter as a man flipped pancakes in the air and narrowly avoided missing his attempts to catch them with the frying pan. Their mother tried to scold him through her own laughter as she poured orange juice.
EIGHTEEN

THE SWEET SCIENCE OF DECEPTION

I don’t want my kids reading this until I’m gone. Then I hope they make it into a made-for-TV movie and rake in a ton of money. Today I heard a song on the radio. It was on the oldies station and it is a haunting ballad about a boxer. It’s not my biography but the emotions scrape across the raw nerves of my life.

My father was a soldier. He died in one of those police actions. They say he died while waiting to be evacuated to a field hospital. It sounds like a TV show doesn’t it? He left behind a wife and a child. I don’t remember him at all. I’m told that I was two at the time. I know now that she was married to my father but her real companion was a bottle. I don’t know if she made that acquaintance before or after his death. Her boozing is one of my strongest memories of her.

She later married a man I detested. They were joined at the bottle. He wasn’t abusive. Neither one of them really was. Sometimes I almost wish they were. Even anger and abuse would have been better than avoidance and neglect. It’s like you just wanted to feel something. They stayed numb I guess. I fluctuated between numb and angry. That’s quite a spread for a kid.
He owned a printing business. It regularly ran shifts around the clock and he mostly worked from midnight to the mid morning. He said that crew needed the most supervision.

In school I became an athlete. As a kid I first tried misbehavior to get attention. I can understand that now. All I ever got was some yelling and the realization that my “loved ones” either didn’t care or, hmm, they didn’t care. That’s also strong medicine for a kid. The schools were always teetering, so they warned, on the verge of expelling me. It was about then that I discovered I wasn’t half bad as an athlete. That opened up a lot of doors. Classroom doors opened in the sense teachers took an interest in me. My smart aleck ways and lazy academic efforts were soon mostly ignored. Car doors, with their inviting back seats also opened for me. I’m not sure I studied more than the absolute minimum to get by. When you were an “important” athlete in those days there was kind of a sliding scale of responsibility.

By my senior year, my parents were pretty much drunk every day. We argued a lot. I had a couple shoving matches with my stepfather and they eventually ordered me out of the house. Where they thought I’d go is still a mystery all of these years later. I knew their habits and I managed to slip into their house to get my clothes and stuff. I stored everything at my girlfriend’s house. Her parents both worked and we were able to have me “move in” while they were gone. I slept amid the basement clutter, getting in and out through a cyclone door in the back wall. We had our time together frequently but we were careful not to have her “visit” me at night while her parents were home. I’d park my car about a mile away after I brought her home from a date. I’d walk back and slip silently through the unlocked door.
Everything was working out until neighbors saw me leaving “home” one morning and jogging from my girlfriend’s house to my parked car up at the all night diner on the highway. Everything hit the fan. There was screaming and of course, my girlfriend was ordered to never see me again. She was grounded and her parents became almost obsessed with her actions and whereabouts after that. Our relationship was over although we’d sometimes talk at school. I guess we were the talk of the school.

My ex-girlfriend’s parents confronted my parents. My parents made a show of taking me back in but it was a tempestuous relationship. They confiscated their car that I’d been using and sold it. Fair enough. It was near the end of my high school career when I got thrown out again. For awhile I slept “out.” I sometimes slept in the basement entry to various buildings. For a few weeks I would sleep in my parent’s car. I knew their habits and most people didn’t lock cars in those days. Weeknights, I would hide in the shadows until my stepfather got home. I’d wait until I saw the bathroom light come on. I’d then sneak into the car, knowing I had until mid morning at the earliest to sleep. I had a key and a few times I even waited until the wee hours to drive away for a spin. I was careful to always park in the same spot. The house had an alley way in the back for access and the car was usually parked about 50 feet from the house. My “ex” girlfriend shared my death wish and she would occasionally slip out to meet me when I’d “borrowed” the car. This worked for weeks until one night I’d no sooner settled back in when the back porch light came on. I peered out to see my stepfather on the porch with his .22 rifle. He was wearing one shoe and holding the other. He was yelling at the car…something about he’d called the police. I
opened the door and of course the dome light came on. I could see him coming
down the steps, struggling to get his other shoe on. I ran for the
shadows and heard him yell again. I heard a shot and a bullet crash into
a limb high above my head. I think the next 2 shots must have been fired
in the air also. Jerk that he was, I doubt he would have really tried to
shoot me. I spent the night slipping around in the shadows as a police car
circulated, its spotlight occasionally sweeping across yards and
driveways.

I eventually managed to regularly get inside a local church to
sleep and even use their basement bathroom facilities to clean up. The
church was never locked. I kept my belongings hidden in that church
basement. By this time I’d graduated.

I had played 3 sports each year in school. I was pretty good and
truthfully, I was six-four and big enough for the small pond where I
played. I wasn’t great. I had a few offers for college athletics—mostly
from small schools. All but 2 offered me partial athletic scholarships for
basketball and baseball. Most of them usually backed-off when my
grades became known. I think the schools that offered me positions were
all on the shady side of athletics. Each one said they’d “take care” of my
academic record for eligibility. Each expected me to play 2 sports as a
so-called “walk-on.” What this meant was I wouldn’t be counted toward
their scholarship allotment but would instead be financed through some
kind of slush fund. I got the idea there would be several of us “walk-
ons” and I know now that we would have been practice fodder. Coaches
talked in a code of sorts and I learned from them and existing players I
was introduced to that I’d get to pretty much slide through the academic
rigors as long as I was actively involved in the program. That was
basketball. I was expected to also “walk-on” in baseball. There weren’t many full baseball scholarships available and by using the likes of me, a team could flesh out a roster and keep the available full rides for regular (better) players they’d recruited. I wasn’t great but I wasn’t going to embarrass anyone with my play in either sport.

I needed money. I was promised a job when I arrived on campus. One player told me I’d probably be assigned to inspecting the parking lots for potholes. He laughed. I had to survive until the fall and work was hard to find in the suburb where I lived. And of course, I was damaged goods with my reputation. I found out about a chance to make some money in the nearby city. There was bus service and I rode into the inner city to answer an ad about being a sparring partner at the Walker-Friendly Neighborhood House. They had a boxing program but needed sparring partners for up and coming prospects. I realize now that being white was a premium. I was often the only Caucasian in the gym. I stuck out like a sore thumb. The only other white was one of the shady promoters who hung around. That will make sense in a minute. I could make $6 a day. Uh, remember the times we’re talking about. This was a lot of years ago. Six bucks was decent. And they’d have sandwiches and soft drinks for the fighters and they’d allow me to grab a bite after a workout. I also found I could get a room in the nearby YMCA for nothing when I was broke and next to nothing when I was paid.

I said I was an athlete and all athletes think we can box. I wasn’t bad but as a sparring partner I was expected to wear a helmet, mouthpiece and huge groin protector while some promising boxer worked out against me. One day the white promoter had me get in the ring with another sparring partner and he urged us to show him what we
could do. I did OK but dressed as we were, there wasn’t much chance of inflicting harm.

I must have done all right because I was offered a chance to make big bucks—$25 to be on the under card of the bi-weekly boxing show at Walker-Friendly. An old manager spent 2 weeks giving me some tips and helping me workout. We went 3 rounds and my first opponent was breathing so hard by the last round he couldn’t keep his hands up. Although I was pretty tired too, I was able to hit him frequently and the fight was stopped.

Two weeks later I had fight number two. It was 3 rounds with similar results. I got hit hard a couple of times but my opponent was gasping for breath by the last round. He eventually went down to one knee and waved the fight off.

I was raking in the dough. Six dollar sparring served as my training for bi-weekly $25 fights. Fight three was tougher and I have to admit I didn’t think I won. I was the one who was exhausted and my nose was bloody. Still, I won a unanimous decision.

I was told to accept a new name for the ring. I’m German and the promoter suggested I fight using the name Kid Deutsch along with my real name. I toyed with the idea but complained when one of the hangers-on in the gym said something about “Kid Douche” and the gym roared. We settled on “The Dutchman.”

I was awarded a 5 round $35 fight against an opponent I’d once sparred for. I think I mentioned I was the only white guy fighting in the gym. I didn’t have any white opponents either. I only mention it because this next fight was also against a black fighter. He had really outclassed me in my sparring assignments. Our scheduled 5 rounder
only lasted 3. He went down and didn’t get up before he was counted out in the 3rd. I was a little surprised because I’m pretty sure he was killing me in the fight. I knocked him down with a good punch but it landed above his left ear. I didn’t think it was that great a shot but he went down. I’ve still never heard of a boxer being knocked out with a similar blow.

I was alone with him in the locker room after the fight. I said something about a lucky punch and he looked at me with a weary look and said, “It wasn’t all that lucky.” I thought it was a compliment at first but he said it in kind of a disgusted way. I got the idea he was disgusted with himself. We stood in the steaming shower and he said, “Don’t you understand you’re a great white hope? You’re going to win 2 or 3 more fights and then take your undefeated record to another city for a fight against somebody with real potential. You won’t beat that guy unless he’s ordered to lay down like me.” He looked me right in the eye and said, “If they can bet enough on you, you might win and you’ll take an even better record to the next city. Eventually you’ll have gone as far as you can and you’ll be on your own in the ring. You’re OK. You’re a decent fighter for an amateur but not a pro. One of these guys will eventually be turned lose to beat you into retirement.”

I had another 5 rounder 2 weeks later. I have to admit I was a little intimidated as I sized up my opponent before the fight. I was having second thoughts. He was big and he looked fast. We circled and he staggered me with a left hook I mostly blocked. The punch still stunned me and I backpedaled. He glared at me. We closed again and missed with a couple of wild swings. All week, the manager worked with me on counter punching. Suddenly I had an opening and managed
to land a left hand he made no effort to block. He dropped his left hand after a week jab and I hit him as hard as I could with my right hand. I didn’t connect too solidly but he went down anyway. He stayed down for the count and a legend was born about the big white kid who knocked out Arnell Johnson in the first round!

I tried to retire that week. I told my manager that I’d decided to get ready for basketball and my college career. He laid a bombshell on me. I hadn’t considered this but he asked me if being a professional fighter ended my amateur status as an athlete. In those days, if you were a professional in one sport, you were considered ineligible in any amateur sport. It’s different today. You’ve got professional baseball players playing college football.

None of this ever mattered because there was soon a newspaper expose’ of the fight game in general and Walker-Friendly Neighborhood House in particular. Rigged fights, drugs and gambling hit the headlines. The police interviewed many people. I hadn’t done anything illegal. I was asked about my occupation and I mentioned my pending college career. One erstwhile investigator contacted the college I’d agreed to attend to check on my story. I was still living at the YMCA then. I don’t know if the college ever tried to contact me at my parent’s home but I showed up for the start of the fall semester. I believed I would be assigned to my dorm room and register for classes. It was an embarrassing scene. I was told my scholarship “consideration” had been rescinded because I failed to follow through by applying. An assistant athletic director further informed me my amateur status had been questioned and they were passing on the information through the proper channels. What was a kid going to do? Accuse a college of denying
illegal funding to an illegal student? I think they may have been afraid of what I might say about what amounted to their rules violations but I had no proof. I went to the reporter who’d written the boxing article and spilled my story. He was interested in using the boxing part of my story and he promised not to use my name. A sports magazine picked up the series and the investigation had spread to similar abuses being found in several cities. He said the great white hope thing wasn’t unique to our city and he could keep mention of it limited to the process rather than the personalities.

The reporter was a nice guy and agreed to contact the college for me. He offered me no hope when he reported back. The college said there was no record of me applying for admission. I clearly remember the assistant coach had taken my application and transcript and had promised to walk it through the process. They denied any knowledge of me other than to say I had been told to apply through regular channels and contact them about walking on to the team if I was admitted. The reporter told me my best bet was to forget the whole episode. He said he believed I could appeal my threatened amateur status but I had to be realistic. I had no money and the truth is, I wasn’t exactly a hotshot prospect with a sound academic background.

I joined the Navy a month later. Nothing their recruiter told me proved misleading. They offered me room and board, books, uniform and plenty of physical activity. I got into electronics. They also had a boxing program. I served 4 years. My boxing record was 1-5.
PART TWO
STORIES DEDICATED TO A VIKING
ONE
THE LAND OF MY YOUTH

Just about every state has a Milford, Milford City, New Milford or some name or region with a Milford in its name. I grew up in one of them. My family, the Potemkins, remain a leading family, past and present, in that town.

I came to my appreciation of my hometown’s unique history the night we all sat in front of a roaring fire in our living room and listened to my great grandfather spin tales of his life growing up in our town. The memory is all the more poignant because we lost him that night. We also lost our house and belongings that memorable evening. It seems we hadn't noticed that, while the crackling fire was warm and comfortable, we didn't actually have a fireplace. Fire Rescue later found my great grandfather wandering in a local park. Many feel the shock of the fire that night may have affected his memory. In any event, this scholarly endeavor is dedicated to him.

THE FOLLOWING PAGES CONTAIN THE EXCITING STORIES TOLD BY MY GREAT GRANDFATHER—CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE DEAN OF MILFORD HISTORIANS!
EARLY SETTLEMENT

Emil Potemkin is seen carrying his girl friend. On Emil's left is Jeremiah Potemkin. Moses Potemkin is also shown. My records do not indicate the names of the other people in the drawing.

The original name of the settlement was Emil's Ford in honor of Emil Potemkin. The following year a drunken settler returning from Erasmus’ Tavern, rode into the sign at full speed knocking the "E" and the "S" to the ground. The town had no budget for repairs and the sign was never fixed. So many people began referring to the town as "Mil Ford" that the name stuck. Years later, Emil Potemkin VI would follow his famous ancestor's footsteps and create Potemkin Village on nearby land that would eventually be absorbed by Milford, as Mil Ford
was soon to be called. Houses were sold by mail order to Easterners interested in migrating west. Potemkin subdivided his land and placed a facade of a house on each property. Photographs were then placed in a catalog and distributed to every home on the East Coast. While many felt they were duped when they realized they had purchased only the land and a facade of a house, Potemkin narrowly avoided prosecution although he was tarred and feathered on several occasions.

There is one positive note to the story. History does credit Potemkin as being the inventor of junk mail. Modern day Potemkins have taken a cue from their ancestor and have invented a great improvement to marketing using the computer. Special Potemkin Anonymous Mail, or "SPAM" as it is lovingly called, has had a great effect on computer users worldwide.

The area hasn’t always seen happy times and successful settlement. The original settlers were known as “Shooters.” They had a rather unusual plan in mind for settling the area.

In the above drawing, new residents knelt for their first craps
game. The first attempt at settling the area now called Milford, occurred in 1725. An excommunicated group from the Shaker Church failed in their attempt to create a utopian society along the local river. Called "Shooters," the group had hoped to create an economy based entirely on shooting dice and playing poker with each other. Facing starvation, the group returned to a more typical economic plan. Despite frequently raising the betting limits, settlers eventually discovered that the lack of constructive employment, manufacturing and farming doomed the isolated colony once their original supplies were exhausted. Modern day government economists and politicians have not given up on the theory that a viable economy can be built on passing each other's money back and forth.

WHAT FOLLOWS ARE MORE RANDOM STORIES OF MY HOMETOWN’S STORIED PAST

We are deeply indebted to the now forgotten sketch artists and photographers who provided the pictures with which we could match the clear memories of my relatives and create this loving account of the history of

MY HOME TOWN!
EVOLUTION, CREATIONISM AND MILFORD SCHOOLS

MONKEY PARK Tourists walk before the 60' tall bronze statue on the old slag heap at the abandoned coal mines on Main Street.

Many newcomers to Milford are unaware of the history and controversy surrounding this magnificent work of art.
Some, of course, think the statue is a commemoration of the great battle over the teaching of evolution in Milford Schools in 1913. At the heart of the struggle was John "Scopes" Potemkin, biology teacher at Milford High School. I'm sure many of you will immediately jump to the conclusion that this whole affair is related to the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, the Milford controversy and subsequent trial occurred almost a dozen years before the famous event in Tennessee. For another factor, it is widely considered that Mr. Potemkin was a rather inept biologist at best and the nickname "Scopes" was derisively applied to him because of his lack of skill using a microscope.

This photo actually earned Mr. Potemkin that sarcastic nickname of Scopes. It is a photo he took through his microscope and sent off to the National Science Foundation, claiming to have discovered a hard-shelled "Super Paramecium type" creature among the usual amoebae and other microorganisms he was attempting to study.

Even that wouldn't have been so bad had he not earlier "discovered" a super observant one-eyed microorganism and sent this
picture to the Smithsonian Institute for verification. Of course it would later be established to be the reflection of his own eye and not a super strain of eye lashed amoebae.

You can thus see that the stage was aptly set for what happened next. The Milford Board Of Education was quite open minded and socially aware for that era. In the Fall of 1913, the board ordered all science teachers to incorporate the teaching of evolution in their classrooms. Mr. Potemkin immediately saw a chance to redeem his reputation. Surrounding himself with many local preachers and other religious extremists who'd never read a science book, Potemkin led a noisy protest. Refusing to allow even the mention of the word evolution in his classroom, he was eventually fired. He then sued the school board.

The subsequent winter trial was dubbed "The Milford Monkey Trial," possibly as a comment about the courtroom antics of Mr. Potemkin and his fundamentalist supporters. They constantly interrupted expert testimony about evolution by making chimpanzee sounds and leaping about the courtroom eating bananas and preening each other's scalps for lice.

The jury returned a verdict in favor of the school board and Potemkin's firing was upheld.

Let's get back to the story of the statue. Potemkin wanted to spend the left over money from his defense fund to memorialize the event and make one more jab at his former employers. He wanted to have a statue created that would forever be an argument against evolution.

Some say that Mr. Potemkin was just a man of bad luck. Even his attempt to memorialize the crowning achievement of his life just
didn’t work out.

The above drawing is the original and depicts Potemkin examining an ancient skull. Unfortunately he had more than a little trouble in communicating his desires to a local sculptor named Fitzhugh Potemkin (a distant cousin). His casual phone comment that "It's colder'n a big brass monkey" was unfortunately heard as "Fitz, order in a big brass monkey." The result sits on Main Street.

NEXT: MY HOMETOWN HAS NEVER RECEIVED THE CREDIT IT DESERVES FOR INVENTING THE NATION’S PASTIME BASEBALL!
THE AMAZING MILFORD
ORIGIN OF BASEBALL!

Many people wrongly credit Abner Doubleday with creating the game of baseball sometime around the era of the Civil War. The legend has it that baseball was modeled after the game of Cricket. Of course anyone willing to do a little research will quickly find baseball was invented in Milford in the early 1800's.

The modern baseball is nothing like the original object!

The lovely fruit of the Hedgeapple (Hedge Apple) or Osage Orange (Maclura pomifera) has always been a key product in the local economy.
Milfordites have long been known to value the wood for building homes. The fruit of the hedge apple, while completely inedible, has been a favorite table display since Milford was first settled.

All that remains from the early days of the sport are old faded photographs. This print from an old tintype (Circa 1855) is believed to be of the Riverside Hedge Apple Stadium on Elm Street in old Milford.

Milford usually had a great influx of hedge apple pickers every fall. Workers migrated from as far away as other counties to stay in the migrant camps and earn what was to them big money in the hedge apple harvest. Young men would use barrel staves to knock the fruit from the branches of the trees. The idea was to climb into the tree and swat the ripe fruit toward a coworker on the ground. Since competition was great and workers were paid by the piece, they would sometimes hone their skills at lunch break by tossing un-ripened (and thus unwanted) fruit to a picker armed with a stout barrel stave. The striker was originally called a
"Bitter" because of the tart spray back that sometimes emanated from a smartly struck hedge apple. Soon a game of sorts developed, where the person catching a swatted fruit was allowed to throw the object at the head of the bitter. To avoid being struck the bitter would run to a designated safe spot—usually a wooden crate spaced almost 90 feet away. Because a bruised hedge apple would sometimes become too slick and slimy to handle after it had been struck a few times, players would sometimes apply a little pine tar resin, called pitch, to their hands to secure a better grip. The apple tosser was often called a pitch guy. Later it was shortened to pitcher. My great-great grandfather, Mortimer Potemkin, was a proponent of using dried bull excrement to dry the hand prior to throwing. He and his family members became known as bull slingers for their efforts. Over the years, we Potemkins have found it difficult to shed this rather unfortunate nickname.

Rules began to evolve and soon a fairly well regulated game developed and served as a vehicle for some heavy gambling. As a matter of fact, the term "hedging one's bet" developed from the practice of Milford bookies who would back up their bets by making counter bets.

The main object of the game was to strike a hedge apple and begin navigating through a series of safe crates before someone could bounce the hedge apple off your head. Fights and disputes were common and the game seemed to attract the basest elements in surrounding communities. Indeed, the Milford City Council briefly outlawed this "Base Game" following a medical scandal in the 1840's. It seems that young men would get bulked up using the newly invented growth hormones intended for use in the local cattle industry. Hedge apples were soon being swatted far past the boundaries of the hedge apple orchards.
The game was reinstated and strictly regulated by local politicians when they discovered they could tax the new game and charge spectators to watch. Some communities even used tax dollars to fund huge hedge apple orchards designed to be used to accommodate the game and spectators!

Milford fielded the first professional team in what was being called Base Apple. The great hedge apple blight of 1850 limited the fruit supply and almost destroyed the game until alternate objects were chosen. Things looked bleak for a time as local teams struggled through Base Brick, Base Cow Pie, Base Fish Head, Base Dead Chicken and Base Boot before the game was finally saved by a young man who had recently seen the game of croquet being played in a neighboring wealthy community. He suggested using the round croquet ball and Base Ball quickly became a nation's pastime. Originally, the term for a player to hit a runner in the head with a hedge apple was an "ouch." By chance it was decided to allow each side to accumulate three "ouches" before losing their turn. Since being struck in the head with a wooden croquet ball would normally render a runner unconscious, the act was referred to as "knocking out a runner." Eventually it was simply shortened to "out."

Milford High School, having literally dozens of hedge apple groves in the district, became a leader in the early version of the new sport. Local sportswriters selected Milford as the mythical state champions through most of the early 1800's. To date, these remain the highlights of Milford’s foray into "major" sports. Milford had great difficulty in adapting to the new rules and equipment and tried to maintain the hedge apple as the game's main object even after the introduction of the new ball started a popular trend that has continued
until modern times.

This old photo tells quite a tragic story. The battered and bruised fruit was the one struck by Hezekiah Potemkin for his 59th home run in 1875. This was the last year Milford fielded a team in the old professional Base-Hedge Apple League that folded the following year in the face of competition from the fledgling Base Ball league.

Fifty-nine home runs remained the home run record until Babe Ruth hit 60 of them in 1927. This hedge apple was preserved and was to be eventually put on display at Cooperstown. Unfortunately, the family pet goat ate it. Hezekiah Potemkin would be knocked permanently senseless the following year when a fielder whistled a wooden croquet ball off his head while he raced for a safe crate during his tryout with a local baseball team.

The modern hedge apple grows wild throughout the nation and is now considered a nuisance plant by many who do not know of its
glorious history. Early residents of Milford discovered that the hedge apple could be used as a very effective contraceptive and also could be used with other fruits to ward off a serious disease. Dr. Hippocrates Potemkin was the first to realize that a young lady who kept a small hedge apple firmly held between her knees on a date could avoid pregnancy. That same year (1899), the Potemkin Clinic discovered that sailors who slept with a hedge apple in their bed and ate a small lemon or lime every day could avoid the dangerous disease of scurvy.

NEXT: MY HOMETOWN FIGHTS A CRIME WAVE AND INVENTS A POPULAR SPORT:

FOOTBALL!

THE AMAZING MILFORD ORIGIN OF FOOTBALL
In this old sketch, a young Milford tough is depicted pursuing a pig on what would later be called Elm Street.

As the security camera would not be invented for years to come, wealthy people would often station sketch artists in trees to guard their property and record possible wrong doing.

Many people erroneously believe that the game of football was
invented on college campuses in the late 1890's. As the theory goes, youngsters tried to invent a new game based on the European games of rugby and soccer. The truth is, the modern game of Football was invented in Milford.

Originally, the game was based on common thievery between young toughs. Roving gangs from local towns would descend on their neighbor and steal a pig and race back to their own town. Each village would try to intercept the other group and recapture their pig.

Milford residents observed the pig theft phenomenon and in the 1880's devised a plan to acquire all of the pigs in the valley. The Milford people devised an intricate scheme of maneuvers and set movements to enable them to escape with the pigs. Since pig theft was a criminal offense at the time, this group was called the "Offense" unit. A separate unit of Milford residents would be assigned certain schemes to defend the pigpens on the Milford side. They were called the "Defense" unit. A tremendous breakthrough occurred in 1885 when a Milford raider completed the first forward pig in history. By tossing his pig ahead to another raider, he was able to escape interception by the other town. Life in Milford being about as boring then as it is today, many spectators would gather to watch the encounters. Whenever a pig was successfully tossed forward, Milford spectators would shout, "He made a pig's ass out of you." The term for this ploy was soon called completing a "pig's ass" It was later shortened to P's Ass or pass.
In this drawing, a Milford player turns to catch a "pig's ass" or "pass" as the maneuver was eventually called. Once an inflated ball was introduced to replace the live pig, the pass and other such innovations made Milford the center of the new sport.

Eventually the pig thefts acquired 'game' status among the young men in the surrounding towns. By making these encounters an organized sport, young men were able to avoid the arrest records of their earlier counterparts. Milford residents created a set of written rules and introduced the use of an air filled ball in place of the live pig. Use of the air filled ball rather than a live pig certainly made extra points and field goals easier. In any event, we point with pride to our town for inventing football!

NEXT: MILFORD CREATES THE WORLD’S MOST POPULAR SPORT WHILE FINDING SOMETHING FOR CLUMSY KIDS TO DO!
MILFORD, MELONS AND HISTORY
The Dark Side Of Soccer

The word soccer brings to mind a dark and distressing period in Milford's history. The fact the game was invented in Milford is not something town fathers and the chamber of commerce are proud of. It's not a pretty story.

As the sports of football and baseball swept the area and catapulted Milford into national prominence, local people began looking for a pastime that clumsy, non-athletic kids could play. Area kids had long had a bad reputation for watermelon stealing and city fathers hoped to mimic the successful way in which pig theft was turned into a respectable sport. For years young Milford children had stolen melons from the terraced melon fields of the neighboring village. Some kids were too uncoordinated to carry a watermelon and walk at the same time so they would nonchalantly roll a stolen melon with their feet through the tall grass in the unkempt fields of Milford.

A Milford youth stumbles and falls as he attempts to capture a runaway melon. Other melon thieves hurry to his aid.
Melons were an important part of the Milford economy. First devised by Tex Potemkin, melon drives would be used each year to herd harvested melons toward markets in other cities. Potemkin was the first to attempt the ill-fated practice of branding his melons.

Range wars sometimes broke out between watermelon ranchers and the newly arrived cantaloupe ranchers and homesteaders of that era.

A local "tough" intercepts a Milford youth who has attempted to pick up his watermelon and run away. Such assaults were common.

While this process had to be kept slow to prevent bruising the melons, it was probably just as fast and interesting as the game played today by something called pro soccer. Kids would often turn the event into a contest to see who could gather the most melons in a short period of time. The game was soon called "Sucker" by some of the tougher kids who bullied these weaker kids. They would regularly promise them a big surprise if they would take off their clothes and leave their melon to go into the woods. You guessed it. The conniving youngsters would quickly gather up the clothes and melons and run away yelling: “Sucker.” Other times the interception was more violent and the watermelons would be
taken by force. It is believed that this early game gave rise to the term sucker punch.

These assaults and the continued problem of melon rustling on the dusty watermelon drives led to government action to deal with the problems.

To legitimize the process and remove the unsavory element, city fathers of surrounding communities declared this organized melon theft into an official sport and created mown fields for play. The game was quite simple. Teams would attempt to roll and propel a melon through a goal at the end of the field. Since the clumsy youngsters were prone to dropping (and thus bursting) a melon, it was decided that the hands would not be used. This was in keeping with the original practice of stealing a melon by rolling it with your feet in the tall grass while you pretended to be strolling...usually whistling, with your hands in your pockets.

To accommodate the non-athletic nature of participants, the original soccer field was about 10 yards long. Here an official oversees the placement of the melon prior to the start of play.

In one forgettable episode, Milford battled a team from a neighboring village for over 90 minutes before it was discovered the
melon had rolled off the field shortly after the game began.

Watermelons were such an important part of the regional economy; Milford briefly toyed with the idea of changing its name to Melonville.

Once the inflated ball was introduced to replaces the melons, the excitement of play was often something spectators could not stand. Similar comments are heard today about this sport.

This drawing captures the first successful attempt to "head" the ball through the goal. Though attempted numerous times during the "melon era" it was not until the introduction of inflated balls that the maneuver was successful.

Eventually the watermelons would be replaced with an inflated ball and kicking would be used to advance the sucker ball. The official name was changed to "Soccer" in an attempt to entice the more nerdy
and prissy children to participate. These kids soon began spending less time with the crude chemistry sets and abacuses. The slow nature of the game was especially important to children who didn't want to remove their pocket protectors before exercising. The game is still played in isolated pockets around the US. The American game is sometimes mistaken for Tai Chi classes and certainly competes well with the similarly paced hobby of watching paint dry. A faster, more athletic and exciting version (called Football or "Futbol") has taken root and become a very important sport throughout the rest of the world.

Who would ever have imagined melon theft would lead Milford to establish the world’s most popular sport? Here a couple of young toughs battle over possession of a rustled melon.

NEXT: GOD AND MAN IN MILFORD
The Strange Story Of The Rise And Fall
Of A Religious Cult In Milford

It all started one innocent Saturday morning in 1963 when Solomon Potemkin and my other distant cousin, Spalding Potemkin relaxed by the well worn fence they shared between their yards. Their painting was greatly impaired by the six-pack each had consumed.

Two pretty young ladies came by and talked to them about their church. They were missionaries and had volunteered 2 years of their lives to spread the Gospel of their unique American-born religion. While neither Potemkin had much interest in religion, they did have an interest in young women. They took turns teasing and flirting with the pretty women. Sensing they weren’t being successful in leading the two reprobates to their beloved church, the two sincere young ladies told them details of their church’s history, made one final invitation and left. Unbeknownst to all, the wives of the two old lechers had observed the exchange from their kitchen windows. The two men settled back and were nearly dozing off as they discussed what each could do to enliven the lives of the two missionaries. They were sleepily talking about slipping off from their chores and getting a tee time at the local golf course without finishing painting the fence.

While Solomon dozed in the shade, a revelation hit his neighbor Spalding from on high like as even to be with the force of a heavy metal object presented to the back of the head.

"Jesus Christ, It's Saturday, Paint," bellowed a voice from on high that somehow sounded like Mrs. Potemkin. Solomon slowly sat up from his nap and watched his relative writhe on the ground, not realizing
his own fate was approaching from behind also. Soon he too received a revelation that struck him as with the force of another one iron swung in anger (only God and the Potemkin women can hit one irons). "You heard her you moron, it's Saturday, paint that fence!"

Both wounded men slowly woke to full concentration and came to the realization that God must have spoken to them. Piecing together what they could remember from their revelation, they immediately formed the Church of Jesus Christ on Saturday Paints. It made more and more sense as they quickly scraped and painted their fence. Spalding began writing a book of scriptures.

**THE GREAT MALT LAKE**

Solomon began scouting the area for a church site. He eventually found the huge sludge pit/retention pond from the old bankrupt Greensnot Brewery on Main Street. The Greensnot family had attempted to market its family created beer for years. Despite catchy slogans like “You’ll never forget the first time you found Greensnot in your beer mug,” the brand just never caught on.

Solomon christened the site The Great Malt Lake. It is believed to vary between 3.2% and 6% alcohol depending on rain runoff from the old collapsed brewery vats.

The Church Of Saturday Paints was off and running. Milford was briefly dubbed Malt Lake City but quickly changed the name back as the peculiarities of the new religious cult began to surface.
In this old photo, Solomon announces, "This is it" as he renames the old brewery retention pond "The Great Malt Lake." Another problem surfaced when the Potemkins attracted members by offering free fishing in the lake. Nothing has ever lived in the heavily alcohol laden water.

Male followers soon gravitated to the male dominant teachings of the two self-proclaimed prophets. More men showed up every day. Joseph Potemkin soon called his book The Book Of More Manly Men. Because of this scripture, his followers began referring to themselves as More Manly Men. Every night, scores of men were seen joyfully and loudly baptizing each other repeatedly in the 6% end of the lake. The membership grew rapidly when Spalding added a chapter calling for the taking of young girls as extra wives. In his book "The Girl Of Great Price," he said men could take all the wives they could afford.

In an interesting sidelight believed to be miraculous by the followers, both Solomon and Spalding displayed "Stigmata" consisting
of facial cuts and bruises after every time they went home to their spouses and discussed adding extra wives. These miraculous marks also appeared every time after the two men attempted to choose extra wives during the Sunday morning "Supplemental Draft of Young Female Talent" portion of the service they conducted. Heeding this most divine "Stigmatic" inspiration, neither man took an extra wife. It would turn out to be a most fortuitous decision.

Little is known of Solomon Potemkin or his background. Old Milford Police records describe a Sol Potemkin who faced a fraud indictment over his door-to-door peddling of a product called Jehovah's Witness Repellent Spray. There is no evidence to deny or support that name as being an alias of Solomon Potemkin.

Spalding Potemkin is believed to be the same Spal Potemkin who started the ill-fated Roaming Cat Lick Church. Court records refer to a “Monsignor Spalding Potemkin” who was frequently arrested for the door-to-door peddling of indulgences and holy water. Apparently, he was also arrested several times for offering to hear the confessions of women he would approach in local taverns.

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

From the start in the 1960s, the Potemkins attempted to isolate their followers from other religions by teaching some out of the mainstream theology. Another cult tactic concerns instituting the practice of wearing some unusual attire. The Potemkins saw this as a great opportunity to advertise their religion as well as to isolate and easily identify their members.
Above: Solomon Potemkin is seen in his day-to-day attire. Of course his ceremonial clothing would be more elaborate.

Above: Spalding Potemkin is seen in his street attire. He also, would later adopt more elaborate styles for the church services. He loved to be seen with his stuffed lion.

A most colorful chapter in the area's rich history has come to an
end. Today the church has gone out of existence although the two aging founders and their remaining followers can be seen splashing about the old brewery pit on a Saturday night.

In this drawing, Spalding Potemkin models the secret ceremonial underwear he designed for church members to wear.

Both self-styled prophets bristle at the suggestion their church was the product of serious head injuries rather than divine inspiration. The Potemkin fence is regularly painted and the Stigmata wounds have all but healed without a trace. A number of followers remain imprisoned
due to the fact that polygamy is still illegal and certainly old men cannot get away with actively pursuing 14 year old girls as “extra” wives except in portions of some western states. Anywhere else, they are called sexual predators and locked up.

NEXT: A NOTED PSYCHIATRIST DISCOVERS:

“WHEN THINGS GO THONG, THEY CAN GO VERY THONG.”
Milford's Brush With Championship Volleyball

Long time Milford residents will recall that the sport of volleyball was invented in the Milford area. Originally called Valleyball, it was named after the local river valley. The local founding team eventually saw its prominence relegated to cult status and eventually found itself ignored by historians. Even the name was eventually changed to "Volleyball" in an attempt to cover-up an embarrassing era.

Dr. Freudlick Potemkin operated a local psychiatry clinic that soon found itself specializing in the treatment of men obsessed with exhibitionist tendencies. He encouraged his patients to find an outlet for their energy in an attempt to have them sublimate for the problem. The sport they invented became popular but the region gained an unwanted exposure, so to speak.

A Milford player returns a serve during a heated match.
A local player leaps to block a ball at the net.

A Milford "valleyballer" turns away while receiving a hard serve.
A server prepares to strike the ball.

A local player follows through after a serve.
Proudly flaunting his thong, a player poses for the camera.

Of course the first thing you noticed was the uniform. Dr. Potemkin's patients claimed that this "thong," as they called it, gave them the correct freedom of movement they needed. In any event, opposing players were so flustered at seeing Milford's players sometimes leaping free of the loose fitting garment that they could not perform athletically. The locals often shut out their opponents en route to declaring themselves World Champions in the new sport.

It was the late 1800's and while Milford was a "wide open" environment for such things, America just wasn't ready for such activity. Valleyball faded from the scene and was replaced by a more acceptable game called Volleyball. Dr. Potemkin and several of his followers were frequently arrested on indecent exposure charges. Dr. Potemkin continued to defend his approach with the argument that his patients designed their uniform and game as part of a group therapy exercise. His unfortunate removal from the medical profession may have been
prompted by his appearance at his disciplinary hearing dressed in the “valleyball” uniform his patients devised. He had begun wearing the attire at all times. He attempted to perform several “moves” and had jumped over the makeshift net and onto the hearing table to do the splits before security guards were summoned to subdue the doctor.

Note that the original net was set at 4 feet.

NEXT: THE GREAT CLONING SCANDAL
MILFORD HAS OFTEN BEEN ACCUSED OF HARBORING SECRET CLONING CLINICS

The 12 member Milford City Council met to dispel the rumor.
The nurses at the Potemkin Clinic also met to dispel the ugly cloning rumor.

NEXT: THE LEGALIZED DRUG ERA
A woman displays a "shotgun Milford bong" on Main Street.
The area was once dotted with “Needle Parks” as local leaders repealed all drug laws. The phrase “Medical Dope,” once used to describe Doctor Potemkin, soon was used to describe the area’s most famous product.

Of course Milford soon became the center of the emerging musical form now called Jazz and later, Rock And Roll. Coffee houses and smoke filled night clubs soon replaced the gin mills and seedy bars the area was once known for.
Workers begin the poppy harvest along Main Street.

A defiant tourist lights one up on Main Street.

Complaints from the hard liquor industry eventually led to the end of the legalized drug era.

ABOUT THOSE AMAZING POTEMKINS!

Most will recognize Gregory Potemkin and the Potemkin family as the social leaders in the Milford area. I almost blush when mention is made that I may well be the best athlete, best student and all around greatest looking graduate of the local high school but being a purveyor of truth, I am honor bound to mention it. I thought you'd enjoy hearing more about my ancestry and me.

I have recently traced my family back to Russia. My great great-great grandfather was named Ivan Potemkin and his brother was Igor Potemkin. They must have been very famous as I read where the whole population turned out to walk them to the border of White Russia when they left. Along the way grateful residents bestowed on them fruit,
vegetables and eggs for their journey. I think they were in medicine as humanitarians specializing in obstetric care for the indigent because several sources mentioned they were responsible for most of the illegitimate births in the township. In one touching article, it was reported numerous women wanted to name their children after the good doctors but they chose to leave the country rather than receive the continued adulation and attention. It’s comforting to know my ancestors had my sense of community service! Apparently, they were men who also tried to help young women enter the professional world. I have a lot of trouble with the language but my translation of one old court record mentioned that they were frequently cited for trying to hire young women to work under them.

One great uncle must have boarded horses and provided wagons, stable space and things like that because the old court records always mention horse thievery after his name. I’m not totally fluent in the language but I have figured out that a horse thievery must be something like what the Americans called a livery. One old newspaper clipping made mention that my uncle was an animal lover. Whenever a horse was reported missing my great uncle was often cited for finding it.

Another uncle was a local detektiv (detective) although several of the records make the apparently common typographical error of using the similar word “defektiv.” He could have been one of those psychic detectives because one source said he was a noted “mental defektiv.”
Greg Potemkin Is Honored With A Parade As He Leaves Milford And Moves To Florida. A modern day Mark Twain, writer Greg Potemkin serves as parade marshal as he leads a parade of grateful residents to the edge of town. Along the way, He was presented with tomatoes, eggs and fruit for his journey.

NEXT: 1960 LOCAL POLITICAL ADVISOR, GREG POTEMKIN, HEADS UP THE LOCAL NIXON FOR PRESIDENT CAMPAIGN.

The Kennedy-Nixon Debate

At Milford High School

Richard Nixon (blue suit, brown shoes) and Ted Kennedy (jeans, loafers) tumble into the orchestra area of the Milford High School auditorium during their confrontation. It is a little known fact that volunteer Nixon campaign manager, Greg Potemkin, convinced Richard Nixon to insist on Milford High School as the site for the 5th and final of the JFK/Nixon debates in 1960. Potemkin scheduled dozens of high school campaign stops for Nixon that year.

Nixon arrived the night before and stayed at the local hotel. Kennedy was to arrive by helicopter shortly before the 8 PM telecast. Nixon spent most of the day on a barstool at a local tavern where he got into several scuffles with other patrons in the largely Democratic area. All were to assemble at the high school auditorium for sound checks. Ted Kennedy was JFK's advance man and he was to be a stand-in for the sound checks. In a further unfortunate situation, Ted spent the day shooting pool and drinking beer at a local bowling alley. The two men
were both in foul moods when they faced off for the sound check. Words led to shoves and when Ted made a comment about Pat Nixon's Republican Cloth Coat, the candidate threw a headlock around Kennedy's neck and the two tumbled into the band pit at the front of the stage. Both camps agreed to cancel the debate due to “technical problems.” It was never rescheduled. It remains unclear as to why Potemkin scheduled so many campaign appearances for Nixon in high schools. The voting age was 21.

Thus completes my stories about my hometown and my illustrious family. I plan to go home again sometime. I will probably wear a disguise. I don’t want anyone to make a big fuss about my visit.
TWO

MY COLLEGE HOMETOWN

Flop County is a small county located several miles into what is called the Deep South. Its one claim to fame is the fact it is home to a famous private college. I attended college there and wrote this after experiencing the culture. We got married a year out of high school and worked for 10 years before we both decided it was time to pack up the kids and head off to college. With the help of a scholarship for non-traditional students and a nice inheritance, we soon found ourselves packed and heading south to take our stand in Dixie.

Founding Fathers

Here in Flop County, Constable Beauregard (Pronounced: Boo-regard) Johnson McDaniels is all that stands between international terrorism and the good citizens. "Boo John," as the locals call him, uses the county helicopter for nighttime deer hunting with the infrared sniper scope provided by The Department Of Homeland Security.

"You let dem deer over populate and first thang you know they's blockin da road in a dang mergency," Boo John laughs as he pounds laughing county commissioner Pete Pyle on the back during a social hour at the Flop County Muskrat Lodge.

Flop County was named for legendary Civil War personality Major Audacious Flop whose name has become synonymous with operations resulting in less than successful conclusions.
In the war, Major Flop attempted to have the 10 surviving members of the County Regiment attack the 12,000 Union soldiers surrounding them. Major Flop was shot in the buttocks 4 times just seconds after he attempted to lead the charge. His regiment immediately surrendered.

The most famous landmark in the county is also the oldest continuously operated hotel in the state. The Flop House has housed travelers since before the Civil War. No one can recall the last tourist to visit the county but the Flop House remains open and now rents rooms by the hour. Several local men have complained that the rooms should be rented in 10 or 15-minute increments. A franchising scheme, designed to put a Flop House in every major city during the 80's, was less than successful for reasons still not understood by the local investors.

"...unless they're talkin' 'bout a liberal"

Bubba Bodine has the talk show during morning drive on the local 1000 watt FM blowtorch. Bubba also disguises his cigarette-crafted voice and serves as the station traffic reporter and pretends to report from a helicopter. Few 50-year-old men can pull off being known as "Bubba" without looking foolish. He is no exception. His real name is Barry and he often brags about his patriotism. "We fought fer that Bill of Rights an' it wasn’t so someone can criticize my government or its leaders and I'll be damned if they'll do it on my program—unless they're talkin' 'bout a liberal."

This same radio station features a weekend show called "Obituary Radio" where people can report local deaths over the air. There are long periods of real dead air when no callers call in their
reports. Speaking of dead air, the station engineer routinely misses the pick up of satellite feeds of syndicated shows—sometimes for as long as 15 or 20 minutes. At other times he manages to broadcast a satellite news report or commentary at the same time as he broadcasts the regular program. You get two shows for the price of one and it is so garbled that you get just what you're paying for.

Sunday mostly features religious broadcasting. Sunday morning used to feature a one-hour show where the son of the station owner did card tricks on the radio. You could just imagine local people huddled around their radio in amazement as one trick after another was broadcast! The program had to be moved to Saturday morning when the religious folk complained about card playing on Sunday. It is a pretty decent lead in to Obituary Radio.

In many ways Flop County is a land time forgot—or at least didn't bother to visit for very long. Local appliance dealer Brad Eyore still runs commercials, complete with voice imitations, poking fun at locally hated former president Bill Clinton. Our university’s political science department did a poll and found 41% of area citizens believed Clinton was still in office and seventy percent of those people believed Clinton was coming to "git their guns" any day now. Twenty percent ordered the poll takers off their property at gun point before they could ask the questions.

"It's in there if you know where to look."

The college also discovered 87% of local residents favored the display of the Ten Commandments in all public places and government
buildings as long as they were in their original form and language from the King James Version. Pastor Jimmy Jacklag of the Mt. Of Blessing Baptist Church (larger than all local churches with the exception of The Flop Gathering Of God main congregation) sums up the feeling of his congregation this way, "The good Lahd wrote it down just like we got it and we got the guns to see it gits forced. He's a good god but he can be jealous. There ain't never been no abortion done in a clinic what got the Ten Commandments displayed in the lobby. Do them gays what got married in Boston read the Ten Commandments at their wedding? Of course not, not when it says right there that the homersexual is sin. When asked to explain where the Ten Commandments speak specifically about the "homersexual," Rev. Jacklag responded: "It's in there if you know where to look."

"Who dey think gonna beat dem Rebels?"

Football is king in Flop County. On a typical Friday night thousands of fans can be seen heading toward Community Stadium, home of The Flop County High School Rebels. I believe half of the teams in the South call themselves the Rebels. Grown men greet each other with loud, shrill rebel yells and point fingers in pistol mimicking motions while chanting, "Who dey think gonna beat dem Rebels?" Flop Schools have fifteen elementary schools and five junior highs scattered around the large county but they maintain one huge high school in order to keep the football team in the top class of the enrollment based state athletic association classification system. In a progressive move, the Flop School Board maintains a system of countywide units of the Senior High
which are located in different neighborhoods designed to maintain a cultural "identity" for the various ethnic groups served by the system. Of course promising athletes enjoy early release and a daily bus trip to the main training facility. Flop won the state championship three times. Judging by the results of my interviews, there must have been somewhere in excess of 850 men who played in each championship game. Half of them made a game saving play. Football is of such value to the reputation of a family that parents have been known to demand schools retain their students in earlier grades so that they will be more physically mature to compete in high school.

"Never be a Republican or marry a Yankee."

If football is king, politics would not be far behind as a spectator sport in the white parts of Flop County. The county is home to what locals call the Blue Tick Democrat. Basically, a Blue Tick Democrat is a registered Democrat who votes a straight Republican ticket in national and statewide elections. One might ask why they don't simply switch their registration. The simple answer is tradition. Youngsters still grow up being told about the evils of Abraham Lincoln and his Republican carpet bagging Northerners. When questioned, several local people related promises they made to their death bed bound parents and/or grandparents to "never become a Republican or marry a Yankee." To make it in Flop politics one is best served to be a registered Democrat but be endorsed by the Republican Party. Of course individuals choosing to run for a national office or a state wide position will generally schedule a press conference where they will announce their switch to the Republican Party. "I do this with a heavy heart but I am consoled by the
thought that I haven't deserted the Democratic Party, it has deserted me," was the way a teary eyed Robert "Bobby" Snopshield explained his move on the night he announced his candidacy for the US Congress. Known simply as "Snop" to his circle of God fearing buddies, Snopshield cited flag burning, abortion and gay marriage as an axis of evil (he called it an "axel" of evil) that would be the major target of his tenure in Congress. Sweating heavily while holding court in the fellowship hall of Burning Bush Baptist Church, he spent almost five hard breathing minutes recounting the evil mechanics of "men lying with men as with a woman." When asked if he would concentrate on family values during the campaign he responded, "Yes sir, they can take my gun when they pry my cold dead fingers off'n it."

"Yes ma'am."

Southern men have the infuriating habit of saying "Yes ma'am/yes sir" or "No ma'am/no sir" in situations where you know they don't mean to be respectful. You get the idea they believe they can tell the biggest lie and get away with it with a polite "yes ma'am/no ma'am." It drips of almost a politician's saccharine phoniness. Workmen will come to your house and make a bid on some work. We bought an old large house complete with big oaks and Spanish moss. The house was cheap but we had to make minor repairs and hire out larger ones. It was an education.

Need painting?

"$3000 seems a little high to paint the front door."

"Yes ma'am. But that's about what it costs here, I've actually
given you a low estimate."

"Will you send someone who'll do a good job?"

"Yes ma'am. All my men studied door painting in college."

Even the street hoods are polite.

"Let go of my purse."

"Yes ma'am. Let me just get your wallet and rings. Thank you ma'am."

The "yes ma'am" also disguises the existence of almost a Third World work ethic. Work often begins just before Noon in situations where workmen are to come to a private home. The only liberal thing in Flop County is the lunch break which is often interrupted by the need to start packing up the tools for the day. A one-day completion estimate actually means at least three or four days. If someone gives you an acceptable bid and says "We'll get it started Monday," you can plan on Wednesday—unless the weather is (or looks) bad.

The answering machine is a godsend for Flop County "craftsmen." Apparently the return call is optional here. When shopping, be aware that when a business advertises its hours as 9 to 6, this is taken seriously only by newly relocated shoppers. The whole county seems to run on its own version of flex time. "Starting at 9" means the employees begin pulling into the parking lot at 9 or reasonably thereafter. Most Flop County businesses could outsource to Bangladesh and not miss a beat.

One should also expect to wait for employees to answer a question until they have finished with their personal cell phone call. A lot of the better employees will try to answer your question while punching in the number of their next call. Apparently there is an etiquette in the larger stores that requires employees to gather in informal little klatches
from which customers are excluded.

Unions are anathema in Flop County. Workers are warned that unions want to make them socialist dupes. Or as one preacher cried from his TV pulpit: “The communists wanted to make you a prawn in their desire to drive God from the workplace.” It sounded almost delicious. It’s widely believed most Flop County citizens have somehow discovered a sinister connection between labor unions and that awful Union that sent soldiers to the South and threw otherwise contented slaves into confusion.

The Fine Art Of The Excuse

Flop Countians have developed the excuse for not showing up to work into an art form. My two favorites were presented by a tree surgeon and a roofing contractor. The tree guy promised he'd attend to our work the "first thing" on Sunday. "Right after church," was how he put it. "I may work on Sunday but I always see that the Lord is honored," was how he further assured me he'd fulfill his promise. Of course he didn't show up or call. I called him the next day and he apparently made the mistake of answering his cell phone instead of allowing it to go safely and conveniently to message. His excuse for not showing up? "I was finishing up a job on Sunday and was working alone when an enraged raccoon wouldn't allow me to climb out of the tree. The dang thing had me trapped for three hours." I asked him if he was coming today to complete his work and he said: "Well, I broke my climbing shoe spike when I threw it at the raccoon and I'm waiting for a new one to be overnighted from the company that makes them. We never heard from him
The roofing guy was also excellent. The day after he failed to show up he finally returned my calls. It seems he was just going to drop off some debris when he arrived to find the dump on fire. He promised to find somewhere else to dump his load and be right over. Of course he never showed. He finally returned one of my calls the next day. His excuse? Priceless! It seems he was heading for my house when he spotted the fire department finishing up dousing a fire at a house along the highway. He stopped to organize an effort to collect clothes and belongings for the people who'd lost things in the fire. He never contacted us again. I'm worried that possibly his truck caught on fire the next day.

Flop Countians apparently don't consider it a lie if they simply say something that is untrue but could have been true. A large appliance repair company had a technician out to repair an appliance. He would have to get a part "back at the shop" but would be there first thing in the morning. He called in to make sure the part was available and his schedule was clear in the morning. He had a computer and small printer with which he presented me a receipt listing the next day and time for my appointment. By now you know he didn't show up and when I eventually talked to him, he denied making the appointment. His supervisor was better. He told me that his man "may well have given you a date and time" but that doesn't mean he gave you an appointment!

Religion seems important to many contractors and business owners. Some are subtle—simply placing a "Jesus fish" on their business card, yellow pages ad or on the advertising signs on their truck. Presumably, you are thus part of some semi-secret band of believers again.

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when you enter into a contract with Brother Bubba. For others it is a slightly harder sell. Billboards, business cards and ads will proclaim in big letters that the owner is a Christian or my personal favorites: "Jesus is my partner" and "Salvation spoken here." Many display a Bible on their cluttered dashboard. Jesus apparently requires that his partners and followers not return phone calls or notify a client if they've found a more lucrative job and won't be there to complete the work they've contracted with you. Just the other day my mailbox yielded a directory. The cover invited me to let my fingers do the walking through The Christian's Guide To Business In Flop County.

**Tex’s Drive-In Funeral Homes Inc.**

Joe Ray "Tex" Major is the most visible politician in Flop County. Twice convicted of corruption and bribery, he has never had serious opposition in a political contest. He is a fiery but folksy orator. He currently holds a seat on the 12-member county highway commission from his cell in the state penitentiary. It is a paid position and runs into 6 figures. Despite the county being financially strapped, Flop County is the only one in the state to have such a commission.

The job nicely augments his main business. He owns a string of funeral homes called Tex’s Drive-In Funeral Homes. He has purchased all of the abandoned drive-in restaurants in the tri state area and turned them into drive-in funeral homes. Visitors can simply pull up to one of the speakers he has positioned in various parts of the parking lot for each of the deceased. They can listen to their chosen service. The recorded services are repeated throughout the day. Young women on roller skates
will glide out to your car and take refreshment orders while you grieve. The most popular special is the Bereavement Platter of fried chicken and fries. Before leaving, you are invited to drive past the drive through window and view the deceased of your choice.

Somehow, the highway commission saw fit last year to re-pave each drive-in and any private gravel road leading to it.

"If you can't drive like the Dopkin boys, stay out of their lane."

The male Dopkin Family members are local legends. They've been tearing up and down the county roads since the days of moonshiners and the revenuers who chased them in the mythic days before stock car racing became mainstream. The Dopkin clan is known for their hot cars and disdain for speed limits. Young boys go into a shrill, breathless enthusiasm when they come of age bragging, "If you can't drive like the Dopkins, stay out of their lane." Even local adults call the passing lane on local highways the Dopkin Lane. There is a small dirt racetrack in the county and Hoss Dopkin and his boys have dominated the Saturday night races for years. Rumor has it that Hoss Jr. is also now the king of local cock fighters. Though illegal, it is said that these popular local sporting events draw even Constable McDaniels.

Three Dopkin "kin" have made contributions to the legend by fatally wrapping their autos around trees while racing on local highways. Everybody in Flop County seems to be a race fan. Most everyone has a decal or bumper sticker that displays the racecar number and name of his or her favorite driver. Fights have been started among grown men overdisrespecting someone's favorite driver. Schoolyard taunts about
favorite drivers are common. They have led to many a young bloody nose.

"An Alcohol Fueled Stupor"

The automobile was introduced to Flop County in 1912. County records report there were 3 registered vehicles and 31 collisions that year. Apparently those early cars had technology far ahead of the curve, so to speak. Over the years, old records frequently mention various Flop County notables driving in an "Alcohol Fueled Stupor." To this day, Flop County drivers tend to ignore open container laws with the same independent streak that results in the avoidance of seat belts and motorcycle helmets.

The automobile has long been an important item in the local culture and economy. Indeed, auto body repair and traffic fines are a staple of the local economy. It is widely believed that such things as the amusement park attraction of "dodge em" cars and the demolition derby grew out of someone observing a local driver ed class.

In the old days, duels would be fought over insults directed at someone's vehicle (pronounced: vee—hickle). In modern times, many a fistfight follows a comment, or even a look, directed at an auto.

So many babies have been conceived in the back seats of Flop County autos that the four local drive-in theaters are sometimes referred to as fertility clinics. One drive-in still does a brisk business despite having had its screen blown down several years ago by a storm.

BLUE LAWS AND BOOTLEGGERS

Flop County is a throwback to the old days of Blue Laws and Prohibition. It’s a “dry” county but by conservative estimates, it is the
equal of any county in alcohol related problems. Since the purchase, sale or possession of alcohol is illegal, estimates of how widespread alcohol is, can only be judged by arrest records. Flop is the equal, on a per capita basis, of any county in the state in alcohol related offenses.

The first time we tried to find a bottle of brandy in the county, kindly friends accompanied me to a “bootlegger.” He operated his liquor store from an old gas station. The pumps had been removed and you could either park and go in or drive around back to a drive-up window. While on my first visit, my companion introduced me and helped me secure a piece of paper stamped with a red star. This would be my identification.

The owner was a jovial chap named Beezer. He was proud to point out the County Highway Commission (of which his brother was a member) was in the process of paving the entire gravel expanse of his lot. I’ve since made 2 solo purchases at Beezer’s. I must say the lot was very smooth. On each of my visits, I was struck by: a.) the amount and variety of products—there were literally several hundreds of cases and even more bottles on display. And b.) the steady torrent of customers—some weekends, the line waiting for the drive-up window stretches across the well-paved lot and far up the highway. On occasion, deputies will be seen directing traffic. I’m told that every few years, Constable Boo John forms local preachers into a posse and a raid is conducted. Sure enough, I later read in the local paper that a raid was conducted on Beezer’s place. All told, seven bottles of cheap whiskey and 2 cases of warm beer were confiscated and destroyed. Because it was his 4th offense, the proprietor was said to be looking at up to a $35 fine.
"I don't care how you did it up north."

Shortly after moving here to Flop County, I sought out a place to continue my practice of Yoga. Back in the North I found it to be a valuable source of relaxation. I found classes advertised in an adult recreation flyer and registered by mail for Intermediate Yoga. I arrived and parked next to a red Ford sedan plastered with several bumper stickers. Amid the usual flag decals and religious slogans I saw a sticker that read: "I don't care how you did it up north." Omens are funny things.

I took a position in the back and spread my mat. I began stretching as the gym filled. The instructor introduced herself and gave us some information about her background. She was a former Army sergeant and learned the basics of Yoga in various military rec centers. I started to get a little nervous. She asked each of us for a name to check off on her list. I gave my name and it dawned on me I was the only man in the class.

"We usually don't get men taking Yoga." It was said in a way that indicated my manhood had been opened to debate.

"I'm sorry, back where I came from we always had a few men in the classes." Wrong answer.

The instructor gave me a forced grin of sorts and drew several head nods and grunts from the others when she said, "Honey, you need to read my bumper sticker." Things quickly deteriorated from there.

"I don't do that heathen Yoga here," she reassured the class in general and me in particular, "Most of you were here for beginning Yoga so you know I don't abide any of that meditation stuff or that Hindu mumbo jumbo, this is American Yoga."
"Race, race, race. It's always race with you people."

Judge Dorothy Cuthbait is a stickler for law and order and hard work. She earned her law degree through a correspondence course while working full time as a dispatcher for Constable McDaniels—a distant cousin.

Judge Cuthbait was elected county judge on largely a bumper sticker campaign proclaiming that she is "pro flag, pro family and proudly pro police." In her most celebrated case to date, she found a bewildered Charles Brown guilty on six counts of theft for passing six bad checks to local merchants. She sentenced him to the maximum six years in prison and repeatedly asked the prosecutor if there was any evidence Mr. Brown could have been carrying a weapon while passing his bad paper. (State law allows added penalties for using a weapon in the commission of a crime.)

Mr. Brown was defended by public defender Raymond Johnson who argued his elderly client suffered from Alzheimer's and could neither read, write nor remember his name.

"Then how did he write the checks Mr. Johnson?"

"He couldn’t have written them your honor. As a matter of fact, he is the victim of identity theft. I intend to show that he was not capable of opening the checking account from which..."

"That's enough Mr. Johnson. This is not Matlock."

"With all due respect your honor, I have witnesses who will testify that the person who opened the account was a young white woman and as your honor can clearly see, the defendant is an elderly
black man.

"Race, race, race. It's always race with you people. You'll not play the race card in my court"

Mr. Brown, at 94, was the oldest prisoner in the history of the state. He spent over two months in a prison infirmary before he was granted a new trial by a state appeals court. After a change of venue, he was fully exonerated at the second trial. Among the evidence presented was the passing of four more checks from the account while Mr. Brown was incarcerated. Word has it that judge Cuthbait is planning to add an attack on the judicial activism of appellate judges to the law and order plank of her re-election campaign platform. That's a lot to fit on a bumper sticker.

"This Ain't No Beauty Shop."

The mullet haircut is still the dominant coiffure for young men in Flop County. A few trendy older men still sport the mullet of their girl chasing days, but older men tend to gravitate to something akin to a military cut, although the flattop still has its devotees. One barbershop proudly sports a sign in the window, "This Ain't No Beauty Shop." I'd say that was a safe bet.

Red's Diner

Local diners often eat at Red's Diner off the Interstate at the Flop County Landfill Exit. Decor is simple and vintage 1950s. Red has chosen off-white Formica topped tables with stainless steel legs to carry out his 50s motif. Wooden chairs surround some of the tables, while metal folding chairs grace the others. Your eyes are quickly taken to the curled
flypaper strips that flutter and flap gently in the loud humming breeze of a more than adequate window air conditioning unit.

You'll want to study the hand-lettered menus for daily specials. In my case, it prevented a serious faux pas as I was prepared to ask the red haired man at the stove if he was the "Red" for whom the restaurant was named. I motioned another customer to go first as I debated my options. He said: "Hey Blue, gimme a hambuggah en' fraas."

I realized right away Blue was no stranger to the rigors of local board of health inspections. He removed his well-chewed cigar stub before wiping his hands on his apron. He unwrapped what looked like a prime cut of a semi frozen square patty of a meat like item. Blue's been here before—he deftly scraped an open spot on the griddle before depositing the entree. Fries can be a tricky item for a chef but he had little trouble shaking loose a full serving from a heavy brown bag he took
from the freezer. He quickly submerged his fry basket in the vat of roiling, sputtering fat while smoothly kicking an errant fry under the stove. Blue is obviously an animal lover.

I went with the Roast Beef Special. The chef scraped himself another clean griddle spot and deposited a beautifully formed square frozen patty. I decided to check the menu for drink options while Blue reached for that familiar brown bag of potatoes.

Red's has an interesting method of serving drinks. In a novel presentation that should become standard in the industry, patrons serve themselves from a chest style cooler containing a selection of sodas and locally bottled favorite “Mr. Swigg Cola.” Something called “Sweet Tea” was promoted with the promise of free refills. I selected the tea.

My particular meat serving was thoroughly cooked and produced little of the freezer burn aftertaste that made the potatoes so unique. It was probably the size of the meal (which was served with a firm slice of white bread and several green beans that had been gently sautéed well past al dente) that kept me from being able to finish everything on my plate. I certainly was served quite a bit more than I wanted and dessert was out of the question despite seeing a tantalizing cherry pie. It sported what appeared to be several more raisins than I had previously noticed when I arrived. It was certainly another interesting presentation!

"What do you need that for?"

Cooking at home is also pretty much not adventuresome in the area. No store stocks much in the way of Asian spices or foreign foods although a few vegetarian items are available. The bigger grocery outlets
do all right on staples like bread, milk and anything made from hog parts, but out of the mainstream items like orzo, falafel or steel cut oats are squeezed out so that 173 brands and styles of grits can be offered.

I once inquired of a grocery clerk, "Can you special order some cumin seed for me?"

Irritated, the clerk shot back, "What do you need that for?"

I didn't have the courage to tell her we were starting a cumin farm and needed seeds. Who knows, she may have called Homeland Security or the constable. The last thing I need is a helicopter circling my house looking for my illicit cumin patch.

**Law And Medicine In Flop County**

The professions are quite visible in Flop County. Although there are only a few hundred thousand residents in the entire county, there are 142 pages of attorney ads in the local phone book. Apparently a large part of the local economy consists of people suing and counter suing one another. Most of the ads are placed by personal injury and product liability lawyers although there is a decent smattering of divorce lawyers among the hundreds of advertisements. One can understand the plethora of personal injury cases just by observing local driving habits. Turn signals are apparently optional in Flop County and most have mastered the tricky cell phone to the ear blind lane change, the area is noted for.

**THE DEWEY MAN**

I was confused by the radio ads of one local attorney. He referred to himself as what sounded like "The Dewey Man" in his
commercials. He would also say, "Call the Dewey Man when you need him." He would also comfort his listeners with the admonition that he'd be there to help in the event someone picked up a Dewey on the way home. It remained a mystery and I was going to write it off as some local peculiarity when the attorney ran a full page ad in the local paper. It offered to defend those charged with a DUI offense! The attorney specialized in handling Driving Under the Influence cases! He even referred to himself in the ad as “The DUI Man.” The “Dewey Man” mystery was solved. Next time you're facing 3 days in jail for picking up a Dewey on the way home, give the Dewey Man a call.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Local laws are made by an eleven member county board of overseers served by the typical staff of lawyers, engineers, planning directors and such. No one in the county can remember the last time the overseers turned down a zoning change. As a result, local traffic is a nightmare and septic fields are a constant source of complaint and disease. When controversial discussions are brought to a vote, it is not unusual for one or more overseers to quietly get up and slip out of the room without comment. They can later claim that they did not vote for (or against) this or that disaster. The law requires a quorum of 6 to be present and there have been a few heated confrontations as two or more lawmakers vied for that last neutral position through the door before a vote.

In some locations, he is known as a judge executive and in others he is a county administrator, city manager or mayor. In Flop County he is Beston R. Levioux, Flop County Regulator. Known as "B.R." and also
"Vo," he hires county employees, advises the board of overseers and runs day-to-day county business. He just signed his 4th ten-year contract. He's a wheeler-dealer who also owns a used car lot in the county. Presently, he forbids the sale of either local daily paper in any county office or property. The ban has been in effect ever since the Flop Sentinel and the Flop Times published stories about the last 21 sealed bid sales of used county property. The items on sale ranged from used police cars to houses confiscated for delinquent taxes. B.R. selects the items to be sold and he and several overseers were the winning bidders on all 21 recent properties. Mr. Levioux is quick to point out that all bids were sealed by his secretary and she has a reputation for integrity that is unmatched in county government. And Vo should know about her reputation because she is also his daughter-in-law.

THE HEALING ARTS

There may be a chicken and egg debate about the relationship between the local medical profession and the abundance of lawyers. There are two hospitals in the county. Flop General has as its unofficial specialty, the postoperative infection. The chief of surgery is Liam Petri and he doubles as the assistant county coroner. There is an oft-repeated story that is probably mostly urban legend about Dr. Petri. As the story goes, he occasionally confuses his two roles and has had to be gently nudged back from autopsy to surgery mode during an operation. There are repeated guffaws exchanged among hospital employees when new patients find their surgeon introduced to them as the county coroner.

The other hospital is Flop County East. Locals lovingly refer to it as Hotel Sepsis. A few years back, the hospital made one of those
priceless typographical errors in their newspaper ad. Prospective patients were advised that they would know they had arrived at Flop County East Hospital when they encountered the friendly staph the moment they entered the lobby. Unfortunately, the ad was run for almost two years before the error was detected.
DEDICATION

It really is difficult to go home again. When home is both a time and place, the object of your desire to return is an irrecoverable condition. It can only be done in the mind—or the heart. It’s made even more difficult when you’re nostalgic for a time and place you’ve never been.

My father was raised in far Western Wisconsin. The Red Cedar River ran nearby. The North Woods were close by. It was not an easy life in those days. He worked as a farm hand, lumberman, railroad section hand and fishing guide. He drove trucks. He learned to drink and he learned to endure some very formidable winters.

Lutheran churches, barn dances and smoke filled taverns were the meeting places of choice. Cars and trains fascinated him.

When it came to family life, he was better than his parents.
They in turn had probably been better than their parents. It’s a hopeful trend. That may well be all we should hope for.

Like many of the people of his generation, he was called out to struggle against a depressed economy and the biggest war of all time. Like many, he had to leave home early—very early. In simpler times it would have been to seek a fortune. Not so for him—people like him left to eke out survival. They invented themselves and created a culture. It was a culture of hard work and sacrifice.

Their days are gone now—having gone the way of their boyhood homes and the steam locomotives that taunted them in the night of faraway places. All that remains are the footprints of their existence in the minds and hearts of those they touched.

My personal Viking had a great sense of humor. He would have thought these last two stories were hilarious. They are actually placed here as part of this dedication. We once watched a TV program about
the need for farm equipment. Several farm workers were leaning and straining against a white rope to pull a plow. He said, “Look, those guys are so tired after the race they can’t break the tape.”

He could laugh with his eyes. During those days of strict segregation and discrimination someone commented about something on TV about a famous black leader. “Now I wouldn’t mind if Ralph Bunche moved in this neighborhood.” My father looked around the room as if judging its contents. He looked at me with a look that asked why would a rich and famous person want to live here. We roared in silence.

My father loved puns and quips. We were watching a documentary about birds and it mentioned some Arctic birds that had long migrations. I told him that you never see just one of those birds alone. He asked why and I answered, “Because one good tern deserves another.” He grinned from ear to ear. The next day I made my morning call to check on him and there was no answer. The world was on its own.

As the disclaimer said, these are stories of fiction. Indeed, I never attended college in the Deep South or as a non-traditional student on scholarship. I did attend college but it was in a delightful little town in the mountains.

Ah, Milford. Yes, I did grow up in one of the dozens of places called some variation with the name Milford. The Milford I wrote about is not the Milford I grew up in. Like Flop County, the mythical place I attended a mythical college, the Milford I wrote about is also fictional. The real Milford of my youth was a special and wonderful place. I moved back briefly as an adult but soon had to again leave. It is both a
fine place to be from and a fine place to be. I miss it. You can always go home again—sometimes it is just in your mind or your heart. In any event, you just can’t stay very long. It’s too bad.