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THE VILLAGE TAVERN

The Stories of a Dozen Dead Drunks

**A Novel by
Nathan Pollack**

**Illustrations by
Dana Pattillo**

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THE VILLAGE TAVERN

by an old but modern Rip Van Winkle

(appropriate apologies to Mister Irving)

A mere 200 years ago Washington Irving jotted of Rip Van Winkle:

He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he repeated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep [for twenty years]..."That flagon last night," thought he, "has addled my poor head sadly!"

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I can outline some of my early history more easily than I can relate my later mystery. I was a nice kid, an obedient kid. I don't remember a lot about Ghent where I was born, but I remember something of when we ran from the Nazis when I was about five.

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It is quiet in this large room, folding chairs in a clumsy circle; on a central table there are no ashtrays; on a side table there is an empty coffee urn, empty mugs but no sugar or creamer, one plastic spoon, no napkins. Wraiths float in intermittently, sit silently, perhaps a dozen and a half. For several moments no one new comes in. The door closes. No one takes control.

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I thank you, reader, my Virgil, for giving me occasion to go back to my own Hades from where I slowly crawled up into the blinding light, to struggle a lumpy life on the surface of this scrawny Earth. I don't know what is supposed to be hell in this metaphor, for myths of good places and bad are likely just as false as any myth, any metaphor.

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Without honesty there is no freedom. Without freedom there is no love, no joy, no growth, no strength. Usually we are slow in these, sometimes criticize or even condemn ourselves because we know we are quite imperfect. Isn't that one of the major obstacles to all the healthy aspects of our living, our own refusal honestly to accept ourselves as we really are?

FOREWORD

I didn't grow up there. I didn't grow up. I was big enough, old enough, wise enough already. I walked into the place a man, a legitimate man. I was twenty-one. By the time I left a couple years later trauma and loss enough had besplattered me, and I was off to medical school ready to begin a real life (for too long a time a real nightmare). I had had many friends while I lived there at the Village Tavern, but by the time I walked out most of them were dead.

They didn't acknowledge my alcoholic condition though they quietly or with bluster bravado admitted their own; they thought I couldn't be like them because to them I was just a kid. They were sad to be within sight of the ends of their lives at early middle age. After twenty more years I myself ran into that brick wall of pain, and I got sober. I think these ghosts from the Tavern subtly and slowly nudged me over the edge, down to the bottom. True friends, eh?

For several decades I have avoided thinking of this story, afraid of my dammed-up floods of fear and shame. I have been instructed not to regret the past nor to shut the door on it. I think I can go back now without having to glorify dissidence nor to make clumsy jokes about what is too painful and too destructive to survive. Now I can laugh not at the vivid details of what happened there, the painful realities we all tried to evade, but to see more clearly remarkable ironies of this bigger real world I have come to live in. I have been liberated, and the friends I have today are quite alive.

It is not very important who I am, so though I was there let's leave me out of this. It's what I witnessed I want them to tell you, these persons with their idiosyncrasies, their color, their pretenses, their frothy humor and its anxious cackles and guffaws, their pain, their lonely ends. Despite their uniquenesses I'm afraid they're pretty much the same one as the other, similar peas in a sinking lifeboat. I offer you their testimonies in their own voices, these ghosts who still speak to me at night in dreams and every day in meetings of our very large recovering family. I may be tempted to interject what I think is the truth, but don't listen to me--listen to them¹.

1 I have changed whatever names I couldn't remember by replacing them; perhaps I have changed others as well. I am sad that they're all dead by any names historic or fictional. Anyhow, no one else remembers them, so perhaps they want to be remembered one last time. Even if they are still recognizable they won't sue me themselves, and even their children and grandchildren won't sue me since they will rather to hear these outlandish stories.

Jack Aguilar: PUBLICAN

A guy's gotta have a dream. I usually play my cards close to the vest, but being dead takes away the need for old habits so I'll tell you the truth.

I'm Jack Aguilar. I was born in Waco, Texas during the Depression, before the War. Some people say *everyone* was poor then, but that's not how it seemed to me. Some people say they didn't even know they were poor because their homes were so full of love, but that's not how it was for me. We were dirt-poor and we hated each other.

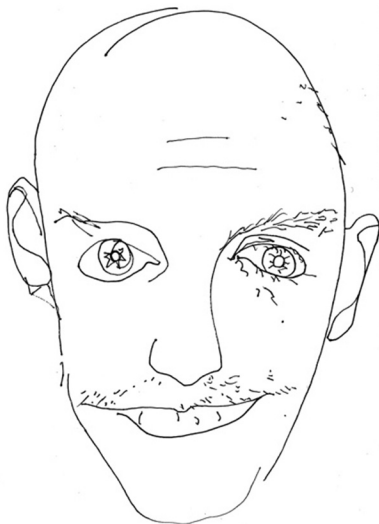
My father was a little man, but his anger was giant. Some mornings he wasn't angry, and he looked even smaller sitting silently at the kitchen table sipping coffee with both hands, nursing bruises from a fight the night before, nursing a hangover and a headache.

My mom was bruised too, as I remember, boiling water for weak coffee, thin oatmeal. Sometimes I didn't know where she got the coffee (not real coffee) or the oatmeal, but I knew where she got the bruises. They spilled over on her from my father's boiling fury, from his fist-fights at the bar.

When he didn't come home at all things were quieter but still there wasn't much of anything to eat. He'd be gone for weeks in the oil fields, rough-necking, doing any job of labor in the pipe yards or at the drill rigs or tank farms or pumps. There wasn't any union then, no decent wage, no glory. My father hated unions anyhow, like he hated FDR.

I didn't know why he wasn't in the army like my uncle, thought he might just be a coward. Later I figured out he was exempted from the army because he was working producing oil. There were lots of jobs to be done and few enough men to do them but he wasn't always employed; he was always a drunk.

My father was a dirty little man, smelled of sweat and cigarettes he rolled by hand with lots of spit, and beer so stale I couldn't tell the difference of its sharp musty odor from the sweat; beer was his sweat. I didn't know how he could stand such stinking things as cigarettes and beer until I tried them. Bitter, but they made me feel bigger, taller.



Sometimes he'd come home after a couple weeks or months and wouldn't find us, not because we ran away from him (the way we should) but because we'd have to move to another little house, another apartment, another town. We stuck together despite him being gone, maybe we stuck together because he wasn't there.

Mom stuck with him over twenty years before he died in a rooming-house fire in Lubbock. I never knew why she put up with him, must have liked being beat up. It surprised me to hear their soft whispering to each other when I was supposed to be asleep, them making up after all the noise and crashing of a fight, humping each other, their bed squeaking like fingernails on a chalk-board.

There were just me and Mom and my little brother Bud. Life was mostly chores, and school, and church on Sundays, and sometimes running in the dry creek bed playing war and robbers. (I was always John Dillinger because I was older than Bud.)

Mom communicated with me by screaming and grabbing me by the ear, until I was big enough to run faster than she could. I guess I was big enough to hit her (for even though she was bigger than my father she wasn't very big) but I was terrified of her anger because like a volcano if she started exploding there was no way to stop her.

I tried to help my little brother grow straight but he was as stubborn as my mother was angry. I taught him how to ditch school and steal cigarettes, how to get a can of corn or beans from the store and slip them in your pants so we could eat that night, how to get onto a moving freight car to go to town (when we were living in a rusty old bus way out near the farm where her father had a job). My brother died in jail when he was seventeen.

I left my mother and my brother when I got my own job in the oil fields. I was small but strong. I told them I was eighteen. I don't think they believed me, but I worked hard so they didn't ask again. I moved all over, like my dad, but we never crossed paths. Texas is big, and the oil business is big, and even though I'd run across someone sometimes who remembered my dad they never said much about him.

I never wrote my mother because I didn't know where she would be, and besides I didn't write well, couldn't spell. I didn't know my brother had died until I overheard it two years later sitting at a bar in Waco.

I did okay in the oil fields, rough-necking on a regular crew, not a migrant like my father. The oil company was good enough to me, gave me uniforms with my name on the front of the shirt ("Jack Junior" because the foreman had known my father). I made good money, but like my father I drank a lot of it, or pissed it away while I was drinking (betting the football games, chasing women and whores, buying rounds of beer like a big-shot), but I never had a fight. I guess I wasn't as angry as either of my folks, never wanted to hurt anybody.

I did save some money because I wanted a truck. Everyone around west Texas had a pick-up truck, no muffler, broom sticking up in the back to sweep out the bed (you had to keep it neat and clean), rifles across the back window.

Some of the guys had a bright red new Chevrolet 3100 half ton, but the best I could do was get a 1948 Ford F-1 for \$189.00. Even though I hated more than anything to

compromise on what I wanted, I'd rather have some truck rather than no truck. So to make up for not having a new one I got it painted candy-apple blue for \$38.00. I thought that made it run better.

Even though I made good money, nearly five dollars an hour, and even though the company paid for my uniforms, motel room, insurance, I couldn't save much. I don't know how my mother found me, probably through someone in the oil patch (maybe that foreman).

Her letter asking for money was hard to read because her spelling was as bad as mine, and besides, to tell the truth, I couldn't read very well. But I sent her twenty bucks, and then I started sending her twenty bucks every three months, then every month. I didn't feel guilty, because I didn't think she had ever done much for me, but I was surprised that I felt a little sentimental. I guess I wanted a mother I cared about enough to send money.

On September 3rd, 1956, chain tongs broke loose (like I had seen happen four times before). It hit me in the leg and I knew it was broken; I also knew I was lucky because I could see my boot and it was still at the end of my pant-leg, not clear across on the other side of the platform.

That broken leg hurt more than I can describe. Waiting for an ambulance to come was also much worse than I can describe, fifty miles down the highway then down that dusty road to the rig. But I wasn't willing to cry or to faint, no matter what. A buddy gave me a big gulp of Jim Beam out of the flask in his boot, then another, then another. I didn't cry and I didn't faint.

When I got to the hospital I found out how close I had come to cutting my whole leg off. I was three weeks in the hospital after the operation, three months in a rehabilitation hospital (more like an old folks' home with a physical therapist's office in the back). I could walk on flat pavement but I couldn't climb back on a rig. I didn't know what I was going to do for money. Everything was sure different.

Texas was growing. The whole country was growing during the Eisenhower years. New jobs, new factories and businesses, new families, new houses. I sat thinking about all this when I saw a friend at the bar who had a job delivering appliances for Sears. He said they were always looking for new men. I told him I was a cripple, that I couldn't carry a refrigerator.

I showed him the scars on my leg. He allowed as how I was right about that. We had another beer, on him. He jumped off the bar stool. "I know!" he said. "You're a good talker. You could sell those damn refrigerators." And I did.

A plain looking little woman with dark hair came into the store looking at toast-ovens. She didn't say a word, just looked, holding her purse with both hands. She left. Other customers came in. I sold some stuff like I did every day, refrigerators, stoves, toasters, deep-freezes, vacuum cleaners and all that.

I lived in a little apartment over a bar, and I didn't have any of those appliances. I still had my truck. I didn't even have a refrigerator, not even a little one, not even one

I could have bought at Sears with my employee discount. I ate downstairs at the bar. I drank there too.

That plain-looking young woman (we called them girls then) came back again. She looked at toaster-ovens again. Again she didn't say anything. Again she disappeared behind the next aisle before I could say anything to her. She wasn't ugly at all, just plain. If she wasn't wearing glasses she might be a little bit cute, small as she was.

I was salesman of the month five out of my first six months. I didn't own any appliances myself, but I sure did believe in them (at least I said I did), and I could get other people to believe me about them. I felt almost like an evangelist, like the ones my mom had dragged me by the ear to listen to before I could outrun her. Bullshit, but righteous bullshit.

When she came in again I wasn't going to give her any slack. She wasn't going to come in, look and disappear, not without me saying anything. I thought back about those first two times and I cursed myself for having been so bashful. I was bashful, you know, not usually (or I couldn't be salesman of the month) but with her I was bashful, and I didn't know why.

She came in again. It wouldn't be a deep-freeze or a television, only a toaster-oven, but I didn't care about how much the sale could be. I had imagined her from time to time but I had never said anything to her, so I was going to say it now.

"May I help you, ma'am?"

"Oh, I'm just looking."

"I've seen you in here before."

"Just on my lunch hour."

"Do you work around here?"

"At the accounting office just across the street."

"Accounting? You must really be smart to add all those numbers."

"Oh, not so smart, I guess. We have machines that do the calculations, adding machines."

"Yeah, I've seen the women in the credit department using those; their fingers move so fast I can't see them. Why don't you get a job over here?"

She disappeared again, this time at least she said something, "Gotta go now."

I took my lunch hour walking across the street. There were no "Accounting" signs on any of the little shops on that block. I walked over to the office building; it was so big it had to be the place she worked. Big building, five stories, elevator. I looked at the directory: doctors, dentists, real estate, taxes. No accounting.

The afternoon was dull. Two sales. At the bar I was quiet, thinking without knowing what I was thinking. I told my friend (the same one who worked in delivery) about my day, at least the puzzle I had stepped into: no accounting office. He told me I was stupid. I got ready to punch him in the nose. He told me I was stupid because I was

interested in an ugly woman. I got ready to punch him with the other fist. He told me I was stupid because a tax office has accountants.

I thought about that. He was right about the accountants but he wasn't right I was stupid. I forgave him. I bought him another beer. He was not right about the ugly woman; she was an almost-cute girl. I got ready to punch him.

At the tax office I explain to the receptionist that now that I have a job and it's April I'd better get some tax work done. She says to bring my files to the back and she will have someone help me.

I have no files. I don't quite know what I am trying to do, but as usual I just keep doing it. I can't sit, so I pace in the small room for a few minutes. She comes in, slight, pert, bashful as a woman but confident as a professional, sweet and in charge. I am immediately grateful for the help (though my request for help was just a con-job to get to see her); and whatever she says to do, you'd better believe I'll do it.

How did this happen, that of all the accountants in the firm she was the one who drew my number? It is what I hoped, but I know I haven't done it myself. Who's looking out for me?

"Oh, it's you. How can I help you with your taxes?"

"I don't have any taxes, not yet. I was hoping you would get me some."

She got me something better than taxes. She got me tax breaks. That isn't why I married her, but that is why I made her my partner. I came that day into that tax office thinking I'd send my mother twenty dollars a month, so why not send Uncle Sam twenty dollars too?

She didn't see it that way. I made way over a hundred dollars a week in puny pay and slim commissions, more than most of the guys I drank with. Terri figured how to keep hold of that and even let the government give me a little extra.

Once we got together I saw we needed our own business so we wouldn't have to clock in and out eight hours a day for someone else's profit. We needed our own profit. So soon we were working sixteen hours a day for ourselves.

We needed her to work and we needed me to work. I worked my butt off every night selling her own tax service. It wasn't hard really, when I got to talking about how wonderful she was at saving and making money, one hundred per cent legal; I believed in her so much I made the guys I sold it to believe it too.

Deductions. Our apartment was an office, a business expense. My jaunts around the county buying beers for guys who needed taxes done took miles of gas and oil and rubber. Deductions.

We could have had a kid for a deduction, but then who would do the deducting? So we used condoms (before birth control pills were commonly available, still hard to

get hold of in the Bible Belt). We wanted to grow our own business, to be in charge together. We wanted that so much we didn't even want a dog.

I kinda thought a Kenmore washer was pretty good, but I was certain Terri was more than pretty good; she was damn pretty and mighty good. I had helped her start her own tax service, so I went around the neighborhood and the whole damn town drumming up business. After a while I didn't much care about Sears and Kenmore, but I kept selling them because we needed the capital. (See, I was learning about business. "Capital." I used to think that was a record company.)

Drinking had been a part of my life since I was a kid, and it was paying off for me to go from bar to bar buying beers for other people. That made drinking look good from one side. But, like I said, I could think better when I wasn't drinking. That gave me a chance to figure how much I would save not drinking.

My father couldn't not drink, and neither could my little brother. But when I thought how much I loved Terri and how ready I was to save money for us to have our business, to be free of bosses (and probably free of children and dogs), I didn't have to give it a second thought.

Terri continued the tax service every day, but not for her old corporation. I kept selling Sears' appliances during the day, but I worked for Terri every night. I could talk, I could even think when I wasn't drinking. I couldn't read very well, and I couldn't juggle numbers; she did that in our "office" (our little apartment), and I was the front man.

I started wearing a suit and tie.

I never thought I was any different from who I had always been, but one day walking down the sidewalk I got a quick glance of a clean-cut guy in a suit and tie and I did a double-take. It was me reflected in a plate-glass window, a new and different me.

I kept the new me but I didn't keep the old job. We made a lot more than five dollars an hour in our business. We had fun working with each other, and found we didn't quite know how to have fun doing other things like going dancing or to Las Vegas, so we kept working most all the time.

Neither of us had any family to waste time visiting with. Terri's folks had trekked to California years ago with the dust storms, disappeared from her in the shuffle, no postcard from them since she finished business college, just post cards she wrote to them returned saying "Addressee Unknown".

Terri hired one full-time accountant and another part-time. I pulled in a lot of tax work and business accounts, learned to talk about those things as if I understood all about it. I thought I did.

We had a big and growing business, we had a bigger and bigger income, but we needed more deductions, we needed to do something productive with our capital besides paying it to the government.

We needed to keep working because we liked the money; but we didn't work for wages any more, we worked for profit. Every expense was something we talked

about seriously with each other; we didn't spend anything that didn't pay off bigger than the expense.

We still lived in our little apartment. She still drove the old faded 1948 Ford pick-up truck, but I needed something more impressive. If the front man was wearing a suit and tie I had to drive a new car too. I got a Cadillac, a shiny new one, the small two-door sedan (much cheaper), plain green, but still a Cadillac.

Terri didn't need anything flashy, not even a fancy dress, but she sure needed more room than we had in the apartment, room for desks, room for files, a receptionist to answer the phone and shuffle the mail. We rented an office space in a new shopping mall, 600 square feet, a huge space compared with where we used to work.

That receptionist even kept my messages and sales appointments straight; I didn't know how I had done without her. I didn't spend much time at the office, just making phone calls, but it was my headquarters, the place where I sat for a few minutes, caught up on phone calls, mapped out my schedule of trips around town, kept the schedule to the same general neighborhood each day so I didn't waste time driving and gas.

That receptionist was a gem, sorta homely but I couldn't work without her. I couldn't make a living without Terri, but I couldn't work without Michelle.

Terri and I loved each other, I am sure, but we loved making money even more. Even as things changed gradually one thing we did every day was as soon as the sun was coming up, to discuss our business with our morning coffee. We had no business secrets from each other, and she kept the accounts to the penny, one set of books for taxes and another stuck away just for us.

Terri cared about making and counting money. She followed the real estate market closely because values per square foot went up and down, most always up. We accumulated ten rental houses, not fancy but affordable for working folk like us. As a matter of fact that's how we got started, old friends who couldn't buy a house but needed a place to live.

Terri was good at keeping track of expenses, taxes, rents. She was very good at collecting rents, not threatening (a small woman) but very persistent. We didn't get rich from our little real estate ventures but we made a nice profit. We agreed to find a small neat apartment building, one we could afford to buy, a place where she could collect rents without driving around town, too much time away from her tax accounting business.

Without us thinking much or talking out loud about it, her job was to run the accounting business and all that. My job was talking to people, selling our services, negotiating deals when we bought another little house, or when one needed a new roof or plumbing or paint. I was the sales department, the maintenance department and advertising too I guess.

Without thinking I found myself dreaming. I wanted to keep making more money and I knew as partners we could do it well enough. We had started well, not dynamite, not like a rocket ship, but growing every month.

I woke up and realized I was the dreamer. I wanted us to make it big. I thought every day how to find a sure thing, because we agreed we wanted to make money and never lose it.

There was a real estate and insurance office next to our office in the mall. The old man who was the insurance and investment specialist got sick and their business hobbled along. The old man died and his widow asked Terri if she knew anyone who would want to buy the insurance business and its decades of clients. She had inherited the business but not enough money to be secure on that alone.

Then, since she had come to trust Terri (a serious young businesswoman as she herself had been) she asked her if she knew someone who might lease that little segment of the mall (for that also was something she and her husband had worked together to establish, leased the whole wing of the building, sublet shops and offices from it).

We bought the business and the lease from the widow. I knew a bright good-looking young insurance man from one of the bars and I sold him on being our accounting and insurance salesman; we engaged him on a good commission to be our insurance sales manager too, all by himself at first.

We ran the all those businesses out of our office on the south end of the mall since it required bookkeeping and telephone and mail work, and scheduling of sales calls around town, not a lot more space, but a lot more activity.

The other shops in that part of the mall we sublet were rented out by stable little businesses that had been around for some years and we figured would likely continue--a vacuum repair shop, a dry cleaner, a little pet store that sold fish mostly. There was one space that wasn't rented, and it was the last on the north side right next to the insurance office.

Mister Dreamer (myself) had accounting clients in several bars all over town, now insurance clients too, so like with the tax accounting business I felt like since I could learn to talk their language I pretty well knew their business. That's when I started to think of those two spaces at the north side of the building as one space, large enough for a barroom.

And we did; we built a bar there.

The space was big enough, but our purse wasn't. We had a big expense paying the lease for our part of the mall; we didn't want to borrow, didn't want to pay someone else interest, so we bought into the whole mall (all but the movie theater) so we got part back when we paid ourselves rent.

Our funds were more than a little bit stretched. Terri figured to the penny the costs of remodeling, equipment (as much as possible from the Sears warehouse, a lot of it for free--guess how), licenses, advertising to get the first employee, to get the first customer, to sell the first beer, to pay for the customers' free pretzels.

I guess you can sell a lot of beer in any neighborhood, but being just three blocks from a college campus helped. College kids drink beer, sure, but they also need jobs as bartenders, waitresses--at student pay.

Carpenters were still working and one of us was always there supervising the work. Those college kids were tapping at the door telling Terri or me how much experience and energy they had, smiling, polite but talking fast.

The fastest talker was a graduate student from New Jersey who said he could play the piano. I had a little trouble understanding his New Jersey accent with my American ears, but he was so persistent the only way to answer the question was to listen to him.

I guessed we needed a piano anyhow (in case we might bring in a combo for the little dance-floor in the front corner), so since the interior was finished up enough to paint (no more sawdust) I thought it was safe to bring in a piano.

I have friends who can get you almost anything, especially late at night, and I have friends who move refrigerators all the time so they sure can move a piano. I told the kid to go do his college homework and come back at ten, called a friend who knew where he could get a piano cheap (not a big one, but a piano), called my buddies from Sears, and had that piano delivered and ready at 9:48, even dusted the bench for his scrawny little ass.

That night the kid from New Jersey showed up exactly on time (he never did that again) and when he played it was ragtime and show tunes and dirty songs like I had never heard. He played and sang a mile a minute. Sang? I guess that was singing; pretty harsh, and New Jersey, but even if it was rough you could hear him across a crowded noisy room. Good enough, and better than good enough, he filled the place. When people heard him they came back.

After we sold the first beer we sold a lot more, so the cash pinch eased up quicker than we had figured. But the payroll picked up too, three waitresses, two bartenders, a manager, a janitor (so at least I didn't have to sweep the place). It got to be elbow to elbow and a line at the ladies' room door.

We did well for the first year and a half, volume constantly growing every month. Our college student piano player was really a fancy graduate student, almost a doctor, but we were doing so well I paid him more and more until he quit school to play piano and drink; he was so popular he even took off some time to play in Las Vegas, but that hurt our take and I made him come back. (He owed me his career and I offered him steady work, not just a week now and then.)

Okay, I've got nothing to lose now, so I'll tell you the truth. Terri and I were still partners and we were damn good lovers. We still had no dog or children but we had cash and we had investments and we had properties. We didn't have millions, but we were on our way, and we were happy with our life.

But I made a mistake for a little while. Our old receptionist Michelle wasn't really so old. She was ordinary looking but her body wasn't bad. Michelle was twen-

ty-three when we hired her and she was twenty-five when she decided to take a job with one of our clients, a second job.

Michelle didn't leave us but she stopped any overtime. Terri didn't like that very much because Michelle knew the business by that time, but receptionists were easy to find, and between Michelle and Terri they could watch the new ones pretty well.

That client wasn't just a bar; it was the oldest burlesque house in town, dated back to before the war. They didn't strip all the way, wore G-strings and pasties. The law was tight then, would have locked the place up. I know that burlesque joint made good money, because Terri was their accountant and Jerry sold them the insurance they needed.

We had a profitable bar because of Johnny Bromo's piano playing and the growing neighborhood of customers, and everybody's thirst for beer and sex. We didn't encourage any hookers but we didn't run them out either, because they made the place more attractive.

I had to make my rounds of our clients' places pretty frequently to pick up the tapes of their receipts and to take their reports and tax forms to them. I could also mildly hint to them they were so successful they really needed more insurance. And because our own bar sold so much beer I could negotiate them a small discount from the wholesaler on their beer.

I came into the burlesque house like I usually did. I never paid a lot of attention to the strippers, mostly old professionals who weren't quite pretty enough for the places in larger cities. The mafia could always send more girls from Vegas and Chicago.

I didn't pay much attention because I didn't drink, so I didn't need a reason to stay, and I usually was in a hurry to make my rounds to other places. But this time a young one with a really good body got me to turn around.

It took a minute for me to recognize her without her glasses and without her clothes, but I kept looking and I saw it was Michelle. My mouth fell open. So I sat down and had two Seven-Ups, my limit.

She recognized me too, and shook her pasties at me, twirled them to the music, spread her thighs a little as she danced, and bumped, and grinded. I went to the next client after a while still thinking of Michelle, couldn't get her out of my eyeballs (or the other ones).

Immediately I planned to go back, even thought I'd have a drink to warm my spirits, but with difficulty I tore myself away by thinking a little bit of the money I needed to make, and a little bit thinking of my partner and a little bit about not having my first drink in a year and a half. I knew I couldn't make money without Terri; we had been partners for a long time and we loved together, loved money.

My mistake surprised me even though I had planned it for days. When I went back to the burlesque house to bring some tax forms to be signed I stayed long enough for three Seven-Ups, sat right in the middle of the first row and waited for Michelle's turn to come on stage. She noticed me, of course, but she knew I had to be there anyhow on business.

But I waited until she came up on the rotation again, her navel with a red jewel, her tassels swinging. She couldn't miss me then, drinking my third Seven-Up. I made my mouth move without even whispering, and she heard me without a sound, "I'll be back." I finished my rounds quick, and just at closing time I was there in the front row, no Seven-Up, just serious business.

I knew she had a roommate so we went to a motel across town. We both were hot as hell, and that's where we were headed. It was hard and sweaty, everything I could imagine and a lot more. I thought she was athletic on the burlesque stage, at least as much as the law would allow and just a hair more, but she was really athletic when we got alone.

Back at the office I wouldn't look at Michelle, almost couldn't bear to look when she was in her glasses and a dress. Terri didn't notice at first because she was so busy with the new girl who was an old lady. But the old lady was an experienced bookkeeper and she answered the phone too, so Terri didn't have to watch her for long.

Terri told me quietly she was worried because Michelle wasn't paying exact attention to her work like she had just three weeks earlier when she took the second job. She also told me it seemed strange that I didn't even say good morning to Michelle.

Two nights later I panicked and told Terri I was worried because I had made a mistake in my work. She said, "Yes, I know. I saw it in her eyes." Terri and I had been communicating for some years without having to say anything. She didn't have to tell me our success in business thrilled her too. We didn't fight and I didn't make any more mistakes.

The International Petroleum Exposition was coming in six months, a periodic big boost to business, and we were certainly in business. Mister Dreamer couldn't let go of the opportunity to make a lot more cash.

I wanted to expand but there wasn't any more room in our mall, so I dreamed of another place to add to our enterprise, a new type of entertainment, a go-go bar. There wasn't another one in town. I knew naked ladies would get the oil men in; they were a lot like cowboys coming to town for the rodeo but there were a lot more of them and they had a lot more money.

Terri warned me it might be risky, to make the investment for just a few weeks of customers, then what? I knew the huge flow meant huge profits, maybe 120,000 loose men in town, and a few women visitors.

But Terri, my ambitious partner, dragged her feet on this one at first. I had to prove it to her. She said she trusted me enough with women but not enough with money; she wasn't sure this would work out in the long run.

She agreed to a modest moderate medium-sized place, an immodest strip joint in a strip mall, nothing expensive. Now we had enough money to pay cash for the renovation and the employees and the booze.

Technically we weren't supposed to have to stock booze at all; the law was the customer had to bring his own bottle and lock it in a little cubby hole with his name on it. When he came in to order his first drink the bartender told him what his "name"

was and poured his drink from “that guy’s” locker. Of course there wasn’t a real “that guy”. The biggest part of our overhead was the liquor, and the biggest part of our profits too.

The go-go girls and their pasties didn’t bother my eyeballs much at all; I only looked at the customers and the books. The go-go bar was going well right off the bat. A lot of the customers were coming from the tavern a mile and a half away, but even though they helped to fill the go-go bar at the Carousel, the piano bar at the Village Tavern was still full every night too. I had found a magic piano player.

I had a magic stable of young inexpensive previously amateur pretty nearly naked girls (most under eighteen, illegal to tell you the truth). They danced to modern fast loud music, not the slow low-pitched slithering ballads the burlesque dancers used. They wore pasties too (the limit of the law) but they also wore bikini bottoms that slipped a little low without much encouragement, especially when somebody was slipping in a dollar bill as an encouraging little tip.

It didn’t hurt profits at all to pay a not-so-little tip under the table to the local cops instead of giving them the traditional free donuts. And business was even better.

We were making so much money Terri smiled all the time. I felt good too, too good to let the upcoming Petroleum Exposition go without another shot at real success. It didn’t seem risky to me. The go-go bar was going well even before the Exposition began, so Terri felt as good as I did, and despite her previous caution she went along with me when on a really small bar napkin I planned a really big place, a first class restaurant close to the Exposition grounds.

Mister Dreamer had great plans, and if they weren’t a sure thing they sure felt like one. I would have to get a building built on the lot I had bought in the heat of ambition. It wasn’t as cheap as renting, but the place had to be fancy, in its own building because a strip mall wouldn’t do. And I had to do it quick because now the Exposition was just a month and a half away. But I had friends who could do most anything, and they were used to working all night long.

Terri and I worked around the clock those weeks getting crews, getting materials, serving as our own construction contractor. That saved money but some of the sub-contractors didn’t. I was so busy looking at the project on blueprints and on ledgers I didn’t give myself a clue about the materials going out the back fence while I went home to take my three-hour nap.

I had to get a really fancy chef, no short-order cook. Terri and I didn’t vacation in Las Vegas (we didn’t vacation at all) but I had gotten to know some businessmen in Las Vegas, especially to negotiate for inexpensive almost-genuine scotch and bourbon.

Besides, my Las Vegas businessmen were the “interior decorators” who decorated the go-go bar, a hooker on every other barstool, red flocked wallpaper and crystal chandeliers. I’d let them “decorate” the new restaurant too. They had almost as many chefs as they had hookers, and a violin player for the swell crowd.

Construction was slow. We fell behind our ambitious deadlines. We fell and fell behind, and fell. Advertising had to be prepaid too, and the radio spots and newspaper ads had to be produced in less than a week.

The chef had ordered equipment and supplies and stocks of very expensive food. Even though it wasn't rotting in the refrigerators that hadn't come yet, it had to be pre-paid.

The chef interviewed the best waiters who could be found, but if we didn't get open soon they wouldn't get the pay or tips they seemed to want (maybe not the small hourly pay but the big tips). The Oil Exposition was only a week away, so all the employees we had planned on had to find other jobs quick. None of them stayed on our prospect lists; they had plenty of other prospects of their own.

Terri and I were exhausted and nervous. We might just make it if we paid double for crews to work around the clock. But even exhausted she could count, and she figured we were tapped out and way behind, too far behind to ever catch up. This time I couldn't argue with her.

I had carried a forty-five automatic with me from the time I was in the oil fields. I never used it but I thought I probably would some day. I took it out of the glove box regularly, held it in my hand to get the heft right, to get the feeling. So many years, so many hugs in my palm, so many caresses from my fingers. We had been together so long I had named the gun--Bertha, Big Bertha.

The cops came into the go-go bar every night to nab anyone who showed a public hair. They threatened to close us up if we couldn't prove every girl was over eighteen. One really was. That irritated me.

Johnny had gone to Las Vegas again despite my begging; he finally came back the very last week and then he died. He took Dan with him as far as I could tell. That made me very very sad. And panicked.

I had been through plenty tough times as a kid, but I don't remember giving up, never even thought of it. Now I didn't know how to go any further. Everything seemed stacked against me.

And Terri, she had stuck with me through all our growth and we were happy with each other (in spite of my one mistake). Now even she was ready to throw in the towel, ready to go back to the tax office and Sears.

The Cadillac was paid for, insured, so if it was gone it wouldn't cost Terri anything much. And I was insured, but not for a lot. I didn't want her to have even a small setback considering the rocket-ride we had been on, all up, not a down day. That would have been just too humiliating.

There was no doubt in my mind the Cadillac could go very fast with a short head start. And fast for a four thousand pound car meant a lot of force at the end of a short

ride. The bridge abutment. It couldn't miss. I wouldn't feel a thing. And if the impact didn't do it I could use Bertha to finish the job.

Well, now that story is all over, and I am relieved. I don't have another one in me. I had wanted to go on making money forever, faster and faster, farther and farther, more and more. But when it all unraveled I was finished, couldn't think of one more thing I could do. I hadn't had a drink in some years but I was still drunk on ego more and more each day. That brick wall sobered me up real quick.

Jerry Reid: THE CLOSER

Hard life? Not I, never. It all rolls off my back. No father? I took advantage of that, monopolized my mother's love, let her take care of me, and I took care of her. The Great Depression? How would I know? I was just a baby. Prohibition? I didn't get thirsty until after it was over. The War? I heard about it on the radio.



My first big challenge should have been when I was pried away from my mommy to start school, but it was no challenge, it was easy, fun. On my first day of kindergarten I didn't even think of crying like most of the other kids. I was the one who got them to laugh.

Everything has always been easy for me, no fret, no sweat, no tension. Sure, I know other people see trouble coming for themselves in what they call "the real world", but they just don't see it quite right. I see everything as an opportunity, so I thrive, and when I am smiling I am helping others to smile. I spread happiness.

Except for my wives. They managed to take everything wrong. I loved every one of them but I didn't know how to make them happy. My mothers-in-law all still love me though. But my wives, no matter how many presents I gave my wives, no matter how many junkets to Las Vegas because I am the best salesman in the world, no matter that I am the best lover in history, they always complained about something.

I was born a salesman. Whatever people wanted I could get for them. I always smiled and unless they were really stubborn about it I made other people smile. People around me always smile and love me. I feel real good about that. I have sold anything and everything, and whatever I sold was always the best (because the best was all I sold).

I sold for Jack Aguilar and his bar and night club, and before that I sold for Terri Aguilar and her insurance and accounting business. Of course a long time before those last couple of years I sold everything everywhere. I sold soap and candy and cards when I was a kid in school. And I sold shoe laces in front of the Mormon Tabernacle until they threw me in jail, and I sold used cars (only good ones), and I sold funeral plans, and I sold...I was born a salesman.

And I am the best. I was always the best. My mother told me so. I didn't have to be the smartest in school, I didn't have to be the strongest or fastest. I was the happiest, and that made everyone else happy, especially my mother. It was easy for

me to want to make everyone happy by getting them exactly what they wanted and selling it to them at a special price.

I was always generous too. If a person didn't know exactly what was best, if someone didn't know exactly what they wanted, all they had to do was ask me. I always knew what was best, always knew what they wanted whether they knew it or not. Generous indeed. I gave all my energy to knowing their needs and wants, always knew their business better than they did and I always got them the best. For a price.

Times were hard for most everyone during the thirties and forties, but not for me because my mother took care of me in every way. So as I grew I took care of her too; I took care of her in the forties and fifties. It was just the two of us. I don't know about other boys who only had their mothers, or mothers who only had their sons, but I don't get curious about other people as long as I am happy myself.

I was always the center of my mother's life; I was her only support and salvation. Her parents lived too far away in Winnipeg, too far to drive, especially in the winter, and my mom didn't have a car, and there wasn't money for gas, and come the War it was rationed, and she wasn't very close with them anyhow, just exchanged Christmas cards. She didn't have much to say about them, but she always said how happy she was to have me for our little two-person family.

My baby pictures show me laughing when she tickled me, show her feeding me while I sang songs and waved my hands in the air, especially with my little birthday cakes each year. As I am growing in those many pictures my mother and I are holding hands at the ice cream shop, at the circus, going to school. Mother helped me with my homework, at least enough to get through. She was always careful to dress me very nice. She was proud of how I looked.

We did everything together, especially to get whatever we needed for our home. We decided where to put our furniture, which curtains to get, how to color-coordinate our little house. We always planned meals together for the two of us, and went to the market together. I helped her cook. Every Saturday we went to the movie matinee, shared popcorn and Milk Duds.

Mom was always proud of me. I never got in trouble or embarrassed her like a lot of the boys put their parents through. I got along with the other boys pretty well, but I didn't have any close friends but my mother. I liked singing, so by middle school I was always on the glee club. I didn't do Boy Scouts or athletic teams (Mother was afraid I could get hurt), and I certainly did not join with other boys in disreputable activities. I was in one of the first distributive education clubs, a born salesman.

My mother loved me, and my teachers loved me almost as much. On the way to school I picked flowers for them in the spring, and when I could I brought them an apple. My answers were not all correct on homework but my handwriting was neat. I was always polite in school, never had a fight. I never ran for president of a class but I won those elections in a way, as a campaign manager, I sold my classmates.

Even though I didn't do a lot with the boys after school or on teams I spent some time with the girls. I always liked girls and I think they liked me. All the kids liked me

and I liked them, but especially girls. They said I was well-dressed, cheerful and polite. When the Second World War was over I got a brand new bright red Schwinn bike by selling encyclopedias door to door to all my paper route clients and to the parents of all my classmates.

That bike made me the envy of all the kids. Every morning I got up before five o'clock to pick up my papers at the office downtown to deliver my route before school. That paper route and my politeness set up my clientele for the rest of my commercial career in Minneapolis, until I left for the Army.

I graduated high school precisely in the middle of the class. By that time there was another war (or a "police action") in Korea. When a lot of my classmates were enlisting I considered it carefully. If you didn't join up you might be drafted and that could even be worse, they told me, because you might have less say-so about time, place and all that. My mother didn't want me to do it, so I decided to enlist.

I interviewed the recruitment officer carefully, with every intention to feel out my options and at the same time to sell myself to him. I'm sure he never met a more enthusiastic prospect, me with my happy smile, me tuning in on what he wanted from me. I made my best deal, two years with an option to extend if I was willing and good enough. I was happy to have a commitment limited to two years, a long time for a teenager but the shortest term available.

I went to basic training in Oklahoma, feared I would never get out of there, but a sergeant liked the way I dressed neatly, polished my boots; he handed me a magazine and ordered me to read it out loud. Finally we were sent to California, staged to go to Korea. I went to Seoul but never saw combat because I was assigned as a broadcast specialist; that sergeant must have liked the way I looked and read. I didn't want to be a great soldier anyhow, but a very good radio announcer.

While I was in Korea a chaplain took me aside to tell me I had bad news, my mother had been hit by a drunk driver in Minneapolis walking to the grocery store. She died in the hospital, never got out. I guess she never regained consciousness. I didn't so very much grieve for my mother because I couldn't change what the chaplain said, but I was glad she wasn't in pain. I felt horrible for myself. I was an orphan now, no family whatsoever. An orphan! I finished my two years convinced no one cared for me except my sergeant.

My military experience was a lot softer than most, but still war is hell. When I didn't opt for an extension I went directly back to the States, no trip through Tokyo. I was excited at the idea of Tokyo because of what I heard about it, but I went straight through to California instead.

Okay, it wasn't just my beautiful voice and pretty face that kept me out of combat. Somehow my sergeant got the idea I drank too much, maybe because he and the others in the unit drank with me but they couldn't keep up. They're the ones who carried me back to the barracks at night and who woke me up in the morning. My sergeant

was harsh enough to tell me the truth, that I was assigned to the radio MOS to keep me and the other soldiers safe from my brain-dead hangovers.

And I didn't really finish my two years, they sent me back to the States to process me out because of my drinking. The Army didn't have any treatment centers until much later; I'm sure if it were nowadays I would have been sobered up and sent back to duty. I found that out about twelve years later when I finally was in a treatment program at the VA and a Viet Nam veteran was there with me, told me how it came down for him.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I never mentioned it from the time I got out. I never mentioned it to any employer, supervisor, client, drinking buddy or bartender. Well, maybe a bartender. I got a general discharge instead of a dishonorable discharge because I had never been court martialled, just drunk. I tried to moderate my drinking after that, and it worked pretty well a lot of the time. But not always.

I never thought I had a drinking problem, but my army experience kept coming to mind, and I was working hard and long anyhow, I didn't have much time to concentrate on drinking in Los Angeles. Besides, selling funeral plans you don't take your client to a bar for a drink to discuss the sale, so I couldn't get started early in the day, and closing time at the bar seemed to come early when you didn't start drinking until late in the afternoon.

Believe it or not that company I hired on with sent me to Oklahoma (of all places). I did so well selling funeral plans in California that they sent me to a new mortuary to help them get started there. That was the beginning of the first big chain of funeral parlors (always before mom-and-pop places) and they needed good salesmen, very polished salesmen, very low-key salesmen. I was good at that, knew how to appeal to women, especially older women. Women were the buyers of any funeral plan, especially if it was for a man.

I thought I moderated pretty well in California, usually only had a few drinks at night in the neighborhood of my apartment. I had a car--you had to have a car in LA, especially if you were going around that spread-out city doing sales. I did get stopped a couple times because CHPs thought I was driving too slow on the freeways, but in those days you just got warned and sent home, maybe got a ticket.

When I got to Oklahoma Tulsa seemed small, especially compared to Los Angeles (almost ten times as big), but it was about the size of my home town Minneapolis. I got an apartment and a car there and went to work for the funeral home, got leads from the office, especially responses to newspaper ads that promised a hundred dollar discount.

I was good at selling anything, and especially good with old ladies. I didn't take them for a drink, of course, but I found a tea room that seemed pretty fancy, cakes and cookies, little cucumber and watercress sandwiches. That little house was decorated like the nineteenth century (though Tulsa wasn't even a city back then). The old ladies seemed to be impressed when I took them there to discuss the Plan quietly

and discreetly. Even older couples came to see me there together but the men drank coffee.

Usually I met with people in their homes, sometimes really elegant big houses built by oilmen, more often smaller newer houses built between the wars, or brand new ranch-styles in the suburbs. I had to dress sharp, and my car had to look really fancy when I drove up to the house or when I took them to the tea room. I couldn't have a bright red car then when I was selling funerals and plots, so I got a baby-blue Buick to go with their baby-blue hair.

That Buick was only a Buick, a car for an old lady, but it was powerful, 236 horse power, the big V-8. I never again got a ticket for going too slow on the freeway for several reasons: 1) Tulsa had no freeways; 2) I no longer drove slow; 3) I didn't drink every night, at first, until I got to know the streets. I did get tickets for driving too fast and too reckless. Then they started enforcing the laws and they started building freeways.

I didn't have a drinking problem but my car did. It scraped parked cars on my way home from the bar at night. I did everything I could to correct the problem. First, I got my car fixed so it looked perfect again, but that kept it in the shop for days. The next time my car did that I just went and got a new car, quicker. I even had my eyes checked for night vision. See, I did everything a person could do.

Sales still went well because I didn't make appointments before noon, I shaved and dressed very carefully, I maintained my cool low-key suaveness, and Binaca. I had enough money to repair and replace body damage but I hated the time I had to spend at the body shop or the car dealers. But they didn't hate me, judging from the regularity of their friendly cards to me on my birthday, Christmas, Yom Kippur, even National Car Dealers Day.

I was very careful very often, but periodically it just got out of hand. I didn't have any serious wrecks because I was a really good driver. With daily practice I honestly believe I got better at driving tipsy. Only rarely I got drunk. I got home with great regularity. For a really long time I had no wrecks. Then I had a wreck, and I wasn't even drinking.

I had decided to cut down on my drinking so I wanted to start by getting it out of my system. I had the flu and I felt awful, a really bad cold and diarrhea and vomiting. I went to bed. I didn't have a drink for over two days. But I was starting to feel better so I went to work. I was okay but I got tired easily so I called to cancel my last appointment and headed for the bar to relax for the sake of my health.

I guess I never made it to the bar. All I remember is waking up in the emergency room at the hospital. They told me I had a broken leg but it would probably heal okay. They said from what the police said I may have had a seizure driving down the street. People saw me slumped over the wheel weaving slowly down Peoria Avenue in the bright daylight. When I got to the hospital they found I had no alcohol in me, just a broken leg.

They admitted me into the hospital for tests. My leg hurt like hell in its cast, and it itched; but that didn't bother me as much as my neck. They took x-rays of my head

and neck. When the doctor came to check on me the second morning he gave me a report: 1) I had a broken leg; 2) I had a “whiplash” neck injury, nothing broken; 3) I didn’t have a brain cancer to cause my seizure; 4) my liver was enlarged.

I didn’t know if that averaged out to be good news or bad. He told me to do some things, and he talked like he thought I had to do them: 1) wear the cast until I saw the sawbones in two weeks, use crutches; 2) wear the neck brace until I saw the sawbones in two weeks, don’t drive until I could turn my head; 3) don’t worry about brain cancer; 4) don’t drink. I did the first two; I didn’t do the second two.

It seemed like months but it was two weeks. I got rides from my drinking buddies, recuperated in the bar, and my belly was getting bigger. I felt better, could turn my head, kept my crutches for walking more than ten feet. But as long as I drank moderately I had no more seizures. After another month I got rid of my cast and I was off crutches. I got a new Ford Victoria convertible, still baby-blue.

I thought I was doing great, and I told my boss about it on the phone. He told me to go to work on crutches and I explained to him that it wouldn’t look right to the little old ladies. He said it would look fine. I told him I had to maintain my image. He told me to maintain my image on my own time. I reminded him I was the best salesman in the country. He assured me he had just hired the second-best to replace me.

A really good salesman doesn’t stay out of work for long. Since most of what he is paid is straight commission, companies can afford to hire a lot of salesmen. As soon as I was on my feet again it took me less than an hour to get a good new job selling big farm equipment. I was from Minnesota where there were lots of farms, and in those days in Oklahoma there were lots of farms (but I think there aren’t so many farms left in either state today).

I didn’t sell shovels and rakes and hoes, of course. I sold the big stuff, big tractors and combines and hay balers and front-end loaders and bulldozers. I could usually pretend to know everything about everything and get away with it. I usually just watched and listened patiently to a new boss or an old hand at selling whatever it was, then I would do it even better than they did. I could sell farm machinery fine. I tried but I couldn’t stand to wear overalls and a straw hat.

No big deal. Within another hour I had a job selling accounting services and insurance for Jack and Terri. That was a bit more on my wavelength, and I could wear a bright tie and a fancy sport coat to go with my fancy sport car. I got a bright red Alfa-Romeo roadster, a Spider, the car of my dreams. I loved that car better than any of my wives, I think, but she was also more fickle in her own ways. I divorced wives (or they divorced me) but I never cried over them like I did over my Alfa.

Two of my wives divorced me, though I never had any idea how come. All three of them were Oklahoma farm girls, not on purpose, just by accident. All three of them wandered into bars unprepared (three different bars). All three of them were completely floored by my big city charm and good looks. They liked my income and they liked the way I dressed. None of them could drink worth a damn but I didn’t know that until after the weddings.

I was really charmed and entertained by each of them. When I met them they seemed like girls more than women, naïve, gullible pretty, blond, trim, athletic. None of them was stupid, just not as smart as I was. None of them could cook like my mother. But now as I think of it for the first few months with each of them we went out to eat mostly, a different restaurant each night. Food tasted better with a bottle of wine or two. After a while she would start to make some excuse to stay home. Then I would eat where I was drinking regularly, or not eat.

Even though I made good money then, and even though I tried to get them anything they wanted, after about two years they had got crotchety and critical, had avoided sex with me for months (then because they made me so anxious with their complaints I had trouble staying hard). Each time when I got served papers I had to move my things to a new apartment, pick myself up, dust myself off and start all over again.

Sometimes during my married lives I would change bars so I wouldn't have to confess to my drinking buddies that I had been married and divorced again. I was really sensitive about my public image and acceptance by other guys in the bars I lived in. They were some of my best contacts for sales (of whatever I was selling that time), and more important, they were the only friends I had. That's one reason I always wanted to have the right car, so they would admire me.

I had an old Chevrolet, then I had a Ford, then a really early VW, one of the first in the US before 1955, then my first new Buick, then that Victoria convertible, then another Buick, then my first red Alfa, and four years later a newer red Alfa, but since I needed a car to accommodate customers I got a 1963 Sedan Deville and kept it in cherry condition to pick up customers for all the things I sold from funerals to tractors to brochures to real estate to insurance.

I always had to have the right car, but my first Alfa Romeo was the one that owned my heart. Like I said, she was fickle, or at least the factory was. One of the big problems was American mechanics. They just didn't have a feel for the delicate Italian machinery. They couldn't keep it in tune, so even if it looked absolutely beautiful it ran rough (kinda like my wives, I guess).

For several months I had to drive the Cadillac not just for work but during the evening. I had a small mishap, small but it broke my heart. I seem to have missed seeing a stop sign one evening, perhaps distracted by a girl hitch-hiker; an old lady in an Oldsmobile drove through the intersection without looking and ran right into the passenger side of my beautiful roadster. What really pissed me off was the cop didn't even give her a ticket. He gave me a ticket.

The repairs took long enough just by themselves, but I was cursed waiting ten extra weeks for the passenger side door latch to arrive from Italy. Two months, then ten more weeks! My life was ruined. But I couldn't consider letting go of her despite the delays and disappointments and expense. I loved that car. (Now I look back and see it was no joke, I never loved a wife so much, nor another car.)

All that time I told the guys in the Village Tavern, my new home bar, about my red Alfa Romeo. They thought my Cadillac was more than okay (and I thought it was

probably sorta okay), but I kept telling them how wonderful my Alfa was. I guess I told them every day. After a few weeks they started talking mean, said they wondered if I really had a sports car, said I was un-American to prefer an Italian car to a good old American Detroit model.

Finally I got the call--my door latch had arrived. It would be two more days before they could install it. I told the guys at the Tavern it was really true, that my Alfa would be ready the day after tomorrow. They didn't say much, drank their beer, glanced at each other. It was clear they didn't believe me. Even when I reassured them they didn't look excited. Well, I was excited for sure. They'd learn to believe me. The next night I didn't even go to the Tavern.

A bright clear Wednesday afternoon I carefully pulled my newly-polished Alfa Romeo Spider alongside the curb, turned off the engine, carefully pocketed the keys (so nothing bad would happen to my car) and hopped into the Tavern. The usual guys were sitting in their usual places drinking Happy Hour twofers. I bounced in smiling, gave all the energy I needed to prod them to their feet and out the door for just a minute to see. They carried their beers with them.

She was there! She was beautiful! They stopped doubting and exclaimed Wow. I felt warm and wonderful, illuminated by the bright sunshine, radiating the warmth of pride. My friends finally believed me. They admired me. They brought me beer. They congratulated me. They made me promise to give them rides (but not this day, as I have to see a client in twenty minutes). Eighteen lonely weeks, eighteen weeks of not being believed, and now...

Waiting for a safe break in the traffic so I wouldn't be hurt, carefully I stepped into the street. Smoothly I slipped into the driver's seat, firmly closed the door. Confidently I turned the key. Her beautiful soprano voice purred. All the guys' mouths fell open at the beauty. Precisely, I adjusted the rear view mirror to watch carefully the approaching traffic coming from behind. I put her in first gear and slowly released the clutch as I turned my head smiling my famous smile to see the envious faces of my friends. I waved to them over my shoulder. I drove over the curb and into a telephone pole.

As I watched the tow truck pull away with my little Spider I realized something was wrong with my life. It wasn't my drinking, it was just everything. I was dejected. My so-called friends just had disdain for me. I always got another job but the harder I tried I still couldn't keep one. My first two wives were really disappointing but I still married another one. I was getting flabby and generally nauseated with food and booze and life.

I was depressed. I missed my mommy. I couldn't look into the mirror. I thought I wanted a stiff drink, more than a beer, but I couldn't decide exactly what it was I wanted a neat triple of. I couldn't decide. I needed electric relief but I couldn't decide. And I clearly realized if I could decide I couldn't act. I was frozen. My "friends"

had gone back to their beers in the bar, but a few of the guys were still standing with me.

"You look terrible, Jerry."

"I feel terrible, Russ."

"That's not like you."

"But that's how I am suddenly."

"I know you like your car, but..."

"I love my car."

"Yeah, and I love my truck, but this just isn't right. You look like a lump of clay. Are you having any chest pain?"

"No, it isn't my heart, it's my other heart. My spirit just left me."

"Do you want us to call your wife?"

"Good heavens no! I just don't feel like dealing with her right now, with all these other things."

"What other things, Jerry?"

"Oh, just the usual normal things I hear you guys talk about in there. Always tired, not sleeping, no energy, gave up on sex, work sliding, worried about money, not getting along with anyone, not getting along with the wife. Just normal stuff, I guess. But it feels like it has caved in on me."

"Yessir, you just said a mouthful."

They took me in, set a beer in front of me, but I didn't drink it. They called Dan over because a bartender is the closest thing to a doctor sometimes. Dan asked me how I was and I broke into tears. I told him my car was killed right in front of my eyes. He said cars don't get killed, just injured, that he was sure it could be fixed. I broke into tears again, "Another six months! I can't stand it." I kept crying.

Dan called Johnny over because he was a psychologist. Dan told him this was a sudden drastic change in one of the most stable men he knew. Johnny didn't even seem drunk (it was early in the evening, he hadn't even started work yet). Johnny seemed to be thinking quietly, something I hadn't seen him do before.

"No, Dan, not a stable man at all, a sort of hebephrenic."

"What's that?"

"Oh, too much cheer and too little relation to reality."

"Is he okay?"

"I doubt it. There's too much danger he will kill himself."

"Should I pour him another drink?"

"No, call the psychiatric ward. Someone take him to the hospital. Right now I'm the one who needs a drink, and a piano."

You know you're depressed or crazy when a psychiatric ward feels better to you than a tavern. They gave me medicines that let me sleep. I stayed depressed but not so tired. They gave me pills to prevent a seizure because even though I didn't tell them so they thought I drank too much. I didn't drink too much, I drank just enough. If I had had enough I'd lay it down. I guess I never had enough because I never laid it down.

They said they could give me medicine that would help me. I said I didn't need help, just some rest and some Kleenex. They said they could give me therapy that would help me. I said no therapist could know me better than I did and no therapist could be smarter than I was. They said I might be so smart I could outsmart myself, but that wouldn't help me stop drinking.

The other patients were goofy in one way or another, too irritable, too quiet, too nice, not nice enough, too rational, too irrational--goofy in some way or another. But I liked most all of them most of the time. I liked them better than the staff liked them. Some patients had to take a lot of medicine and they looked like zombies. Some patients were too happy, too energetic, too fast, and they gave them pills that sure did slow them down, froze them up.

We had group therapy every morning and every afternoon. Once we started talking I learned there were some people there who drank too much. When I calculated from what they said I figured they didn't drink nearly as much as I did, but I certainly didn't tell anyone about that. They tried to get us to go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous two nights a week. I went to one. It was obvious they were a religious cult and that if I didn't sell them my soul they would probably take my money.

They made me read their book, and it was the goofiest thing I had ever seen. They said if you wanted to get better you had to admit you were sick, and if you wanted to get smarter you had to admit you were crazy, and if you wanted to care about other people you had to be selfish. Basically they said if you wanted to be happy do all the things you don't want to do. Now who's crazy?

When I got out of the hospital Jack told me I couldn't work for them any more, that I was a bad PR risk because I had been in the loony bin, that he was afraid some of the customers would find out. A great salesman can always find a new job. Always wasn't always quick. And this "great" salesman was willing to settle for "pretty good salesman", or maybe even "veteran salesman". I went around town for a few days--actually a little over two weeks pounding the pavement. I hadn't had a drink since I went into the hospital that second time.

Eventually I got back to work, at a new job selling stocks. It seemed easy to me because stock prices went up and down in patterns no one understood, at least I didn't. I couldn't tell a client whether it would go up or down and so I'd just tell them it would go up, because if I told them it would go down they wouldn't buy it. So, it was like

everything else I ever sold, it was the best. My job was not to figure out what a stock would do but to promote it as the best and get the signature on the bottom line.

I got back to work and I made better money than I ever had before, and that's the most I ever made again. Since I hadn't had a drink in two weeks I thought I would take advantage of the head start and lay it down. If that didn't work I sure knew where to go to pick it up again. My wife seemed pleased enough that I was working like a normal person and that I was staying home at night and going to sleep, and we even had sex, and I even kept it up, and I even enjoyed it, and I even remembered it.

I wasn't real happy doing things I wasn't used to, things I hadn't really chosen, but selling stock from early morning to mid-afternoon left me pretty tired by the time I went home, and even though I liked the sex well enough, and even though my wife wasn't ugly or mean, I felt restless, missing something I felt was important, something to feel good about. Russ and Martha went to a bowling league every Wednesday night. I thought I should take my wife too.

I wasn't very good at first, but I got better. My wife had been bowling before and she was pretty good. I got better by the third week, and she had women's best score three weeks in a row. I cheered for her but I wasn't feeling very cheery. Something was missing, and it wasn't much of a secret from me. Only my wife didn't know I had need of a drink, just one (to begin with). She thought I was over it and she was happy because that's what she wanted.

All my problems were still there, just lying fairly quiet, not growing or erupting. My work was simple enough but I wasn't as energetic about it as I had been. My home life was much better only because before I never went home. Now I had meals (though not as good as Mom's), conversation (but dull, routine domestic stuff), sex (rare and, as they say, "perfunctory" which is not at all the same as "perfect").

My real car was in the shop for some more weeks, and I knew it was pointless to prod the mechanic, it would just distract him from fixing my car. So I had to drive the damn Cadillac, but I endured that obediently. I watched television and read the newspaper. I didn't even go to a baseball game because my wife said they sold beer and peanuts there. I think she was allergic to peanuts.

I needed some relief. I had the phone numbers of the hospital and the psychiatrist they had me see when I was there, but they just wanted me to go to meetings of some sort; they didn't want to help me solve my problems. The only people I knew who might be familiar with these vague sufferings were my drinking buddies at the bar, or in extreme circumstances the bartender himself, or as I discovered in my despair, the psychologist piano-player. So I went to see them.

Like magic I felt better when I saw all the regulars were there at the Tavern just like I had left them. At least one thing in the world was reliable. I asked Dan for a cup of coffee and he put on a fresh pot for me. I tried to talk to the guys, said hello, said I was really glad to see them. They said they were glad to see me too, but they didn't crowd around me smiling, just kept talking and drinking. And as I listened to their talking I realized it didn't make a lot of sense.

I consider myself a professional expert at the subtleties of talk, as a veteran honey-tongued champion salesman. I know how to make my words aim in on the emotional triggers of the customer without pounding on her or him with a hard-sell (doesn't work so well in my experience). I listened to these friends of mine talk past each other with almost every statement. They said things the others would not care about, and they expressed strong opinions they knew the others also held.

For a few moments I was puzzled. I don't know what I expected from them, but now I was feeling disappointed and irritated. But a good salesman is patient, can wait for the right opening when necessary. Then I got to thinking they had nothing real to say to each other or to me, they just made words the same as they just sat there, and they just bent their elbows. It was all repetitive habit. But I had something important to say, that they were my friends and I needed some help.

Dina the barmaid came by with another pitcher of Coors, asked if I needed a refill on coffee. "No," I told her, "Just bring me a glass."

I remembered why I drank. I felt better just with the taste, and I felt much better as I felt the warmth come up my neck and face. In a few moments, after the third glass, I heard better, heard what my friends said as interesting. With all the intensity of what I had come to say, I asked "Who's gonna win the Series?" Then all hell broke loose. It was exciting. I forgot to say I was getting depressed again, please help me go to the hospital. I was no longer depressed.

I don't remember exactly when I left the Tavern that night, not until after closing because I was still a regular. I figured out I didn't hit anything on the way home because the Cadillac was in one piece the next morning when I woke up with my hang-over. My wife had made coffee but had not cooked breakfast for me. I poured the half cup that was left in the pot and said good morning. She stared two bullet-holes in me, one with each eye.

"I said good morning."

(Bullet-holes)

"How are you?"

(Pause)

"Thanks for the coffee."

(Small quiet grunt)

"You seem quiet this morning."

"Well, you were sure quiet last night, until you got home."

"I was talking with some friends. I'm sorry I didn't call."

"I'm not. I was trying to sleep."

(Silence, thinking)

"If you ever go to that bar again I'll kill you. You remind me of my dad."

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"You bet it won't! You were supposed to be well, sober. The psychiatrist said so, and you said so."

"You can count on my word."

I was back into the juggling business, which was a bit better than the suffering-in-silence business. Now that I acknowledged my dissatisfaction with almost everything in my life I could treat each thing I had to deal with as a hot potato. It was almost like kiting checks for pointlessness and desperation. I was spinning my wheels. I wasn't just faced with two choices but innumerable possibilities none of which would forestall disaster.

If I didn't get some relief I would kill myself, but if I went to the Tavern for relief my wife would kill me, and if I didn't compose myself and get to work I would be broke in two weeks, bankrupt in four. If I went broke or bankrupt I would go crazy and then I wouldn't be able to work. If I told my wife how close I was to being bankrupt and crazy she would divorce me, kill me, keep me from sleeping and put itching powder in my underwear.

Wait. My imagination was getting away from me. Let me calm down and try again. I avoided looking into the mirror when I shaved, dressed calmly, went out to the Cadillac, sat in the driver's seat, turned on the ignition, backed out of my parking space, drove out the driveway, drove around the corner, pulled over to the curb, turned off the ignition and sat in peace. I opened my Day-Timer, checked my schedule, drew a line under three o'clock, rewrote the ones below the line for the next morning.

I drove to the filling station down the street, let the boy fill the tank, wash the windows and check the tires and oil while I got change, went to the pay phone in the waiting area and called to rearrange my afternoon appointments. I paid for the gas. I got back in the car. I turned on the ignition. I pulled out into the street and headed toward my first appointment. I felt like I had decided something. I felt like I had done something. I hummed tunelessly.

The day was a little rough, but it could have been worse. I was a bit hung over but my anxieties about marriage, money and my Alfa Romeo crowded out the diminishing headache, and stopping for a donut helped my queasy stomach, at least for a while. Binaca, first time in three weeks. First appointment was easy, telling an old couple how secure they would be if they bought safe, conservative, balanced mutual funds from me--but the price would likely be higher tomorrow, so buy now.

Once started on my sales trajectory I made it through to noon, too nauseated to eat, took some Tums. It helped to remind myself I could relax come three o'clock. Two more appointments, too busy to worry out loud about all that stuff. Finished for the day, driving toward the Village Tavern, I began to re-juggle. Luckily the parking lot was within sight. I was into the parking space right in front of the door (a sign I was at the right place). I hopped from the bright afternoon into the perennial dark of the bar.

My plan was simple. I knew I needed enough undisturbed time at the Tavern to calm my anxiety. I had cleared the last three hours of my schedule to drink. I could have my cake and eat it too. Not much work time lost, not much difference in dollars. Anyhow I could just chat faster with the customers, cut it short, save a little time. Then I would go home not much later than usual, avoid kissing my wife. Six o'clock, that was my exit time. Simple as pie.

I had a beer. At five I told Russ to remind me to go home at five-thirty. I had a beer. I talked baseball until Johnny started playing. I had a beer. I got into a conversation about the economy, thought it might lead me to a sale of securities if I was patient, waited for the right opening. I had a beer. At about eleven, shocked and terrified, I screamed at Russ, asked what had happened to my reminder at five-thirty?! He said he forgot.

I raced home, pulled into my two parking spaces (the Alfa was still in the shop). I ran in to the courtyard where the stairs go up to my second floor. I got a sense of something in my peripheral vision, something floating in the swimming pool. Immediately I thought it might be a dead body, someone who jumped from the second level into the pool but missed, someone who was shot by his wife. I looked more closely. Floating in the pool were *my* suit case, *my* suits, *my* shoes and *my* socks and *my* underwear...

I tried to calm myself running up three stairs at a time to my apartment, but it didn't work. Frantic I walked calmly to the door of the apartment. I tried to put the key in the lock but it wouldn't fit. I tried again, with both hands. I carefully read the number on the door. It was our number. I thought I might have forgotten the number, went to the next apartment. The key didn't fit. I went back to our door.

I'm not stupid. I realized she had changed the locks. I pounded. "Sheila! Sheila! Open the door Sheila!" Sheila opened the door the full couple inches the safety chain would allow. She poked my pistol out that little crack and she shot three times in my direction.

This time no wife was going to divorce me. I divorced her. The hearing was de-tailed and lengthy. Even though she got no charges for trying to kill me, no charges for discharging the gun, disturbing the peace and endangering innocent children, the judge at the divorce hearing looked at me with disgust and sympathy, allowed as how I was insufferable and the two of us were incompatible, granted the divorce, awarded her about half of the alimony she had demanded (perhaps he had been divorced himself) and called a lunch break so he could get away from all this.

This time also I was the one who had to get a new apartment, a one-room efficiency, but not in the same building, a much cheaper one. I wasn't especially happy about how things had gone but I had to admit I felt relieved to be free to go to the Tavern every day when I was finished working. I thought I was working more efficiently because I was finished with my calls and appointment earlier than I had been previously, usually by three o'clock. I didn't quite understand why my commissions were going down when I was working so well.

My boss answered that question. He said, as he held out his hand for my keys to the office, that I came late, left early, didn't return calls, reeked when I got to clients' houses late for appointments, sometimes was seen wearing one blue sock and one brown. As I reached for my keys I admitted most of what he had said, but I wasn't about to believe that blue sock/brown sock stuff. That just wasn't the way I dressed, never.

A good salesman can always get another job. It took more than an hour this time, more than a day, more than a week, but I got a job selling used cars. The first used car I sold, as soon as I got my Alfa Romeo back, was my Cadillac Sedan Deville. I didn't have much left of my fancy wardrobe and I couldn't really afford to go to the fancy shops where I used to get them, so I went to Robert Hall and got two suits, one blue and one brown.

The auto market wasn't very good. Some smart-ass young kids got ahead of me rushing a customer who came in the door. But I was a good salesman, a very good salesman, and if I could get to the customer first I could close the sale, sometimes. I did sell a car now and then, almost enough to pay my rent if I didn't have a bar bill. A guy's gotta have priorities. The rent payment was usually delayed.

When I scraped the Alfa I didn't even think to get it fixed as long as it would roll. I realized I hadn't been this poor since I left the army. I decided to save money on food so I only ate once a day. The frozen pizza at the Village Tavern wasn't very bad, pretty bad but not very bad, just bad. When I kept running out of money before I was finished drinking I let the other guys buy rounds. Then they kept buying rounds but as they went around the table they didn't pour for me, just sent the pitcher past me fast.

So again it was time to make some businesslike decisions. I liked my privacy, so I decided to stay home a lot. As long as I was going to sit at home I figured I may as well get a six-pack of Old Milwaukee instead of wasting gas driving to the Tavern. I still pried myself out of bed most days, went to the car lot. Every once in a while I sold a car but my commission was usually eaten up by the little advances I had wheedled from the manager.

Some days I didn't quite get up in time to go to work until noon, then sometimes three. The lot closed at seven, so going after three didn't pay off very well. The apartment manager was putting a lot of pressure on me to pay my back rent. I thought that was a good idea too, but I just couldn't get around to it because I just didn't have enough money to pay it, and that meant I didn't have enough money to buy gas to get to work, and that meant I couldn't get any money.

It was worse than that. My belly swelled up so much I couldn't get my Robert Hall pants to fasten, and I couldn't get my Robert Hall jacket or even my shirt to button in the front. My tie still fit. I didn't mind not eating because I didn't have much appetite, in fact I threw up just about every time I tried to eat something. I knew drinking would help my stomach so I tried to always be nursing a beer while I was home, so I didn't leave home.

Then suddenly my belly started hurting like hell. I mean really burning stabbing doubled-over double-barreled shotgun-in-the-gut pain with simultaneous projectile vomiting, but the kind of vomiting that doesn't at least let you feel a little bit relieved

when it's over but doubles the intensity and doubles the duration of the pain, then doubles it again. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't help but scream but without breath I couldn't scream very loud.

After a long, long time the guy who lived beneath me knocked on the door. He had come up because he wanted me to shut up. As loudly as I could without breathing I screamed "Come in", not very loud but he heard me, and when he opened the door he saw a pale pasty crying screaming balloon of a ghost lying on the floor covered with blood. He started to walk out and close the door on me, but he hesitated, turned toward the phone and dialed zero.

The ambulance wailed up and all I could do was cry. I tried to tell them how I felt, what had happened, all the answers to all their questions, but I couldn't say a word and all I could do was cry. At the emergency room they asked me more questions, but when they saw I couldn't talk they opened my wallet and spread everything out on the desk.

"His name's Jerry Reid. I recognize him, he's been here before. He's got Blue Cross/Blue Shield...but it's expired. Wait a minute. It looks like he's a veteran. If he doesn't have insurance and he's a veteran, let's send him to the VA. Hey! You! Ambulance driver. Don't leave yet. This fellow needs a ride. Take him to the VA. Thanks."

I guess I'm glad. When I finally got there they injected some drug to knock me out and they slowed down the bleeding. I had pancreatitis. (Hell, I didn't even know I had a pancreas. What is a pancreas?) From the emergency ward after about an hour they wheeled me to a medical ward with about a dozen other vets. I was in no condition to chat until a lot later, days later, but I heard some of them talk to each other and talk about me.

They didn't have much nice to say nor anything that sounded hopeful. Those guys weren't doctors so I tended to believe what I heard them say.

"Another guy puking blood, huh?"

"That's what I heard them say, a skid row alcoholic."

"Welcome to the club. What's your name, buddy?"

"I don't think he can talk yet."

"Don't worry, pal. It gets better or it gets worse. Either way it never stays the same."

"At least you're not alone."

And so on. They talked, some of them, and I heard some of it between nodding off from the drugs and fainting from the exhaustion and blood loss. Even when I perked up over the next few days I wasn't very gregarious. Nothing happened very quickly at the VA. I was new, and there were about three new guys that first week, two with

pancreatitis and one with lung cancer. And someone has to leave, you know. One guy was pretty well and went home in a wheelchair. And two died.

I was on that medical ward for over three weeks. They offered to put me in the psychiatric ward to cure my alcoholism. I told them I had already been on a psychiatric ward and I wasn't depressed any more this time and I sure wasn't alcoholic. They said I could come to AA meetings. I told them I already did that too. They got a social worker to help me find an even cheaper subsidized apartment; they got me a visiting nurse to come once a week to see me in my cheap apartment; they got me on disability status so I could get some food.

I sat watching my little TV. I took my pills. That's all I did. I had some commodity food supplies the social worker brought for me, beans, stale bread, cheese, bologna. No beer. Sometimes I made a sandwich. I never boiled any of those beans. I guess when I died there were fifty pounds of beans in the cupboard. I don't think I left anything else to speak of. It's lucky I wasn't married. It's lucky I had no kids. No one lost out but me. My alcoholism never hurt anyone.

Russell and Martha McCulliss: the RUSTLER and his MAMA

Martha: We did almost everything together for over thirty-five years. Russ is good at bluster and cowboy bullshit but I can speak in a sensible and orderly manner, so I'll tell you our story. If he chimes in, I don't care. I know how to handle him. We grew up close and pretty much the same but I was older, from the big city, and he was just a wild child from the boondocks outside of town.



Russ: Now just a minute, Martha. I know better than to argue with you, and what you say is literally true, but you are misleading these people. You are older but we are only five months apart in age. You are from the "city" of Drumright, population about 4,000 when you were born there, and dropping fast. I was born just outside Olive, and that town doesn't even exist any more.

Martha: Russ grew up on a farm (if you want to call it that), dirt poor on poor dirt. He was older than most of his brothers and sisters. I like his mom pretty good, and some of his sisters. Every one of his brothers is a son of a bitch. His father was a nonentity, poor as a farmer, mostly just went around the county maintenancing little oil wells, the kind that has a rocking horse pump, and a little tank for the crude oil; the gas goes down one pipe and the oil down another.

Russ: And they call it a beam pump or a grasshopper too. You see them on farm fields all over oil country. The famous ones are on the Oklahoma City Capitol grounds.

Martha: Everyone knows that, cowboy. Anyhow, my father had a real job with the same oil company. In fact my dad was the Rustler's dad's supervisor.

Russ: Until I was your dad's supervisor.

Martha: Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you why they have always called Russ "Rustler". When he was a kid he was poor, like I said, very poor because of his father and because they had so many kids and because of the dust bowl and the Depression, and everything. Sometimes poor people are very honest, maybe they're proud in some way, or religious. I've known poor people who would walk through the snow to pay you back two dollars because they were too poor to have bus fare. And I've known rich people who'd never pay back anyone, and when rich people want to borrow from you they take more than you have.

Russ: What you do with rich people isn't to lend them money but to take it from them when they're not looking.

Martha: Well, Russ was a poor boy who wasn't honest at all. He would steal anything that wasn't nailed down. He didn't steal things for the thrill of stealing; he stole things because he needed them. One time when he was seven he took a kid's pony, one who lived just down the road. He tied that pony behind the back of the shack they called a barn on that place they called a farm. It didn't take long for the neighbor kid and his dad to figure it out and come back for the pony. They might have called him "horse-thief" or "klepto" or something like that, but because he was "Russ" anyhow the name "Rustler" stuck. And since he kept taking stuff that way through his whole life he was "Rustler" his whole life to a lot of people.

Russ: There you go again, Martha. You don't have to say it right out that way. Just being Russ is good enough for me, isn't it? I could be "Podner" (I'm your partner, aren't I?); I could be "Tex" if I was from Texas; I could be "Slim" because I'm taller than I am wide.

Martha: You're Rustler, so hush up. Russ and I went to the same schools from elementary but he was a year behind me.

Russ: That made a big difference when I was in the first grade, but by high school you didn't look down on me.

Martha: I've always looked down on you.

Russ: But I'm six-foot-six and you're just five feet.

Martha: You sure do take up more than your share of the bed. He was tall enough, and by the time I finished high school he passed as old enough. When I turned eighteen I didn't have to ask anyone to get married, and no one in his family really cared about him much so they didn't make a fuss about a senior girl robbing the cradle and taking off with a junior boy. His dad had died and his mom had married a Baptist preacher in Sapulpa and took all the younger kids with her. I got a job with the oil company working in the front office. It didn't pay much but I wanted Russ to finish high school so he could get a better job than his dad.

Russ: I did have a job while I was in school; I worked in the chop shop.

Martha: It's true, honey-boy; you brought in some money but not much left after you spent it on beer.

Russ: I didn't spend much on beer; I stole the beer.

Martha: But we rented the run-down little house at the edge of town...

Russ: *Really* little. I had to duck my head when I was at home, and I'd forget.

Martha: And your feet didn't fit in the bedroom, they stuck out the bedroom door into the hall. But we were happy. Sex all the time like teenagers, so we were happy.

Russ: But we *were* teenagers.

Martha: And we acted like it. We learned how to get along together because we really wanted to. It wasn't religion that made us loyal to each other or anything like

that, but we just got along. I guess it was religion in a way. Neither of us liked religion, didn't believe in it, and *that* put us together, our strong belief *against* religion. Everyone else was hard-core Baptists or some sort of holy rollers, but they never saw *these* McCullisses in their church, not even for ice cream socials.

Russ: Especially not for ice cream socials, because we were in the roadhouse honky-tonk and it wasn't for ice cream--more for moonshine. Then the war came and I went into the Army. We don't talk about that time, remember?. But I made it home, and I was so glad I jumped and sang and when I made it back to Drumright I danced and danced. Didn't I dance with you, sweet Martha.

Martha: Jitterbug. You were the best, those long arms swingin', those long legs kickin', you squatted down almost to the floor. It was sure good to have you home after I was really lonely for three whole years.

Russ: But you had your family close by. I had tanks and bombs and mortars. It wasn't easy in Italy. War is hell.

Martha: But you were rewarded for your talent and hard work.

Russ: Yeah, the Army liked how slick I could repair engines and chassies of everything, even right in the confusion of combat; and the officers liked how I could requisition most anything they wanted under cover of darkness--wine, farm girls, chickens...

Martha: Farm girls! You said we wouldn't talk about that. Lying to me again! It wasn't easy for me, raunchy and randy and horny and working every day at the office, trying to stay busy enough and trying to think of you all the time and despite my having no religion trying to have faith that you would make it back.

Russ: You knew I'd make it back. I told you I'd make it back. And when I did get back didn't I make it up to you, especially in bed? And didn't I get you your own farm? And your own cow? And a 1932 Ford coupe of your own so you could drive to work? And I tuned your engine for you, didn't I?

Martha: Yes, you did all that, and we got Amanda and little Randy out of that, just like normal people. But that "farm" you got me wasn't much of a farm, just rented the old place you grew up in because there wasn't no one else would buy it or rent it, all of them off to California years earlier, and no new young ones coming back.

Russ: Yeah, old Mister Jackson couldn't do nothin' with it so he rented it to us cheap.

Martha: Anyhow, I got Rustler a job at the oil company doing what his dad used to do, just part time so he could go to classes in Stillwater on the GI Bill. And he got his associate certificate in petroleum equipment maintenance, but he really knew all about that already. Then the company gave him a full-time job in the field, then supervising other guys like my father used to do, then he became a regional foreman, then the chief of that department.

Russ: You got me started and kept me going, but I did all the hard work going from department chief to general manager to vice president. I would have been president of the company if...

Martha: Randy had joined the Marines; we went to Camp Pendleton to watch him graduate from basic training before he went to Viet Nam. That's the trip when we ran into that eighteen-wheeler in California. Russ had just become a vice-president of the whole oil company.

Russ: Back then Martha ran a lot of what happened at the company office so they kept raising her pay too, and I was moving up in the company so they kept raising my pay too. By 1955 we made more than \$8,000 between us. But we made more than that because I never quit the chop shop, in fact I owned it (if you can own something that's technically illegal), ran it from that big old shack behind the farm house that used to be my dad's barn.

Martha: Ran the office? Yeah I ran the office. And I hired you, didn't I? And I promoted you, didn't I? And I covered your ass when you were late or hung over, didn't I? And you called that a house? No electricity, no plumbing, roof leaked all over, big rats in the barn and even bigger in the house.

Russ: Baby, we've always done right by each other. That place wasn't quite big enough to be a farm but it was plenty big to be a house. There really weren't very many rats, mostly mice. And with what I made selling cars I built you a new house, didn't I, indoor plumbing and electric lights and an electric refrigerator and an electric range?

Martha: And I not only hired you and gave you raises, I fed you and paid the mortgage and gave you two nice kids, worked every day at the office and every day and night at home.

Russ: And I worked every day out in the fields and every night in the barn.

Martha: Yeah, we did well for each other into the late fifties.

Russ: Then Drumright was doing so poorly, and the oil company was doing so well that they built a new building for a new office in Tulsa. And we gave up everything we grew up with and were used to...

Martha: ...to do a hell of a lot better. We sold that house for a good price, a lot more than we had in it, the kids were in school and excited about moving to the big city, we were both being paid good salaries for working as office manager for a pretty big oil company, and drilling chief.

Russ: I didn't even have to keep selling stolen cars, even made enough to buy my own new ones. I bought you a pretty Ford convertible to replace the old roadster (but that old jalopy still ran). And I got me a brand new bright blue Studebaker pickup. That was sure a good vehicle, stood up well until at 300,000 miles I upgraded to my bright red GMC in 1965; that was a really good one too.

Martha: Yeah, so good it got us killed.

Russ: It wasn't the truck that got us killed, Martha. Remember, you were driving.

Martha: And you were drinking. That's how our partnership always went, sharing all the tasks.

Russ: Yeah. You cooked and I washed the dishes.

Martha: Until we got an electric dishwasher, then you just ate. And drank.

Russ: We have always done well together, best partners in the history of the world. We worked together at the oil company until we abruptly retired together. We raised our kids together, and they never went to jail like all my brothers' kids did. We were in the same bowling league on the same team in Drumright, then in Tulsa, won more trophies than anyone else we know of.

Martha: And we stayed on the same bowling team even after we got divorced. How many couples can do that?

Russ: That was all your idea, Martha. I started looking at the young women who came into the Village Tavern just because they were good-looking, worth looking at. All men do that but you and I did it together, like we did everything else. You looked too; I'd say "See that one," and you'd look and say things like "She's not too bad but her butt's too big."

Martha: You got so carried away as time went on, finally with one young college girl I said, "You'd like to fuck her, wouldn't you?" And when you didn't say anything I knew the answer was Yes.

Russ: Okay, I admit guys get to middle age and they want to drive something big and red, like my truck.

Martha: Going over this old stuff I'm remembering a lot of things, us helping each other in ways no one else seems to do. No wonder we've been happy all our time together, and even now that we are dead. You got that bright red Jimmy pickup with a Twin-Six V-12 engine and blew everybody away. You were more proud of that than you were of Randy.

Russ: Never. Our son is still the most important thing in the world to me, except our granddaughter. I didn't know I'd ever be satisfied with a production model of anything, but that one was a dream...the truck, I mean, not the granddaughter.

Martha: You got that truck so you could pick up young women, didn't you?!

Russ: Well, you don't have to put it in that tone of voice. But you knew that, and because we are such long-term loyal partners you helped me. I would have helped you.

Martha: I sure did help you. You never would have gotten a date without me. I did everything for you, always have, probably always will. I never really held back anything from you, but until menopause took away my drive and made me fat and flabby, and until a hysterectomy wrecked my equipment, I would never have compromised with owning all of you, even your medium-sized big red vehicle. But once I had nothing left to lose I was willing and able to be your sex agent.

Russ: And the whole idea made me really horny. Every time I was screwing some dumb young thing I was thinking of you, and thankful you had buddied up with her at the Tavern and slowly talked her into bed with me.

Martha: We still went to the Village Tavern most every night, remember? But sometimes I'd stay home to watch Johnny Carson. We'd always choose our songs on the juke box at the roadhouse when we were young, and we'd always scrawl our

requests on a bar napkin for Johnny Bromo at the Tavern when we got older. We never disagreed in any of our choice of songs, and we never disagreed in our choice of women for you to try to bring home. I helped a lot, told them how good you were in bed.

Russ: You're the best at everything, Martha, except at drinking beer. You never could keep up with me, and when I kept going you just sipped, and even left a little in the glass. But I guess you did the best you could. If you drank more than two you couldn't drive me home and I had to use my athletic genius to drive us both, one eye closed to avoid double vision. Lucky we lived close.

Martha: We never gave up our partnership, our love, our family, our bowling team, our friends in the bar, our choices in music, just our marriage. We got divorced and moved to different apartments--right next door to each other on the second floor, so I could cook your breakfast and iron your shirts.

Russ: And so you could hear me banging women in the next apartment through the paper-thin walls.

Martha: You banged loud, and sometimes they squeaked, but I didn't mind so much as long as you showed up on time for breakfast in the morning, at the Tavern in the evening, and at the bowling alley every Wednesday night.

Russ: You understood me and took care of me in grade school, in high school, in the oil company, even in that trip to California to see Randy in training, and at those last moments in the truck--my poor truck. Dying didn't even separate us. We did that together just like we have always done everything. And now here we are, still together.

Martha: World champions, no doubt about it.

Dan Tanner: LIFE MASTER

Guilty. When I was alive the one thing I couldn't begin to understand was honesty. I never stole a thing but I wasn't honest. I understood most everything "factual" in the world, a regular walking encyclopedia and card-shark; I would not hesitate to correct anyone who mistook a scientific or historic matter and I wouldn't *cheat* at cards, but I would focus intensely all my skills and experience to beat you, and I would use every psychological ploy to throw you off balance or to distract you.

I didn't understand what was *actual* in the lives and loves of other people. When people talked about honesty I never quite got it; I thought I did, but I never quite got it. Now I honestly don't know anything for sure, at least not the Truth with a capital T. I didn't hesitate to say anything whatsoever when I sold used cars or seduced a girl or a woman. I would embellish stories about my own talents and heroism without hesitation.



The only truth I ever knew was from my own point of view (what I wanted to believe), and the only truth I wanted you to know was just what I wanted you to believe. I only fooled you if you were foolish (but I always fooled me without the slightest suspicion I was being hoodwinked).

Now I know honesty is not to possess the Truth (something none of us has ever got hold of) but simply to honor it, to know it is real somehow but not my own possession (it doesn't have my monogram embroidered in its corner). Now I know I have to honor what is true for you or I am not being honest with you.

I'll stop trying to explain this to you now because if you've understood it all along I don't have to say anything about it. And if you don't get it, you may have to die before you catch on, like I did. Let me see if I can honestly tell you the story of this honest liar.

My mother was the third of the all-but-famous seven Allen sisters of Winfield, Kansas. Every one of my aunts and their mother (my grandmother) was a simple farm girl with a hidden mind a steel trap. Somehow none of them kept a man very long, but

instead of intimidating them or running them off or poisoning them they managed to just let them die, then lived themselves to upward of a hundred, every one of them.

Alice (my mother) had gone to college but most of the immense body of her knowledge came not from professors but from real life of the most practical sort. Oh sure, she read a lot, but only for the intellectual entertainment of jousting with the classic authors and the best minds of human history. Most of those were men (because women were not allowed to write or speak), and most of them committed blatant errors of fact or thinking, so she considered them intellectual criminals of the low misdemeanor sort, only a few high level cerebral felons like Napoleon and Stalin and Hitler (high level just because of the number they had killed, not because they were big-time thinkers).

Alice worked in an insurance office where she handled quite a volume of money, none of which she stole, much of which she just got. The insurance agent was a man who didn't really want to work, just to drink and play golf, so it was worth it to him to pay her very well to do most all the work. She did it by herself, single-handed, because she didn't make mistakes. If she had needed another hand she would have hired a bright young woman, but she didn't need another hand or another brain.

My father evaporated when I was too young to remember him well, only stayed until my wonderful little brother Paul was born when I was four. I'm not sure what happened to my father. I think he died in the oil fields of Lake Maracaibo. Oil drilling platforms are dangerous, even for engineers. Maybe he fell off the platform drunk.

My mother was the smartest quiet little farm girl in the city. Part of her success was keeping other people from knowing exactly what she was thinking or doing. I never really knew what she was doing either, and she never really knew what I was up to. I guess that's why we trusted each other.

She not only took good pay from Mister Wheeler (about a third of his net income because she produced over half of his net income). Of what she made off her own investments buying and managing houses and apartments she cut him in for a quarter (repayment for capital he put up as down payments, and also for office expenses she paid for from his checking account). He considered it a good deal for him because he didn't have to go to the office, and she considered it a good deal for her because he stayed away from the office.

Alice worked many hours every day, and from an early age she let me also work on my own projects on my own schedule. I went through one phase after another, always busy, often making some money or at least doing something no kid had ever before done. I sold several things, one article at a time so I didn't have to tie up my capital in inventory or diffuse my advertising or confuse my customers.

I sold all-occasion greeting cards, I sold fancy milled hand soap, I sold exotic spices, I sold geologic treasures. To advertise my goods I printed flyers on my toy printing press, I pressed cakes of Ivory soap (soft stuff) into a mold I made in third grade art class, I repackaged salt and pepper into fancy little bags (made from squares of scrap cloth, tied with brightly colored thread dyed with food coloring), and I picked up round rocks from the river and oiled them with Wesson so they shined.

I pretty much raised my brother. I made his breakfast and I walked him to school. He was a good kid. He was bright and he admired me as a big brother. He was small so I could get him into unusual tight places. We produced a poltergeist by concealing him in a cupboard, while I flamboyantly distracted the grownup he would surreptitiously slither out, move things, and slip back into the cupboard. Amazing!

Or I would wear a long magician's coat that trailed along the floor and he would hang on my back by holding my shoulders, then when my back was turned away from them in the neighbor's kitchen he would slither down, steal the cookies, then go back under my skirt to climb back on my back. Abracadabra, no cookies.

Paul sang with the sweetest voice. He would have inspired people singing Christmas carols but we steered clear of any religion. We were anti-God. We were Unitarians. He could tap dance too. Everyone was enthralled at the diminutive terpsichorean, quick as a whip while I swirled a lariat loop around him, and he spun around my feet in tippy-tappy circles. Spike Jones had us on his television show, but he didn't pay us, said we were amateurs. I gave Paul a shiny new quarter anyhow.

I read anything they told me *not* to, especially racy stuff. I'd tell little Paul about it but he'd be puzzled. He wouldn't quite understand it even if I showed him on a dog or a pair of dogs. He was bright but inhibited. Paul became a doctor, perhaps to know the parts inside, then he became a neurologist, perhaps to get inside the head, then he eased over into psychiatry to get to the real secrets, the racy stuff.

I was good-humored about it all, light-hearted, devil-may-care. I told jokes, even about myself, but I never spilled over into confessions about my shucking and jiving, conning and evading. My clothes were always clean and pressed and my shoes had a shine as brilliant as my patter. Everyone loved me. I was sure of it. I believed it and my little brother believed it—but I think my mother saw through it even before grade school. She was too kind to confront me.

Alice knew how to keep cool as a cucumber. She never said what she knew. She never said Mister Wheeler was a lazy shirking drunk, just let him have a lot of money to serve as her front man so she could make even more. She never tipped her hand, not even to her six sisters and her mother, about her own rackets. She never missed church even though she didn't believe in God.

And Alice always told everyone how proud she was of Paul and me, how hard we worked, how brilliantly we excelled. And we did all those things, he with his serious good-boy dedication and me with my slick con-artist improvisation.

And Alice never told me what happened to Paul Senior, even when I asked her. She'd say the same sort of thing about him as she said about me.

"Oh, your father was a brilliant engineer. That oil company couldn't have done without him."

"Is he dead, Alice?"

"They never found his body."

She didn't lie, she just evaded the question, slipped past the answer. Good training for me, but it didn't help me find a dad.

I was the youngest life-master in the American Contract Bridge League, started gathering points and winning tournaments long before I left high school. I left high school all right, left in a blaze of glory on my way to an international bridge event in Paris, France. The high school band played at the airport as I climbed the stairway into the plane. The school principal gave a speech in my honor as I ogled the stewardesses and figured how to get whiskey on the flight to New York.

I never went back to high school and I never went to college, never gave those a thought. To show up for class, to ace examinations, to jockey for the highest grades, to be elected president of the class, to have the lustful adulation of innumerable coeds--all those would have been easy enough, but they would have taken too much time.

The big war was over and the Korean War had begun. Men in uniform were looked up to as heroes. The decline of honor for servicemen wouldn't come until a bit later, until Viet Nam, and by then I was finished with the service, and though I was finished with honor altogether I was not finished with glory.

Before Paul was ready to start that medical career I was in and out of the Marines. I was borderline small but not too short really, just over five foot six. I couldn't fight impressively hand to hand in combat at 137 pounds so I transferred over to the Navy side and became a test pilot. Paul was proud of me. Experimental fighter jets were more exciting than spangled magician's gowns and sleight of hand. I might have become a lion tamer just to show I was brave. Anything, as long as I was showy. The uniform and the pilot's gear sure were showy.

Life was smooth and easy. To be a Navy pilot was hardly different from being a grade school clown or junior high school magician. I went from conning teachers and evading principals, conning girls and evading their parents, conning bartenders (who should have demanded my ID) and evading cops; I graduated on to conning commanding officers and evading MPs, and by a margin of at least five feet evading anyone's nose on the flight line who might smell my breath from the night before. If they were honest they would have had to ground me.

But for now I was a dashing test-pilot with shiny shoes and a shiny winning smile. I enjoyed every moment of cutting-edge technology and daring danger. Every day was new equipment to master immediately as no one else could do, and every day was exhilarating powerful flying, jetting, rocketing over the desert, over the mountains. It was no sight-seeing trip, too much supersonic speed for that, and constant radio back-and-forth about the specifics, the specifications, and occasional dysfunctions, and panics at the control tower and at headquarters (but just a confident grin from me).

Every night it was the officer's club and beautiful women, dangerous wild rides to the nightclub in town in my fire-engine red Oldsmobile Rocket 88 convertible, without a pass but always easy re-entry to the base under the radar of my knowingly

winking Marine guard pals. I didn't tire of flying jets that had never been flown before nor women who had never been flown that fast.

I played local bridge tournaments when they were at the right time and place and I won consistently. I flew to bigger events when I had leave time, and I won consistently, usually in Las Vegas. It was wine women and song on the base and wine women and song in Las Vegas and wine women and song on the flights between if I went commercial (just whiskey from a hip-flask and a song I hummed to myself on a military flight, but that flight was much faster than commercial so I got to the women quickly anyhow).

I could have stayed in as a test pilot for five years and finished the rest of twenty years as an instructor, then retired with good pay (if only I could survive the first five years). But I wanted more money, more excitement, more glory. The Marines and the Navy were a lot of fun and the uniform always attracted a lot of women, but it wasn't big enough or fast enough for me. I wanted the kind of destiny that rockets through the top of the circus tent and away beyond sight through the atmosphere, over the mountains.

It was all good in the Navy, but Las Vegas was better every time I went there. I had more fun and I made more money. Amateur card-playing doesn't mean there is no betting, just not on top of the table. Anyhow, I wouldn't call it gambling because any time I competed I won, no risk, so it was no gamble. Even if it wasn't my own bet, the high rollers would tip me big when they bet on me and won, they gave me at least ten per cent (and I could never lose).

It was all so good I couldn't let myself stagnate downhill into instructor status. I was afraid without the test-pilot éclat the women would lose their luster. But the Navy didn't pay nearly as much as the syndicate. If I gave up my uniform I might lose some of my sex appeal, but with plenty of money my popularity would go up again.

When my stint was over I didn't re-up. I hung up my uniform and moved to Las Vegas where I was the Bridge King. There were plenty of bridge clubs and plenty of bridge tournaments in the casinos. I got to know the maîtres d' and the big stars, so I sat ringside, waved and nodded. Women liked that, liked to be seen with me. And I liked to see them in my hotel room.

I hung up my uniform, which left me ill at ease only for a short time, but the tailors at the fancy hotels could suit me out so that I stood out. It wasn't as flashy as Liberace or Elvis, but I wouldn't want to go that far. I knew Liberace wasn't straight, and I wondered about Elvis. I spent an awful lot but I made quite a bit more, and I was happy for a long while.

Now that I look back I understand it pretty clearly, but at the time it seemed a simple but severe run of bad luck. Not merely bad luck but the worst most unjustified bad luck in the history of the world. If I had believed in God I would have been furious with Her. But I was not religious or superstitious, so I just blamed Dame Fortune. Either way, it hurt like hell and I broke down and cried.

Everything had been exactly as it should be. I was doing what I wanted to do, playing bridge and beating everyone in the world--literally everyone in the world.

Nowadays we might say I was the Tiger Woods of contract bridge. I couldn't lose and I couldn't stop setting records. Everyone crowded around me, especially women. People came up to me everywhere in Las Vegas to hand me money (my "tips" from their bets on me).

I lived at the top of the Flamingo. After tournaments were over for the night I ate filet and lobster served elegantly in my room, washed it down with champagne. But really the champagne was for the girls; I preferred gin, washed down my supper with martinis, then had martinis before dessert, more martinis for my dessert. For a while there I think I broke the martini records as well as the bridge records. I didn't hang out with the Rat Pack but I encountered them sometimes. One night I drank Frank under the table. I was in the big time.

It took a lot of champagne to water that many women, and I fertilized them but I never weeded out the crop. By then I had to start chasing out perfectly wonderful specimens to get a couple hours sleep, a shower, a shave and dressed for the day. I took a deep breath, concentrated through my hangover and won most all the time.

One morning it stopped being fun. It was a real task to open an eye, much less get up and dressed. And the headache was thicker than the smoke in the casino downstairs. I didn't have the energy my athletic youth had given me for more than five years. My muscles no longer bulged but my belly did. I didn't take a shower to get dressed so much as I took a long steamy shower to clear my pipes, to breathe. I was pale yellow, and slow of mind and body.

I came in third in a tournament, but I shook that off. I won a couple in a row then came in third again. I didn't win a match for over three months, started not showing up about half the time. I felt like I was going downhill but I couldn't believe it. As long as the champagne was flowing the girls kept coming, but I didn't.

I was depressed, really depressed, but I didn't have a friend to help me see it so I felt it but refused to believe it. I never dared to look me eye to eye in the mirror. I would have seen the whites were slightly yellow. There were a lot of people around as long as I was winning, but they didn't want to see my decline any more than I did so they didn't say anything about it.

I kept taking the oldest medicine in the whole wide world for what ailed me (ethanol), but it seemed to help less and less. So I tried to increase my dose, but I couldn't stomach it. I started vomiting in the mornings when I woke up from not sleeping, and I started vomiting blood.

One morning I didn't make it to the bathroom, vomited right in the bed. A cute little girl (I never knew their names) jumped into her little red dress and pumps, and clicking her way out of the hotel told the clerk at the desk, "I think a guy died in 609."

That was the end of Las Vegas. I don't think anyone noticed I was gone. I don't remember the ambulance but the hospital people must have called my mother in Oklahoma; when I woke up in the hospital bed with tubes stuck in my arms and my arms tied down, there at the end of the bed were Paul and Alice. I couldn't move my arms to wave hello to them, just wiggled my fingers. They took me home.

I had been pretty sick, and I was sick of being sick. I was too sick to want a drink. The doctor told me I could never drink again. I had never accepted any authority's opinions or instructions, so I was sardonically silent in the face of his effrontery.

But the sweet young nurse told me the reason I wasn't in withdrawal was because I had already been through it, unconscious for over two weeks. My seizures had stopped, my shakes were gone. I always believed pretty young women. It would be worse than foolish to jump back into the rapids only to have to swim across again to get a toe-hold on dry land.

Even though Tulsa was as boring as ever, I wasn't bored. It took careful effort to sip a cup of broth, but it tasted pretty good. At first I didn't have the energy to walk outside the house but soon I was in the front yard, then down the street, then around the block in less than ten minutes. I thought of the supersonic speeds I had exceeded in jet planes, and the super-supersonic speeds at which I flew through Las Vegas, but now a slow careful step-by-step adventure to the front yard was good enough. I had no regrets about slowing down.

My brother nursed me for two weeks before he had to return to medical school. I took care of myself at home all day, and my mother fixed me a meal after work. I went to bed early so I wouldn't fall asleep in the living room reading, might drop a burning cigarette. I didn't have a drink, didn't miss it yet, but I had to have my cigarettes and coffee. I didn't want to fall asleep smoking in bed so I read at the dining table—if I dozed off I would fall out of the chair and wake up on the way down.

It really was slow to get strength back. My muscles were wasted from disease and disuse, and I was anemic from blood loss through my esophagus. Lucky I didn't have enough energy to get ambitious or I don't know what I would have done. I didn't want to drink; it hurt my stomach just to think of it. For over three weeks that worked, but as I developed an appetite I began to develop a thirst.

I wasn't stupid but I wasn't strong. To drink again frightened me, but I still wanted it. And I had never been frightened by anything, not even death, but having a two week black-out and being so weak and shaky was new, unexpected and very frightening. Of course I had no idea how to protect myself. I had a sip of my mother's sherry and promptly threw up. That was more than I could take.

I had a few old friends from the high school whom I had left on the runway that glorious day seven years ago, before my ignominious crash in Las Vegas. Cal had come when he heard I was sick at my mother's house. He sat with me on the porch, listened as I rambled, confused and uncomfortable about where I had been, where I was that day, where I would be going (seemed like it would be nowhere).

As he listened patiently I heard some of it myself. It sounded like I had rocketed out of this town on jet fuel, and after burning out my engines floated back down the stream on embalming fluid. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream. It

wasn't hard for me to see what a nightmare my dream would be if I resumed drinking. Cal seemed to be familiar with the problem, assured me there is a solution.

So when I could walk a few feet to the car he gave me rides to a nearby church basement for AA meetings. I still needed help climbing the stairs back up when the meeting was over. Like most poor broken-down fools who stumble or stagger into church basements in such a fashion, I was allergic to the G word, still am. But Alcoholics Anonymous really is not a cult or a religion, and there are plenty of us who stay agnostic or even piously atheistic and still don't have to drink.

Cal helped me find a way to avoid alcohol, and that was a relief. But recovery from alcoholism is also a way to become happy and free in small increments, one day at a time. I certainly have not become a saint. I have watched many persons seem happy and free, at least happier and freer than they had been previously. I didn't get free of the risk of drinking once and forever; I have to newly reconfirm that part every day. And I have little doubt that I became happier and freer than ever I had been.

But there are some things I never let go of completely. Now that I am dead I can see them pretty clearly. I'm not sure why I clung to them so tight, but I sure did. I couldn't stop feeling gleeful when I fooled people, especially bridge opponents and naïve women. I didn't stop smoking, because it was like breathing in fire and blowing out flames. I was calmly furious. I could put all the energy of my anger into smoking and nobody had to know I had any anger, nobody including me, for in those days smoking was normal for everyone.

I did give up several life-threatening habits, especially speeding in planes and cars and motorcycles. I still talked fast, but that was part of the "harmless" (I thought) good-humored blarney and palaver that I thought entertained people. I made enough progress in recovery to live the rest of my life without killing anyone but myself. I didn't fully understand the value of honesty until now, that it isn't "cute" to con opponents at cards, that it isn't "cute" to con women into bed, that it isn't "cute" to con myself into thinking I'm a nice guy when I'm acting like an asshole.

I got on my feet and I was willing to calm down and stay alive not drinking. Like a lot of recovering alcoholics, one of the first things I had to do was to get a job as a bartender. Normal people think that doesn't make much sense, but it gave me a chance to prove I didn't have to drink alcohol even when my nose was rubbed in it.

I got a part-time job tending bar at the new Village Tavern. Work as a bartender convinced me that when people are drunk they are boring and stupid and a total pain in the ass. Even when they think they're not drunk at all they may be very drunk indeed. Knowing that I didn't have to drink and that I could tolerate a good measure of obnoxious misbehavior from others helped a lot to allow me relative peace with the world.

All I had to do at work was to count and maintain the stock of beer (but I let other people do the wrestling of full kegs until I got stronger). I had to organize the schedules for the staff, I had to inventory and maintain the cleaning supplies, the light

bulbs, the softball team uniforms and equipment, the freezer full of cardboard pizzas. And I cleaned the toilets.

I liked Jack okay, the owner, but I didn't have to buddy up to him. We were friendly, personable, but not personal, just business. When I was stronger and still sober he promoted me to head bartender and manager, which meant I didn't have to clean the toilets any more.

College students usually worked out okay as bartenders if I kept a close eye on them. If they weren't doing okay it was easy to replace them because the college had an unending supply of guys who would work for free beer and a buck an hour (the same as five dollars today), and under duress they could clean toilets.

With Johnny Brautigam it was different. With him it was *all* personal. I didn't tell him how to play the piano and he didn't tell me how to tap a keg. I certainly did tell him which songs to play for me and he did tell me when he needed a drink.

He came into the bar looking for a job a day before the doors first opened, about when I did, and two people couldn't be closer. Even though we were definitely straight heterosexual normal American guys we were emotionally bonded from the moment we met. Neither of us ever married a woman but that was just dumb luck, not a lifestyle choice.

Johnny was very intelligent, energetic and driven. Also he was a bad alcoholic from an age as early as I had been, but he was a little further along, four years my senior. John had come to Tulsa to work on his doctorate in psychology but he needed a job to skim by, otherwise the starving student really would have starved.

He had slinked out of New Jersey, the eldest of a family of three children of hard-working European refugees. Like many humble immigrant families his parents reached for the cultural status they had aspired to in Belgium, stretched hard to get him piano lessons. He had a future as a concert pianist, but he whizzed through high school by sixteen and apprenticed himself to the pool-hall like any normal Jersey boy.

The factory-town urban streets converted Mozart into Scott Joplin, and Johnny put himself through Rutgers playing ragtime and rugby songs in low dives. Like a bat, he was used to dark and dank and the smell of stale beer. It was a radical change for him to travel to the middle of the country, to the plains, to the suburbs of a city barely past its farm-town phase. He didn't feel at home until he found a dark place in which to drink and sing.

So here we were in a brand-new shopping mall, but since he slept through all the daylight it seemed to him as dark as any other cave once the sun had set. And here came the suburbanites, thronging to hear the raspy voice and delicate fingers of the ribald troubadour from the sophisticated East, singer of ballads--"The Lady in Red" and "I've Got A Lover-ly Bunch of Cocoanuts"; "Coney Island Washboard Roundelay" and "Maple Leaf Rag"; "Good Night, Irene" and "Once I Married a Tattooed Lady"; "Masculine Women, Feminine Men" and "Lydia the Tattooed Lady", and every other classical love song from a lyric quire for the drunken choir.

And I pulled beer from dusk to dawn.

Johnny had a small apartment near the university, as cluttered and grimy as any student garret in the neighborhood. But as soon as the Village Tavern opened with him as the headliner the bar was elbow to elbow all night long. Jack sold a very large lot of beer and made a very large lot of money, and Jack paid Johnny accordingly. So Johnny got a larger more expensive soon-cluttered and grimy apartment. To drive the six blocks from his domicile to the bar he got a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air, white-under-black with chrome-silver trim, a classic already even in the early sixties.

Too busy making money and discussing psychology and baseball all night at the Tavern he let the thesis slide, so he all-but got the doctoral title. But what was that compared with being famous, at least locally famous? Later he did get gigs in Las Vegas through a couple of my old acquaintances, especially Pete Barbutti. I reluctantly surrendered John to Las Vegas despite my fear of being corrupted by even an indirect contact with Nevada, afraid the mob would horn in on me again, or worse, horn in on John.

Thank goodness for my trips to the church basement several times a week and my quick supper I cooked and shared with my mother in the cozy breakfast nook when she came home before I left for work. Otherwise my world would have been limited to the Village Tavern in the dark. How long could I have survived if I had forgot my miserable misfame and misfortune in Las Vegas?

How long could I have stayed sober and alive without a little taste of sunshine every day? Serving alcohol to innumerable customers didn't bother me at all, but being so very close to Johnny's alcoholic circadian nocturnal patterns would have sucked me down for sure. Sunk.

Johnny Bromo (his stage name) burned an awful lot of energy playing and singing every night, staggered home to fall asleep in his clothes (his car on automatic pilot the short six blocks from the Tavern). He usually was still hiding under his bed when I called him in the afternoon before I left for work. He extruded his last drop of energy to groan, "Yeah, I'm up. I'll be there. No, I can't eat anything. Thanks anyhow."

Eventually the inevitable is likely to happen. Johnny had a few automobile problems. He had a few landlord problems. He had a few clothing malfunctions. He even had a few musical instrument mishaps. He had no woman problems because even though he was around hundreds of them and dozens of them flirted with him, idolized him with gooey adulation, he never had much time between playing his last set and the time he passed out, so that didn't leave him time to play around.

To me as his friend these problems each appeared understandable misfortunes of the sort that might be suffered by anyone. To the authorities and to the press they were more notable, at least they were more noted. Yet as I review these matters quickly in my mind I have the distinct impression there are some patterns here, not merely an unfortunate frequency of random mischance.

Most of his automobile problems were occasioned by his being struck by sleep at the wheel. It resembled narcolepsy. Often he had pulled off the road or street

and turned off the engine to take a nap. One morning he awakened eyes rattled by dawn's unsettling light in the parking lot of a convenience store, engine idling slowly, the bumper of the Chevrolet firmly pressed against a very heavy metal mail box which was firmly bolted into the concrete.

Likely he had pulled into the convenience store parking lot on his way home from the Tavern meaning to buy a pack of cigarettes, but he fell asleep there, tired from long work. He didn't even get his cigarettes. He so often was tired after work, I began to pick him up at his apartment in the evening, then take him home after closing as often as I could, if I was finished with the bar and with the receipts. Sometimes one of the regulars would volunteer to take him home.

Some smart-asses at the Tavern said he drove drunk. Occasionally that happens to any of us, but I know John never endangered the public. He never speeded, just dozed off on occasion. He never had a serious accident, just wandered into curbs or up against trees. He rented two parking spaces together at his apartment house, so it would be easier to get between the lines. He was cautious to avoid breaking the rules, even apartment house rules.

When the local police first encountered Johnny's nocturnal fatigue they ticketed him for driving erratically; the next time for driving too slow. They began to look for him to drive home late at night but he got hip to it and was very cautious, pinched himself awake all the way home. They even followed him during the day if he went out before sundown (not very often, really).

Finally he sold the car and let me drive him. It took a couple tries even though it was a cherry 1957 Bel Air. A kid came to look at it. John tossed the kid the keys. The kid couldn't believe a grown man would trust him. And the price was good. But despite all that the kid came back just ten minutes later, held out the keys.

"Doesn't it run okay?"

"Like a dream?"

"Is the price too high? I'll drop it."

"No, it seems like a bargain for that."

"I'll let you pay installments."

"It isn't that, it's just that it scares me."

"What scares you?"

"I hadn't even come around the corner when the cops stopped me, lights, siren, the whole thing. Two of them walked up with their hands on their holsters, looked in the window fast, like they might pull their guns. One of them said, 'You're not him!' I wasn't even speeding. No, you can have your car back."

The next kid did better. He didn't get stopped by the cops so he bought the car.

John not driving took a lot of worry off the police, and it was a relief to me and all the other citizens on the streets. He didn't drive well even sober (nobody from New Jersey drove worth a damn), and he wasn't usually sober, especially since he had fin-

ished all his scheduled classwork the previous spring and only had his thesis to work on--and he didn't work on his thesis, but he still talked about it a lot, and had more time, drank more and more.

He had concentrated hard on his doctoral thesis, "Childhood Effects of Immigration in Twentieth Century America". But he stepped into this gig at the Village Tavern and it grew to consume energy and time and space and ego, so the doctorate was set aside "just for a short time". And he worked long and hard, but he drank more and more, ate less and less, hardly moved from the piano bench except to fall off of it.

I still went to AA meetings every early afternoon. The new college student bartenders were good enough (or we didn't keep them) so Jack and I could trust them to open the bar. I really didn't have to come in to the Tavern until about six. But I was the only one Jack and I could trust to close down at night, take the money around the corner to the bank deposit hole-in-the-wall.

John went on at seven and he stopped playing at last call. Even if I telephoned him to be ready to be picked up he usually wouldn't be dressed when I came for him. I made sure he had a clean shirt, and I had to tie his black bow tie for him because not having had a drink for upwards of twelve hours left him too very shaky. I carried two miniature bottles of cheap whiskey in the glove box to get him to work (and a crate of them in the trunk).

His first piano set was pretty short and pretty clean, then he took a fifteen minute break to get lubricated for the longer stronger raunchier second set. He had a glass of beer on the piano with his miniature candelabrum (my joke birthday gift to him). The barmaids kept his beer refreshed throughout the night. I was the one who pulled those beers for him at the bar, and I was the one who splashed a shot of cheap whiskey in there too, to keep him from downing the beers quite so fast.

Last call was at a quarter of two because legal closing was mandatory by two o'clock. The tourists had to be gone by two but the regulars could get away with staying locked in with me until I took away their glasses, gave them plastic to-go cups for the last of their last beers. No more beer, no more piano, no more girls coming in the door meant there was nothing more for them to stay for so they left.

Going out the door all the guys tossed their cups into the wastebasket (so the cops waiting in the parking lot wouldn't catch them with an open container in the car). I usually really closed the bar before three, rarely as late as three-fifteen. By then it was spit-shine clean, spick and span and ready to go for the next day, even if I had to do it all myself.

I really couldn't afford the time to take Johnny home to his apartment and come back to close things down, but Johnny and I were friends, good friends, closer friends every day, so he didn't mind waiting for me to take him home. He usually just passed out in the back booth anyhow, then in the back seat of the car.

I'd pull Alice's Oldsmobile up to the alley door, drag him out to the car, stand him up by the open back door, nudge him so he fell onto the back seat as I quickly folded his knees clear on the way down. If he woke up we might go to a greasy spoon for

breakfast before I took him to his apartment to pass out again. If not, I'd go home hungry and have breakfast the next afternoon with Alice before I went to work.

Needless to say (but my friends in Alcoholics Anonymous certainly said it to me repeatedly, needless or not) John became more and more disorganized and more and more dependent on me. I didn't very much mind having no life separate from him because I so much admired and enjoyed his intelligence, his humor both sensitive and crass, his art. He had memorized hundreds of songs, maybe thousands, both to play and to sing, and the jokes with which to punctuate them.

Nobody knew the history of Scott Joplin as well as John; he should have written the biography. He had a delicate sense of the ironies of Joplin's life as the son of a slave in the post-Civil War south, a congenitally genius musician and composer who was excluded from the larger audience because of his race. John tearfully grieved each of Joplin's defeats and losses, his frantic efforts to accomplish his artistic goals racing against impending dementia and death from the then-common scourge of syphilis.

Johnny's most intensely focused and truly sober hours were during those months he struggled diligently to learn, polish and eventually master the playing of the Maple Leaf Rag. That was the big one for John, as it had been for Mister Joplin. He learned other rags of Joplin's and other turn-of-the-century negroes but it was the Maple Leaf Rag that was always requested by audiences and by me.

The personality he sold to the customers brought him good money but it wasn't a good personality to have. It was a very shallow veneer, a loud raspy grinning chain-smoking guzzling sardonic entertainer. The sensitive intellectual artist I knew was never seen in public, and sadly for me I hardly saw him even in private again.

More and more he needed me to awaken him, to dress him, to feed him, to protect him, to defend him, to carry him from place to place, to bring him cigarettes and drinks. Because I loved him I was glad to do these for him. I came in my own recovery to realize how shallow my own public persona had become in Las Vegas (hero, champion, Don Juan, martini-master), and I had little respect for the charlatan I had been.

But even though I understood the difference between the billboard Johnny Bromo so popular and self-destructive on the one hand, and John Brautigam his true self, my humble wise closest friend, I none the less loved and applauded the public facade as much as the public did. I contemplated my own con-artist act from childhood until my alcoholic near-death twenty-five years later (from which I miraculously awakened) and I hated that self of mine for its corrupt dishonesty. Somehow I did not hate John's false self even though it was killing the psychologist/musician whom I admired profoundly.

It was inevitable that I would do what I had promised my mother and me that I would not. One afternoon I could not get him up. I could not tolerate the puke and piss and shit he strewed about caked onto the toilet, floor and walls in his bathroom, or the pile of dirty clothes that wasn't even a single pile but a field of piles. I realized it would get worse, never better. Plutonium has a half-life of 24,110 years. Can crap or vomit last that long?

I got up before six-thirty the next morning (even though I had not got to sleep until about three-thirty). I put on the coffee and I did talk with Alice honestly and in enough detail (but she already understood, reminded me how she had cared for my drunken father until he disappeared into Venezuela). She understood and she sighed and she shrugged and then she went to her office. She thanked me for the coffee.

Since I was up already and could hardly go back to sleep, and since it would be necessary that very afternoon to instruct him as to the new arrangement (even though he would hardly participate in it actively), I went to the noon AA meeting instead of waiting until the three o'clock. I was at John's apartment by one-thirty packing up his things while he slept oblivious.

His two clean suits still in their plastic bags from the cleaners, his three clean shirts and his clean underwear in the dresser, a few clean things including even an unused bright white tennis outfit (gift from his sister), I carefully set all into the suitcase I had extracted from under the bed. I carefully wrapped his patent leather pumps in a clean towel, nested them between the suits and the shirts.

In the process of all this packing I was careful not to impact or jostle him inadvertently, nor did he move. From the silence of his torpor I couldn't really be sure he was still breathing, but as I reached under the bed for the case I felt and smelled the waves of his fetid breath flow warmly over me. He was alive.

The piles, hills and mountains and the odd shreds of dirty clothes were the easiest to pack (some really dirty, caked in all the stuff that caked the bathroom); I just shoved all of it into plastic garbage bags, of course, of which I had purloined a dozen at the Tavern on my way to John's. His modest library I put into two whiskey crates from the same source, and his clock radio. That was about the extent of his baggage.

All that stuff fit into the ample trunk and back seat of Alice's old Oldsmobile. Now I had to get John into the front seat (since his usual back-seat sofa was filled with bulging garbage bags). Even awake he was unsteady, at least no rock, and discoordinated. I had him stand a moment beside the open car-door, counted to three, folded him at the hips and knees and pushed him in.

He was not used to daylight, even with dark glasses. He said little, just glanced glazed and dazed as the day and the streets flashed past. I briefed him in near-monosyllables in all the orderly intelligence I had composed for him.

"John, that little apartment isn't good enough for you any more. You deserve more space and comfort. You and I are going to live together at Alice's house so I can take care of you easier. After all, it will be less for me to drive at three in the morning. Your schedule will be the same but your life will be easier. And, Johnny, we have a piano in the living room, a grand piano."

"Ungh-hup" he belched.

All went smoothly for almost two months. He was passive in everything, which made it much easier for me to take care of him, better off if he didn't even try to help. He didn't have to go to the store for cigarettes. He didn't have to remember to eat.

He didn't have to go to the cleaners. He didn't have to pick up his clothes off the floor or make the bed (as if he ever would). He didn't have to empty the ashtrays.

That worried me a bit. I had been conditioned by military discipline to finish my last cigarette in the living room after reading, or in the john before going to bed. But John smoked his last cigarette on the verge of passing out, and it didn't always get completely snuffed. I planted a huge ashtray on his night-stand and many of the butts were long worms of ash that had burnt their own way to the filters.

More than a few deep black charcoal ruts garnished the bedside table. We slept in twin beds in the bedroom I had shared with Paul when we were boys. More than once I awakened in the next bed from the sharp acrid smell of burning shellac and mahogany, nice for incense perhaps, but too abrupt a smell to sleep through.

I was as careful as I could be and Johnny promised me he would be too. My cautious mother and my beloved Marine Corps sergeant taught me to anticipate and prepare maximally against any risk, to maintain alertness toward it as if it were a mugger in a bad neighborhood or an enemy sniper; then you will lose less sleep and you will enjoy an increased sense of security. I always believed whatever Alice said, or the Marine Corps training manual.

But consider that this-daring lad had lived an insouciant history of disdain for risk and danger, I had soared above all that, speeding along oblivious to all on ground level. I did what occurred to me to do, focused my attention only on what I aimed at, not on the clattering chaos below me, not on the matters that others thought important (mother, teacher, policeman, commanding officer, enemy sniper).

For my fifth birthday I had received a valuable present from my Aunt Daisy, a carpenter's set on the scale of a five year old but fully authentic in every other way: a hammer, a screwdriver, a T-square, a hand saw, brads, a plumb line. In those days before the concept of safety had been invented, all my tools were real, not plastic but metal. Now that's what a really good aunt is good for.

The garbage truck came every Friday, pulled up in front of the house, the ever-so-strong garbage-man with his Navy tattoos and sleeveless muscle shirt hopped off the back of the truck where he had been hanging with one hand, he went to the back of the house by the garage where the trash cans were lined up, picked them up one in each hand over his back even when they were heavy, bulging full above the brim, strode back up the driveway to the front of the house, overhead dumped the trash into the bowels of the truck, and carried the trash cans back, delicately and silently set them down precisely where they belonged. I aspired to grow up to be a garbage-man.

Excited with my grown-up birthday present, with my little real metal saw, as I saw the garbage truck pull up in front of the house I walked up to the big wheel with its big tire as round as I was tall and sawed away as hard and fast as I could while the big strong garbage-man went to the back to get the cans. When he came back the tire was flat, no longer tall and round.

That's how it always was, and I guess that's how it was through my whole life, for fifty-eight years. I knew what I wanted to do but I didn't know what the results would be. I knew I wanted to be a magician, a swashbuckler, a gambler, a card shark, a jet pi-

lot, a test pilot, a *bon vivant*, a *raconteur*, a rocket, a comet, a tornado. I didn't know in the process of being all those good things I would be stepping on people's toes.

But I had been really good since I woke up from that coma. I didn't have a drink. (I still smoked, but so did everyone, especially doctors.) I got a job, a low-profile job, and I worked hard. I helped my mother (even though I was more than merely grown). And especially I helped my friend John Brautigam increasingly as he became less able to care for himself.

I trusted his promises though it made no sense to do so. And I had my heavy habit of being oblivious to anything that wasn't my own idea. It was not my idea for Johnny to smoke in bed, so I was preoccupied with my own thoughts, my own dreams.

Alice's house was not very large, two bedrooms in the house itself, ample for a couple people or so, for a small family. The space had been amplified many years earlier when my brother and I were accommodated into our own bedroom above the detached garage. Alice and Paul Senior planned it that way.

It was hardly acceptable to her, especially since it was her own house, for a hard-working middle-aged woman who worked downtown from early in the morning and at home retired early in the evening, to have two grown men awoken as she was getting ready for bed, and for them to return at three or so the next morning the one carrying the other fireman style, the two of them singing or yelling at each other.

By chance or design the outside stairs to our place above the garage were on the side away from the house itself, and Alice's room was the one farthest from the garage side, her window away and at the front. So the separation from the house proper of our room above the garage, the separation of the two men improper from the proper old lady, the separation of Alice's sleeping ears from most of the intrusive noise saved all of us, let us coexist in relative peace.

Except I was tired at three-thirty, and John was drunk, ready to pass out as usual. And John had his last cigarette going as I was just beginning to snore politely. And Alice couldn't easily hear or see or smell what was happening far away from her through walls and distance. She only awakened when the fire engines' sirens were careening down the street.

A passer-by from his car had seen the glow of flickering flames, but he didn't know the garage, obviously separate from the house, had human occupants. At that moment the house looked safe enough, if you were driving down the street fast in the dark after closing time from that nearest bar. He gunned it to the pay phone at the all-night gas station most of a mile away, dialed zero to call the fire department lest the fire spread.

If I had seen the scene I might have been entertained. I imagine it as it might have been reported by James Thurber (if only he had been there and had been sober), or as it might have been shown as a specimen of the Keystone Fire Department. The firemen were awake and Alice was awake and the neighbors were awake. Johnny was not awake at all, not until the day after the next.

I was suddenly awake choking and coughing from the smoke, knowing there was a fire but seeing nothing for the smoke. There were flashes through the smoke but I didn't stop to sight-see, just crawled across the floor a couple feet to John and dragged him toward the stair as best I could just as I had been taught in basic training.

The ambulance was parked in the middle of the lawn. The ambulance drivers lifted Johnny from me on the stairs, strapped John onto the little cot in the back with an oxygen mask, me sitting in the shotgun seat in the front of the ambulance gasping. I knew what had happened but I couldn't do a damn thing about it. I kept trying to make it all go backwards in my mind to undo it, but it wouldn't unwind. I was really afraid Johnny was dead.

I remember arriving at the hospital, siren blaring, lights glaring, speeding down the empty streets at four a.m., my shoulder slamming into the door at every lurching turn with a painful thudding bruise. They walked me out of the ambulance but only one step, to the gurney cart on which they wheeled me to my curtained cubicle. I looked for John and looked for John but I couldn't see him and I couldn't even just reach the curtain to pull it away because my arms were strapped to my sides.

They did some things I did not like, cut off my yellow silk pajamas and put me into a hospital gown. They put an oxygen mask on my face, but it didn't comfort me, just seemed to choke off my air. After I took the mask off three times and they put it back on three times they gave me a shot and I couldn't see and I couldn't move and I still couldn't see Johnny.

They wheeled me into an elevator to some place upstairs, wheeled me into another curtained cubicle; I sorta remember that, almost. Then I was asleep until I woke up with brightness I could hardly stand, even closing my eyes didn't protect me, oxygen mask still on, IV tubes in both arms, beeping from every direction, each of the several sets of beeps syncopated away from the others.

I looked across from me, to the next section, all but within reach. As I stared trying to focus my eyes I could make out someone with an oxygen mask and IVs in each arm. At first I thought it must be a mirror because it looked like I felt. Then I saw the hair was dark but I knew mine was an almost sandy light brown; and the mirror image had full hair and I knew mine was thin, thinner than when I was only twenty-five.

Slowly my eyes focused and there was Johnny, inert but Johnny. I had seen him passed out blotto many times before, and I told me that was who it was (and I ought to know, the world's greatest expert on John unconscious). He wasn't moving or opening his eyes and I couldn't be sure he was breathing, but I thought if he was dead he would be in the morgue, not in the ICU.

Intensive care units were pretty new and I thought they hadn't quite been perfected because you couldn't rest there, you couldn't sleep there, you couldn't see a door or wall or window to tell your brain you were inside something somewhere, that there was something outside all that. You could remember a bigger world and hoped to get back to it.

He coughed. He coughed again. He kept on coughing. There were other coughs so hard they shook my narrow little bed. Of course they did, for that was me also coughing. My throat burned and my chest hurt. A nurse lifted some cold water to my lips in a straw. I sucked and it felt a little better until it burned again. I didn't tell her because I couldn't. If I started to make a noise in my throat I coughed so hard and repeatedly like a machine gun, and so I couldn't speak.

Johnny woke and looked at me, but we didn't speak for all those hours. We just coughed. He didn't have breath or energy to talk until late the second day. At least I had been up to the bathroom with help from a pretty cute little nurse. Finally he croaked hello to me. My smile came back, not the brave defiant grin or the sardonic subtle condemnation of every other person's frailty but a smile of sheer joy that Johnny was alive.

I could breathe without the oxygen tank sooner than Johnny could. I was weak but he was weaker. When he was able to get up in a chair with a lot of help, when he was able to breathe without the oxygen, they gave us our own room together. The window looked out into a brick wall, but at least we could see a wall. We even had our own bathroom, and soon we each could make it to the bathroom toting our IV poles.

The third day was great progress, and the fourth day we went home in Alice's new Buick (the replacement for the incinerated old Olds). Our increasing strength and comfort were good, but there were big adjustments to make. The Oldsmobile and the whole garage had gone up in the fire, and all our clothes and books. We had no place to live until the garage was rebuilt.

Alice was pretty tolerant of the mess we had made for her. Luckily she was in the insurance business and the place was well over-insured, the car too. I suspect it was insured with three or four policies at once, so she may have made a bit of profit; she usually did. Our cousin Randy the contractor was already on the job when we pulled up the drive in the Buick. The garage was gone, foundation scraped clean. Another opportunity for financial profit for the family; but after all, what are families for?

Johnny and I got our few salvaged possessions together with some help from friends at the Tavern, young Norman and old Uncle Bulgie. We moved into the glamorous Bugs Bunny Motel (no kidding about the name, really kidding about the glamor). Even though it was not very far from the Tavern, a straight shot by bus, we just couldn't do that because the buses didn't run at three in the morning.

I had the number somewhere of the high school student who had bought the Bel Air from John a few months earlier. I scavenged through pant pockets, jacket pockets, sweater pockets all to no avail, for all the pants and jackets and sweaters had burnt up in the fire. But I had memorized bridge hands from ten years earlier without difficulty, so I imagined the phone number as numbers in a bridge hand.

"Hi. This is Dan Tanner calling for Ralphie. Is he there?...Oh. Well, Missus Rogers, can you ask him to call me? John Brautigam is my partner. Ralphie bought John's Chevrolet automobile last spring. I wondered how that was working out for Ralphie...The Army? How nice for you. Having met Ralphie I think he will make a very nice soldier...Well, then, I do have another question for you, if you

have a minute, Missus Rogers...Oh, I was just thinking if that isn't what Ralph needs right now--I'm sure Ralph told you how much Mister Brautigam liked that car, and I promised him I would check for him...The insurance? Yes they charge young people a lot. I don't blame him for thinking that's too much. It usually goes down after age twenty-five...Yeah, I agree, seven years is a long time to wait for the rates to go down. So how much did he tell you to sell it for?...Seven hundred is a lot of money, more than Ralph paid for it--but come to think of it, not *much* more. I think we might be able to do that...Tell me that address once more, ma'am...Thanks. I'll see you in about an hour."

It's what in Alcoholics Anonymous we call a God-job. With no regard for your own planning or skillful manipulation, no expectation of anything in particular, no sense of entitlement, something you really need falls into your lap. It shows you someone else or something else runs the universe, not you; and it shows you better things can happen than you yourself can think up. Johnny needed to *not* have a car so that angel, that messenger from God Ralphie took it off his hands; then John needed *me* to have a car, and Poof! Ralphie sold it back for a small commission.

It took cousin Randy single-handed only three weeks to build and paint a new garage with a new apartment on top of it, a two-car garage for the Buick and the Chevrolet, and a two-man apartment with two beds, a kitchenette, and a ventilator fan for our cigarette smoke so we could see each other and even see the page of a book clearly enough to read it.

We were the first in the neighborhood to have several remarkable devices, new miracles of mid-twentieth century technology: the smoke detector, the radio-controlled electric overhead garage door opener, a remote control color television set, and a motorized La-Z-Boy recliner with velvet upholstery. We were space-age luxuriously comforted, and safe from wind, rain, fire and burglary.

During our five-day absence from the Tavern things had not gone well. Fewer people came in, and when they found that Johnny wasn't there they went right out again. Jack admitted to me that some people had even asked for me also, said they liked some of my jokes behind the bar, my friendly face and smile, my harmonious singing with Johnny's well-known raunchy standards. The regulars still came in, Jack said, just as regular as ever, as if they hadn't come for humor or music, only beer.

Johnny's repertoire was so well-known to the customers that even though for a week or more after we got back he could hardly sing at all, as soon as he hit the initial chord or melody line everyone in the bar would roar out the words. He picked up on that quick and so would start just a note, then pause, hit one more note, then pause again for just a moment, then sound another until the crowd caught on and sang it out; then Johnny would play it full with finger-gusto (still no phonation).

And back to normal, with a big grin from Jack. Again elbow to elbow, beer flowing like beer (faster than water). Summers or school vacations didn't really thin the

crowds because the place was at capacity no matter what, and without the students there was more room for more townies, and they tipped better anyhow.

Johnny Bromo wasn't my only friend at the Village Tavern, only the closest. Jack Aguilar and I were friendly because I made his life easier and he gave me a living. Besides that, all of the regulars depended on me (or I wouldn't let them stay after closing). Uncle Bulgie needed me more than anyone else because without me he could hardly stay alive (and after a while he didn't).

I knew more about the regulars and about the irregulars than anyone suspected, not because I was nosy or into blackmail, but just because I was sober when they were not. They thought everything they did or said was uproariously funny or profoundly insightful because that's what they intended it to be. It wasn't. Though they weren't entertaining to me I still appreciated them because they were my bread and butter. Anyhow, they were who Dan Tanner used to be, and if I forgot that, I could all too easily be that way again.

My celebrity champion champagne card-shark millionaire days were over, and I didn't even miss them. I had a new simple life, a quiet recuperation from the death I had brought on myself in Las Vegas. As long as I stayed humble and acted that way I was not very likely to get into bad trouble. I guess that's why I was pleased to be in the shadow of Johnny Bromo, to let him be my raucous front-man.

I only wanted to be of service--to Johnny, yes by now he was my ward as well as my friend--and to be useful for everyone in the place. "What can I get you?" "Will you like another?" "Let me get you a cup of coffee now if you're driving home. I'll make a fresh pot." I could afford sincerely to care about and serve them, regulars or strangers, college students or neighbors, even vagrants, even hookers (treated them like any other lady customer, with polished politeness).

At first when I got back to my home town I was relieved that the deluge of "karma" had subsided, those disasters I had earned but sped fast ahead of, temporarily evaded. I was exhausted then, glad to rest on a bit of dry land. I needed simple peace and quiet and simple nourishment. After the smoke-inhalation and the scare that Johnny might be dead I retired again to my quiet recuperation. The one thing I found out I didn't need was a drink. And I stopped chasing women, and I stopped letting them catch me.

Only one woman was different. I didn't want to conquer her and I didn't want to fool her. I just wanted to serve her, and I began to suspect that I just wanted to love her. I haven't yet learned to love well, but at least I know now I knew nothing of it then. Since I didn't know any better and I didn't know how to talk with a woman any other way I slipped into my old radiant grin and slick routine of sleazy lines--I didn't buy that myself, but I didn't know what else to do.

Carol was "the Goddess of the Village Tavern". She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, but I don't think she knew that. I don't think she knew she was beautiful. She was quiet and kind, and she never demanded anything, rarely even asked (except for a drink). She came in sometimes with her roommate Christine, not nearly so attractive, a little too masculine for me.

I was galvanized by Carol's beauty, opalescent, cool, warm. What absolutely confirmed my conviction that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen was the night her little daughter Diana came in looking for her, the most beautiful little girl I had ever seen, precisely the image of Carol as a child. I could see the child in Carol who was still somewhere inside, and that sleepy little girl Diana was precisely her twin.

Those next couple months went okay for me. I recovered from the smoke inhalation, so I could resume smoking cigarettes. Johnny hadn't waited to recuperate before he started smoking again. He never really stopped. He got his voice back, sang as loud and raspy as ever. Our car, our apartment, our routine all were smooth and sweet as a shot of Southern Comfort.

Once Johnny Bromo was back in the saddle Jack Aguilar was appropriately reassured. The bar was full and the receipts kept growing, but he seemed preoccupied with dreams of something else--a go-go club--and his wheels were spinning. His wife Terri was not argumentative with Jack, just conservative, calm but skeptical. She started watching the books more closely over my shoulder.

I realized I needed the Aguilars to be in harmony with each other, that the stability of the whole operation needed the two of them to thrive together, sort of like the mother and father of this ragged family. Every one of us really had a place in that family, all dependent on each other. Even the alcoholic regulars could hardly afford to give or get any trouble lest there be repercussions for the whole community. If someone drank too much someone else relatively sober would just take him home. Or her, but no one would dare take advantage of a woman's drunkenness. We were gentlemen even if we didn't drink like it.

But Jack did chase the go-go girl idea (not the go-go girls themselves because he seemed quite aware of Terri's parameters of tolerance). He and Terri leased a spot in a strip mall to put in a strip club. We continued business as usual at the Tavern. We carefully avoided any acknowledgement of our worry that the Carousel might drain business from the Village Tavern.

It was BYOB, "bring your own bottle". By the law, if you were a member of a private club you could have your private locked cubby-hole behind the bar from which the bartender could pour your drinks and charge an "uncorking fee". Of course no one brought his own unopened bottle of booze or wine from the liquor store (though there was one next door). That was too inconvenient.

There were no sales of booze outright by the drink, but a Byzantine system had been legislated to make it look to the Dries and Baptists that sale of liquor by the glass was still forbidden, and to the majority of normal people that they could buy a drink (or ten if they needed them). Tourists were clued in under the counter (so to speak) by the bar maids or by the regulars lining the bar. If the cops checked (and they didn't) any bottle was locked as required by law (with a paper clip) into an appropriately labeled bin, and everyone in the bar had a valid membership card.

Everyone had to pay five bucks for a lifetime membership to the nightclub. If a policeman was within earshot the cognoscenti knew which fictitious name to invoke for which sort of potion (“...from *Mister Daniels’ bottle, please*” meant Jack Daniels Black Label; “*My name is John Walker, Senior*” meant good scotch, “*Junior*” less well-aged; “*My lovely friend here is Mademoiselle Bubbles LaFrance*” meant champagne for the lady of course, and so it went).

There is a different culture in every drinking place despite a similarity of purpose—to let the customers get drunk and to let the owners get rich. A subtly different culture, a different ambience, different personalities, drinks different in taste to the connoisseur even if they had the same name and recipe (a Rob Roy was better at the Carousel than at Sully’s down the street, but a Manhattan was clearly better at Sully’s than at the Carousel). The Village Tavern was culturally distinct from the Carousel, a beer joint with a piano bar (until John died); the Carousel and the Tavern even had separate softball teams.

The Tavern was running smoothly. The regulars sat subdued and quiet in the afternoons still a bit hung over from the night before. They escaped from work as early as they could finagle, ran directly home to the bar (to their real home); the staff cleaned up from the night before and set up for the night to come. We at the Tavern weren’t so rattled by the idea of a go-go club as soon as it was clear it was actually making money and apparently passed as legal. Terri was as skeptical as ever but she could be reassured by numbers. I stayed at the Village Tavern, and a new manager/bar-keep ran the Carousel, the new club. So Jack’s dream was coming true, I guess.

Jack and Terri were in solid harmony, were not at the Tavern so often, all the other projects whizzing. All the staff got along with each other and usually showed up for work. And the Tavern softball team was going to win the championship. Johnny filled the place every night, then at closing I took him back to our new apartment in his old car (not as old as Alice’s Oldsmobile had been).

I was reading late, about four-thirty in the morning, sitting in our little dormer study. The world was at its darkest, as it is said to be before the dawn. I had gently laid Johnny down in his bed; he had passed out early, just a few minutes before three. I no longer was anxious about the risk of fire because I always watched John have his last cigarette, made sure it was really out before I went to sleep. Besides, we had all the space-age fire protection equipment.

I was ready to retire at the end of this next chapter of *Pantagruel*, nodding a bit. I was grasped and shaken awake by a stinging sniff of an all-too-familiar toxin—burning smoke! I jumped to the bedroom but it was difficult to get in to grab him through the billows, clouds, hot wind and flames. This time was like a nightmare of the before, I couldn’t tell the difference. But that earlier time his body had a tension to it, like a shred of resistance, a willingness to fight to live. Now I tried to drag dead weight.

I coughed, collapsed to the floor, went white and black and nowhere. Then a very tiny stillness beneath the clouds, a little pocket of air, gave me enough oxygen to become conscious of what I wanted never to know. Then out of it again but not to nothing, carrying the reality that this time John was really dead. Later I threw that reality away a thousand times, but it was fly-paper, stuck.

I didn't come conscious in the hospital until a full week later, and even then not fully awake or aware. The pain of burns is worst the first few days (unless the nerves themselves are burned away), but I was given enough morphine to relieve me of the need to scream (and to relieve the nurses of the need to scream back). But at first I couldn't scream anyhow because I was still intubated in the ICU. I could just stare and glare and holler in my head. I couldn't move my mummy hands enough even to give the doctor the finger.

Long days without nights, months out of the real world in rehab, even though my mother and my brother came and went. Johnny was dead, but I knew it because I had felt it in my hands, yet I denied it constantly, a whizzing rapidly revolving door that said No and No and No and No. Slowly it came that I could breathe, the tracheostomy tube was removed, that I could croak out one-word pronouncements roughly. And skin grafts; and therapies; and therapies; and more skin grafts.

Finally up in a chair, not without a lot of hesitation and help from my nurses and orderlies. Soon every day up for a while, then sitting at the window hours at a time, listening to Rachmaninoff on the first classical FM station KRAV.

Looking back I piece together a sad little history of the Village Tavern. A very small straw broke the big old camel's back, destabilized the massive mushrooming house of cards that had been our Tavern family. One night Jerry the salesman did indeed make heavy passes at Serena the Pitiful who wasn't so much drunk as melting down again over her abusive boss, so Jerry gave her a ride home.

Not really-drunk she was able at a red light to push her way out of his Alfa Romeo roadster, slammed the door hard behind her and stepped behind the Alfa right into a Ford sedan before the light turned green. Boy, was that guy in the Ford surprised. He grinned and greeted her with "Hello, *Babe*". She reached into her purse, pulled out the Beretta and reciprocated "Now you drive, *boy*."

He drove and she told him to keep driving or else. What else could he do? She saw it was a pretty fancy car, pulled down the visor; the visor had a mirror on the back. He came to a stop sign and started to stop. "You *drive*, boy." She saw in the mirror she was really beautiful in the dark at that angle; she saw what her driver and Jerry and her lecherous boss would be missing, a doll face. Vengeful toward all those men she brought the Beretta into her mouth, pulled the trigger.

Serena's suicide ripped the fabric of the old regulars even though she herself was not an old regular. What really tore it up was what happened a while later. Carol the Goddess calmly left Christine and Diana at home, walked to the Tavern at dusk, stepped out the back door, planted her feet back to the wall, put her little .22 up her nose and did what Serena had done.

The big atomic bomb for the Tavern, of course, had been Johnny Bromo's death not a week before Carol's. And then I was out of commission for months in the hospital, so there was no more chief bartender. The last big gathering of the regulars was at John's wake while I was still tied to the bed unaware of anything. For John's wake Jack gave away twelve kegs of beer, and a hundred pizzas, no cash register.

I missed Serena's suicide, thank goodness. I also missed Carol's going away, I didn't hear about it until I started coming out of my nervous breakdown three months later. I missed her going away but I didn't miss her suicide. It replays itself in my heart every day. I do miss Carol, always will.

After Jerry's *faux pas* with Serena the bonds and trust among the regulars were still attached but as loose as the latch and hinges on the Alfa's passenger door had been. Just one more little tippy-tap, a tiny crack in the family shell, amplified the growing anxiety. Eventually the overwhelming bulk of that fancy restaurant idea of Jack's really undermined the stability and personalness of all three of the establishments. So Jack offed himself by driving into a bridge abutment and the whole thing collapsed.

John was dead and I couldn't accept it. The more people repeated it to me and the more they expressed their condolences the less I could hear or remember what they were saying. I was in another world most of the time. Every once in a while I desperately remembered I needed to be at the Tavern, and they told me that was gone too. The garage and apartment were gone so I moved into Alice's little second bedroom in the house.

I'm sure they told me about the scandal of Serena's death, inevitable. They told me about the Goddess and I could hear it but not respond to it, nor could I remember it, like John's. My desperate hands and fingers reached for them constantly even when I was not aware of it. I could not conceive that Carol was dead, and I could remember John was dead but I could not remember John was dead.

The same with Jack's death no doubt. I'm sure some parts of me reacted to all those realities, but some other parts shoved each of those truths down and down and down. I don't remember knowing them until my brain reluctantly cleared much later, and I don't remember feeling them for a very very long time.

Soon Alice realized I needed someone with me around the clock so she could go to work her usual ten hours a day. I really needed someone with me because if my awareness had shaken itself awake I would have found a gun. I moved in with Aunt Daisy who had a spare bedroom, and she was home all day to keep an eye on me.

She tolerated me well, as she always had. I knew where I was at her house (I had halfway grown up there) so I knew where I was in the house but I didn't have any idea what had happened or what day it was or even who I was really. One thing is for sure, and I didn't know it then, not at all, that John and Serena and Carol and Jack had all died in the span of a month.

The events and growth of the next several months became clearer to me every day, and keep becoming ever more clear as I look back on them now. Aunt Daisy let me sleep as long as I needed in the morning, and I needed that. She fed me simple food, not too much but it tasted good. As I got a bit braver she even took me with her to the store to shop for groceries. Gradually I learned again to count, I learned to concentrate enough to remember what we needed to buy. I even learned to tell her how to drive home, where to turn, which direction.

I had put John's clothes away in the back of my closet. Aunt Daisy laid out my own clothes each morning before I got up, and when I got up I carefully put my own clothes away, hung them back in my closet, and I took John's clothes and put them on. I hummed John's songs. I told John's jokes. I tried not to remember that John was dead.

One morning as I walked down the hallway from my bedroom to the kitchen for my breakfast (no longer letting Daisy feed me in bed), as I strode by the oval mirror there, hanging on the wall between colonies of family photographs, I saw me and I recognized me in the mirror. I moved my mouth trying to smile, I waved my hand. I was not John. Puzzled, I slowly resumed walking, shuffled down the rest of the short hallway to the kitchen. I plopped into a chair at the table, flopped my head down between my stewed prunes and the Tulsa Daily World and I cried.

I sobbed, I gasped, I reached out for my Aunt Daisy. She stood beside me, hugged me for the longest time. I tried to say I was sorry for crying, but I just cried more, couldn't speak. I tried again and cried. She said, "I know," and I knew she knew. I sobbed some more, less volcanic. I sobbed less. I said "Thanks".

I asked Daisy if she knew Johnny was dead. She nodded. I said the Tavern needed me at the bar, could she give me a ride. She shook her head mildly. She said, "You can't go to your job. You're too sick, just starting to get well. And there is no job there, Dan, the Tavern closed." I cried a moment more; I was grieving something artificial that had no soul. But to me it had a personality.

"The people close to us are real," she said. "The family is real, your friends and fellows at the Tavern are also, but they're not at the Tavern any more. There is no Tavern. Can I call Cal for you?"

Cal came as I was sipping coffee with my toast, staring out the window. (I could not eat eggs and sausage just at that moment.)

"Your Aunt Daisy told me you remembered John had died in the fire when you were hurt, when you had to go into the hospital at the end of August."

"What day is it now?"

"November seventeenth."

"I can't remember."

"You don't have to. I'll be your memory. What do you need to know?"

"What else have I missed? Did we win the softball finals?"

"No, Dan. The Village Tavern team didn't finish the season."

"What? Why was that? We were fourteen and two..."

"The Village Tavern closed the ninth of September."

"But we were doing so well..."

"Johnny was gone, and others, and you couldn't be there. We really weren't sure you would survive what the fire had done to you."

"Did anyone else die in the fire?"

"Well, in a way they did, I'm sorry to say."

"Whaddya mean 'in a way'?"

"Dan, a couple other people you know died since Johnny died. Jack was one of them, so that was it for your Tavern."

"Jack? Jack Aguilar? You gotta be kidding. What happened?"

"I can't tell you exactly because I don't know exactly, but I do know without Johnny and you the place went downhill real fast. Maybe that's why he had to close it, and then he did just what we call 'a permanent solution for a temporary problem'."

"Cal, I heard you say 'a couple other people'. *My* people? Were they *my* people?"

"Did you know a woman named Serena?"

"Yeah. A sad little bird. Did she die?"

"Shot herself."

"Too bad, but she was so pitiful, I can't be surprised. And Jack, you said 'permanent solution'. Does that mean he committed suicide too?"

"Ran his car into the bridge abutment at Twenty-first Street, going fast."

"Anyone else, as long as you're dragging me through the cemetery?"

"Do you know a woman named Carol?"

"NO! NO! You can't say that. She has a little girl. You can't say that!"

"I'm here with you, Dan, and I won't leave, and neither will your aunt. You don't have to be alone with this. Ever since you had me take you into the church basement with the rest of us you haven't had to be alone. You have been sick and weak, but you're on your feet now. When you are ready I'll take you to a meeting with me. You are not alone, Dan."

"But Carol, Cal...I *love* Carol. Carol can't be dead. So many people dead. Carol can't be dead, can she, Cal?"

"Carol's dead, Dan, yes."

"But what happened to Carol?"

"They thought she shot herself, Dan, because she had a gun and they found her body behind the Tavern in the alley, shot in the head. They did an autopsy, Dan, and they found she had breast cancer, very far advanced. She shot herself, Dan, but probably because she was dying of cancer."

"I've lost everyone."

"No, you haven't lost everyone."

"But my best friend and the woman I love and my boss, and Bulgie, and...no one ever found my dad! No one ever found my dad!" And having got to the heart of it I cried for a long long time.

After all that sudden grief, progress was much more easy. It certainly wasn't rapid but it moved smoothly. Now I knew who I was and what I needed to be today. I didn't care at all who I had been. It was not at all the energetic aspirations of an ambitious young man with a future. It was the simplest willingness to be who I was today, to do what was before me. As my friend Jim said in the meetings, "Don't worry about doing the next right thing, just do the next thing right."

The Tavern was gone, and everything about it was gone except waning memories of Johnny Bromo's songs and jokes that still stay with some folks for fifty years and more. After a year of recovery from my psychotic depression (what might later be called post-traumatic stress disorder, or worse) which had followed nearly two years of sobriety and daily AA meetings (except when I was too sick to get to the church basement, too weak or too confused), I got a job sweeping the floors in a machine shop. I could just about handle the cognitive challenge of pushing a broom.

After another six months I was not only able to sweep but I became an assistant manager of the whole maintenance and repair department. Driving a car without getting lost was not so easy. I still didn't have the coordination to work the precision machinery in the shop and I didn't have the attention span to do calculations or composition of more than mere schedules and brief memoranda, but I was reliable at what I could do, and I was always getting better. I was always on time.

I remembered that I had done what I thought were heroic feats with jet planes, with cards, with women. But I had been burned twice (literally) and the emotional injuries were worse than the physical ones. Not a day, not an hour went by that I wasn't aware of Johnny's death, and Carol's. And I could bring up the faces of the others I had lost, every one of them.

Especially in AA meetings where I was with my alcoholic friends sober, not a day went by that I didn't remember the fellowship at the Tavern. It wasn't the drinking or the drunkenness at all (and I was not drinking then myself). It was the conversations before the slurring started. It was the mutual support, the willingness to do things for each other. It was the softball team whether we won that year or almost won. For a time, like a family we were all together at the Village Tavern.

I never completely stopped chasing girls and I never stopped smoking. I tried to respect the girls I chased. Chasing girls was increasingly a strain as I got older, but it didn't kill me. Smoking did. When I wasn't even interested in girls I knew something was wrong. I didn't have the energy to do it. I was coughing and huffing and puffing. When I coughed up blood I finally went to a doctor, but I didn't quit smoking.

When I got pain every time I coughed, and when I was coughing constantly, it didn't take long for them to put me in the hospital. When they saw how big my lung cancer was it didn't take long for them to get me into the operating room. When they took out my cancer and much of my right lung it took no time at all to wheel me into the intensive care unit.

It seemed like the same windowless unrelentingly punishing blinding light and crushing stinging flashing gashing tear-provoking gasping chest pain as I had suffered briefly twenty-five years earlier when I had been here in this nowhere place, twice. It hurt and I hated it because I was a hero who could transcend any pain but this pain transcended me. Bummer.

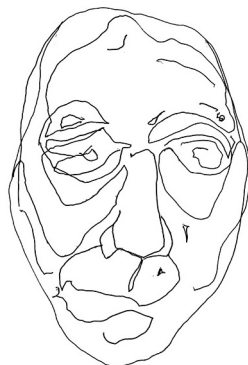
They said my incision would heal. (A chain-saw wound clear through my breast bone? I don't think so.) They said the pain would get better but it didn't. They said eventually, maybe pretty soon, my pain would go away. My pain went away when I died and left my poor body to itself to disintegrate by nature.

Now, telling you about this, I can see my life-long energy, my obstacles, my struggles, my intelligence, my strengths, my stupidities, my defects. I can see my duplicity, my manipulations, my mendacity. I can see my foolishness, but I can see my sincerity under it all. I cannot see my clarity, for I think I fell shy of clarity, still too easily confused. I feel sorry for my dishonesty, especially my lies to women, my lies to me. I'm sorry for the suffering I caused, but I sure am glad I lived. Innocent.

Joseph Raymond Bulger: a WANNABEE USERER

People say that bankers are worse than salesmen or lawyers. I don't know about that. But now that I am dead I find me telling the truth even when I thought I didn't really know the truth. People say I am self-centered and dishonest. That may be so, but I don't care any more. I don't have to please you, and you can't hurt my feelings--I don't have any.

I really do know how to act polite and socially acceptable--"act" is exactly what it is--but I don't want to be that way any more and I don't have to. I don't have to wear a tie either. I couldn't be candid or sympathetic when I was a banker or an alcoholic. Having died already I have nothing to lose. My story is my story and I don't have to tell it to you, but I will because I can. And I can lie about it all if I feel like it, but I don't have to.



I'm not very important to me. My mother is the one who was important. My father just gave me a bad name I couldn't get out from under, and bad genes that always tricked me. I never met him.

My mother was a sweet country girl, not at all naïve or unsophisticated, very intelligent. She went to high school in Sapulpa and to college in the big city of Tulsa, and she read Shakespeare. We lived with her parents when I was young but they died one after the other when I was ten. They were old. My mother and I rented an apartment in town over a bar where we lived until after the War.

I remember our little farmhouse outside of the town of Jenks, no more herds of cattle or big fields of wheat or corn like it used to be, just vegetables of all sorts and a few chickens around the little house. They used to have a herd of goats but they had sold down to only two by the time I came around. They were kind to me, especially my grandmother.

Each of my grandparents had come from Bulgaria to Chicago in the late 1880's, met at the Orthodox church. Their cousins came to Indian Territory with the land rush and my grandparents followed, homesteaded along the Arkansas River. They grew everything on their 160 acres, but by the time I lived with them they had sold down to two little acres, raised vegetables, lived in the little house my grandfather built with his own hands and a hammer.

They raised vegetables and four children (one died early). We weren't in the Panhandle where the dust storms were worst, but we had dust storms anyhow, bad enough to choke, bad enough to cover everything in the house, just not so severe to drive us out. My Uncle Ivan and my Aunt Mary both moved to California at the beginning of the dust bowl days, one after the other. My mom was the youngest and stayed with my grandparents in Oklahoma. I visited California for a week on the train once between the end of high school and my summer job.

We lived in the Depression but I didn't know we were poor because we always had something to eat from the garden. Sometimes (not very often) we'd get a kid from the goats and butcher it. We usually had some goat milk to make yogurt and we'd trade vegetables for cow's milk from our neighbors. We didn't eat much meat but we could get some meat sometimes the same way, trading vegetables. We ate chicken too, and eggs. I didn't go hungry then.

I said my grandmother was kind to me; it wasn't that my grandfather wasn't, he was just quiet to himself and didn't speak English as well as he understood it. He just hoed and planted and watered, patched up things around the place, the roof, the fence, the porch. My grandmother was my favorite cook, so of course I loved her.

My favorite foods then were yogurt soup with cucumber, shish kabob of chicken or meat, shopska salad from the garden, sausages, baklava--baklava especially. I couldn't get any of those when I went off to the army or after I was discharged, or in business college, so I started eating what everybody else ate--a lot of it if I could get it. I never came back home. Even when I was sick those last months of my life I wanted the dishes my grandmother made; even though I'm dead now I have a real taste for them.

I worked hard all my life and I never missed a meal or broke a sweat, but I didn't get anywhere. I graduated from the same high school as my mother, took classes from the same teachers. It wasn't easy for me, not the brightest bulb in the garden, and I was easily distracted by the desire to get a girl into the back seat of a car; but I didn't have a car and I didn't get a girl.

Summers I worked all day and helped with the farm until dark, then I went out to drink beer. I worked pipe yards for oil supply companies, refurbished pipe from shut-down wells (we called it tubing). The dirty bent rusty used tubing came in by rail car, a lot of it neatly stacked on a flatbed.

Very quickly I'd glance at a carload (we called one piece of tubing a joint), I'd eyeball how many wide, how many high, adjust for the taper of the whole stack to a sort of flattened point, get a sense of how many joints were there. I'd eyeball the length of the pipe too so I could say how many feet of tubing total were on that car, and on the next. I didn't add and multiply to get the bottom line, just eyeballed. For no good reason an accurate estimate was right there at the tips of my fingers or by the seat of my pants.

I graduated high school without ever having wished to make the honor roll or the varsity squad. I never made an A on my report card and I never got a letter on my jacket. But I passed every course, especially spelling (for no good reason) and mathe-

matics. I had some friends for a time, but we didn't stay in touch when we left school to go out into the real world. I'm not sure I ever made it to the real world. If you want a ticket to my unreal world I'll buy you one.

I said my father gave me a bad name and bad genes. His name was Joseph Bulger, and I am Joseph Raymond Bulger, Junior. My name is not "Bulgar" after my grandfather the Bulgarian (whose family name was really "Ibraheem", he changed to Abraham when he came from Chicago). I am not "Ray Bolger"; Bulger or Bolger is an Irish name just like that "Churkendoose" dancer. And those troublesome genes of mine are Irish too.

On top of being Bulgarian, and having a father I never met named Bulger, I have always had a big belly; I have always been bulgy so they called me that. Even in third grade I weighed as much as my mother. I always loved to eat, and all my adult life I loved to drink, especially beer. So I couldn't get away from the name "Bulgie" for those three reasons ("Bulgar", "Bulger" and "Bulgie"), and even though I struggled for more than thirty years to be "Mister Bulger the respected banker", I slipped back into my grade-school name of "Bulgie" at the end.

I was almost old enough to be in the Army, to go to Europe or the Pacific, but by the time I finished high school the War was long over. I didn't even go to Korea because I had almost finished my army stint by the time Korea started, so I lost out, I was in between. I was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, spent my glamorous military career as a clerk in the pay office, never went to exotic places, never experienced combat.

The army was different. At the enlisted men's club we really did share some companionship. We all had similar strong sentiments about our work--we hated it. We drank and complained, but especially we made fun of our supervisors and of the base commander. We could get away with saying whatever we wanted to, laughed and drank to any witty comment, or especially to any crude comment, because they couldn't hear us. They were in the officers' club, same big building but blocked off by thick walls and locked doors. What protected their privacy protected our privacy.

Beer was cheap but beer was precious; we avoided spilling any. We got no glory, we got no girls, we got no good pay, we got no comfort, we got no respect, so all we got was beer. We always got beer but we never got sober. It was all a question of values, of trade-offs; if the only thing of value we could get was beer, we'd take that, we'd take the beer. We might have traded for sex or money but no one offered to trade us for those so we settled for beer. I knew how much beer we got because we would stack the cans up against the wall, or sometimes we'd stack it in pyramids in the middle of the floor, and I could eyeball that as close as joints of tubing.

I didn't like army work but I was good at it. I could add a column of figures in my head, a column of any length because somehow without focusing on it I accumulated a subtotal and carried it somewhere in my head to the accrual of the next item. That didn't seem much different from knowing the alphabet. I could carry the battalion rolls in my head in alphabetical order, but that was not so very difficult because our

census wasn't changing rapidly like it would in combat--losing dead and wounded every day, receiving green ones. And it wasn't hard to remember because I knew every one of those guys.

When I left Kansas I went back to Oklahoma, not so much because I liked Oklahoma but it was on my way from Kansas to anywhere else in the world. I couldn't leave Kansas without going through Oklahoma unless I wanted to go through Nebraska, and I certainly didn't want to go through Nebraska.

I went back to Sapulpa and I stayed with my mother temporarily. But temporarily was the same as indefinitely, not because I meant to stay but it was convenient to the bar downstairs (no drunk driving charges if I didn't drive). I went to business school where they taught me how to do what the army had already taught me to do. The GI Bill made it easy for me to go to school; otherwise, I guess I would have gone back to the pipe-yard for the rest of my life.

I got a recommendation from business school to go to the bank in Sapulpa to apply for a job, and because the school said I was able to do the work, and because it was pretty easy for me to do, and because they didn't pay me much to be a teller, they kept me. After about a year and a half they let me be a sort of gofer-clerk in the loan department.

It was a pretty big town or a pretty small city, but the bank did a good lot of business, especially farm loans back then, and as the town grew, a *lot* of home loans. So I became a loan officer easily enough. I never wanted to be the president of the bank, too much socializing and wheeling and dealing, too much being friendly and polite.

Vice president was as far as I got, and probably farther than I really wanted to go. Come to think of it, I only made the rank of corporal in the army because I didn't really want to be in charge of anyone. I hated bosses, supervisors, commanding officers, and I didn't ever want to be a foreman anywhere I worked. I wanted to clock in and clock out, keep my evenings and weekends to myself.

The bank did so well in those post-War years that it branched out. When they opened a small associated branch in the big city they asked me to go to Tulsa, almost fifteen miles away, seemed almost as far as California. So I had to move from my safe little apartment above the bar in downtown Sapulpa to an apartment in suburban Tulsa, not right above but several blocks away from the nearest bar. I had to drive because I was not athletic enough to walk.

I hardly ever went anywhere or did anything except at whatever beer joint was my regular place for that month, whatever place hadn't eighty-sixed me for being drunk and disorderly (which is why I had to shift about every month). I got tired of being thrown out so I got quiet, sat in the corner and drank my beer. I only had one regular bar at a time because my car was on automatic pilot all the way home. My car could get confused and lost too easily if I started bar-hopping, then I was bound to get lost or in a ditch.

Since I was a regular wherever I drank they always asked me to be on the softball team. I wasn't a good enough athlete to be a serious part of the team, and I sure

couldn't be a coach, but I made a darned good manager. Needless to say, in the local beer-joint softball league we had kegs at every game, sometimes ran through two or three. No peanuts.

I got real good at loading, carrying, unloading, tapping. Picking up the empty kegs to carry back wasn't so difficult because they were lighter, but it was pretty difficult anyhow because I was more drunk. Years later when I got fired from the bank and had to bartend at the Village Tavern to drink and eat, that beer-keg talent came in handy.

I tried to pick up women in the bars the same as any of the rest of the men there, but I ended up drinking until last call anyhow. Looking back from this angle, I guess that's what I wanted to do. Like some other guys who sat there drinking beer until closing time, sometimes I would go home with a woman but not very often, and then only the dregs. The few who were left over for me were real ugly and bad drunk. No wonder I usually fell into my car and rolled it back to my apartment alone.

One time I met a woman before closing time who wasn't plug-ugly. She was plain enough in her puritanical grey dress, shy. She sat on the stool next to me because all the other stools were taken. She ordered a small beer. We said hi. I ordered another beer for her. She said no but finally took it. She said she had to go home and she left.

A few nights later she came in again, still plain in a modest beige dress, still shy. She came and sat down next to me. We said hello like we knew each other because we sort of knew each other. I suspected maybe she thought I might have been there waiting for her. Or maybe when I saw her walk in I thought maybe she had come to see if I was there.

Madeline had started at Sapulpa High three years behind me, so I never met her but we knew some of the same people, especially the teachers. She was shy and maybe she was alone but she wasn't much of a drinker. Two small draws again and she was off for home, "I have to work early tomorrow."

It was hardly a romance. Even after twenty years we didn't talk about anything personal. If we had we might have agreed that the institution of marriage serves at least one purpose, to protect us from sex. Chasing women is stressful enough, much less catching one or being caught. It was easier to sit in the bar to drink than to pretend to be hunting for sex. It made it all the more easy to be married, to leave the wife at home and to go to the bar purely to drink.

We had two children, a girl and a boy. I liked them well enough; at least I thought they were cute when they were small. Sometimes I liked to look at them when they weren't looking because from just the right angle I could see my grandmother or my mother or my grandfather. I could never see my father because I had never seen my father.

I liked them pretty much. I paid to feed them, I paid to clothe them, I paid to house them, I paid to send them to school. That's about what I could do. I know exactly what I paid because my mind works that way. I know they needed a father too. I would have been a better father to them if I had just known how to be a father.

They did okay, went to college, got jobs, got married like everybody else, stayed out of their home town. They stayed in touch with their mother even before we got divorced, so I guess I was the only reason they didn't come back home. I didn't feel real bad about that, tried not to think about it.

I had been a regular at some bar or another all my grown life. I thought I was after the social life, normal companionship, but no one really wanted to be with me, especially not women. I knew the guys in every bar, could name them off by the order of their barstools (regulars usually sit on the same stool every night, or stand at the same place at the bar).

From the day it opened I was a regular at the Village Tavern because it was the closest beer joint to the house where I lived with my wife. By then I tried not to drive at night (it hadn't paid off real well, five drunk driving arrests--five that I could remember). Toward the end I rode my bicycle, come the very end I couldn't even do that.

I spent every evening at the bar from the time the bank closed until I had to go home for dinner. If I didn't get home until ten she would feed me but she'd bitch a lot. And the food was dry and cold. So against my will I usually got home by nine.

Time came when without thinking about it I stopped eating altogether, or pretty much did. I couldn't get away from the bar so easily because I needed one more, and I needed one more, and I needed just one more.

I wasn't very hungry, and that was obviously my wife's fault because she didn't cook like my grandmother. I didn't have much appetite anyhow, thought maybe if I remembered to eat at the next mealtime it would go better than the one just past; it sounded like a good idea. And I was convinced my wife didn't even *wish* to cook like my grandmother. And I couldn't stomach it anyway.

I finally got fired from the bank for the way I smelled and my wife divorced me. My kids were grown and gone by then, but they didn't like me anyhow. So I didn't have dinner at home every night (didn't really have a home, could cook but didn't want to). The job was gone and the house was foreclosed on by my own bank, a loan I had authorized myself.

I rented a little room with an old bed, a chair and bedbugs. Slowly I half swallowed the fact that I didn't have any choices about waking up (because I couldn't sleep anyhow), no choices about cleaning up and getting dressed up because I had nothing to clean up for and my clothes were ragged, and I couldn't remember to get dressed (but I didn't have to anyhow because I slept in my clothes).

I took a job at the Village Tavern as second bartender, mostly carried ice and mopped the floors. Jack didn't pay me even minimum wage, and I didn't get any tips, but he let me have all the beer I needed. I used to win bets at the bar, especially on baseball; now I couldn't win a bet at the bar and that worried me. I couldn't pay my rent.

I didn't eat regularly but I drank more beer until I couldn't drink more beer, then I drank less beer. When my wife had left for Nebraska I stopped eating altogether except left-over frozen pizza at the bar if some customer didn't finish it. It didn't taste any good, but I didn't have much appetite anyhow, none. When my liver blew up on me my muscles melted away but my belly bulged out from all the water I retained.

My muscles wouldn't work, weak and achy all the time, my belly was so tight it hurt, it was really hard to breathe, my legs were stinging because they were so swollen, I was sick to my stomach all the time, puked hard every morning, sometimes puked blood, my shit was just black water that exploded out without warning, my skin and eyes were pale and yellow, I kept getting bruises even if I didn't fall down but I fell down a lot because I was dizzy.

I kept forgetting things, even baseball statistics. I couldn't remember anything but I couldn't remember that I couldn't remember. (Did I tell you that already?) Now that I look back on it I see I was a really wretched mess but I couldn't see it; I thought everything was normal.

Now I am dead. I can finally see myself, and I realize all this is past my comprehension. It seemed to have happened so quickly, a big-deal banker one minute, a desperate derelict the next. And now I can see all that without making any proud assumptions about how good I am and how secure I deserve to be. Now I see this was my story all the time, from the time my Irish father planted the seed.

Ronnie came looking for me because his big sister told him to; she was the only one he obeyed. I don't know why Sharon cared, her mother sure didn't. Well, at least they had a father they'd met, so what were they so crabby about?

Ronnie knew the address where his mother and I had lived even though he had never been there. I guess that day he came to that house, and the neighbors weren't interested in his questions about the fat old drunk they never liked anyhow. They probably were disappointed when Madeline left town, left me there alone; they were afraid on my own I was dangerous, so they must have been relieved when I finally disappeared.

I guess Ronnie found me when he drove around the block looking for the nearest bar. When he asked for me at the Village Tavern no one could tell him where I was because they didn't really know. Dan knew, if he could remember, but I think he was still in the hospital from smoke inhalation, the fire that nearly killed Johnny Brautigam. I hadn't called anyone at the Tavern, not even Jack. I guess no one noticed I was gone.

So only Dan knew I had moved to a room a couple blocks away but even he didn't know that I couldn't pay my rent and had to move to the alley three blocks from the Tavern. Three blocks was too far for me to walk by then, and I had sold my bicycle for three dollars. Three blocks I couldn't walk, and I couldn't figure out what direction to walk anyway, and I didn't know what time it was or what day, and I couldn't have tended bar anyhow, so rather than to be fired by Jake I just stayed in the alley.

Do you want to know how long a person can live without anything to drink? I'd tell you, but I couldn't keep track of the days. Sorry. I couldn't tell one day from the other and I couldn't tell what time of day it was much less which day.

And it wasn't because I was drunk, because I hadn't found anything to drink in ever so long. I guess "ever so long..." means a long long time, but even though it must have been days for how long it seemed, it couldn't have been a big number of days because I was too weak for that.

"Dad, is that you? No, you don't look like the guy I'm looking for, not at all."

I tried to say "Ronnie".

"Are you trying to say something? How did you get back behind this dumpster, you old broken bird? Do you know a guy named Bulger? Joseph Raymond Bulger? Bulgie?"

I tried to nod.

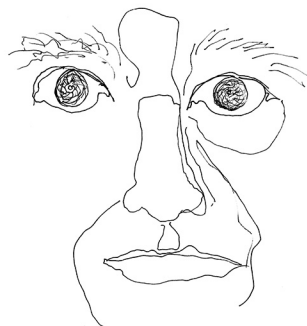
"You look terrible, sir. Do you need something to eat? There's a tavern down the street a couple blocks. I could take you. They might not let you in for the smell. I can tell them to give me something to bring outside to you. Maybe I'd better just go pick up something for you. You wait here, now. Don't go off anywhere. I'll be back. I promise. Don't go anywhere."

I guess it would be a long time waiting if I could have some idea of the time. I knew that was my own son who didn't recognize me, but I didn't know what to say and I didn't have enough energy to say it. I didn't know what I wanted. Probably for him to go away, save me the shame. But I couldn't tell him. If I had the breath I'd say "Go away."

He didn't come back.

Courtlandt Lee Davis: a STARVING ARTIST

I was born Courtlandt Lee Davis, but I doubt anyone noticed and I think I didn't miss the attention. I learned to be the fly on the wall, and even though I had occasion to sigh wistfully when I saw everyone else in the midst of the action I settled for the satisfaction of being the audience and at the same time the recorder and the engineer. I guess I was the little man behind the green curtain, the Wizard of Oz. You can call me Corky.



I watched ants crawl in the grass, I watched the other children play in school, I watched cars whoosh by on the road in front of the house, I watched my parents sit and drink, then I watched my friends sit and drink, a lot.

My parents were quite old when I came along by accident. My brothers and sister were as much as twenty years older than I was. My father Bill was an architect if and when he walked the hundred feet to a very little very cluttered office of adobe brick on that semirural road in front of the house(s). That little office blocked the view down the driveway that led back to our compound so no one knew there were five houses there.

My father studied architecture and art in Mexico in the 1930's, mostly drank even in his young days, smoked marijuana by the shoeboxful. My oldest brother Bill was an architect partner of my father, always trying to build the business, to modernize it, but Dad dragged his feet on everything, didn't want any changes any more.

I don't know where my mother came from, really--a farm I think. I don't know what she did before she quietly raised her first three children in that main house. I suppose she went to school, worked somewhere somehow before tying up with my father. Maybe she partied with him and the other art students--but somehow I doubt it.

I think the most she ever did was to feed the chickens and tend her herb garden out the back door of that kitchen. She was a quiet sweetly polite lady, not much to me but a useful appliance in my home. She could make my father do whatever she wanted.

By the time I came around I was the only child at home, the only child for many blocks around. There wasn't even a house for many blocks around, just brush. There

was no school within miles of where we lived so they drove me far into the city to school (some grownup or other, usually my brother Bill; and then he came back to work in the office).

My father didn't drive me because he wasn't awake yet, and he rarely drove. My mother couldn't drive at all; I don't think she could swim either, and I know first-hand she couldn't cook. She could sit in her rocking chair, same as my father's rocking chair but smaller to a scale of 2:3.

My parents had twin rocking chairs in the terra cotta tiled kitchen in front of the fireplace. They sat and drank wine and rocked ever-so-slowly all day in silence. My father and mother constituted an isolated pair of wrinkled life-size dolls propped in front of that fireplace in the kitchen, cozy in the winter with a fire, breezy in the summer with door and windows open.

I was probably happy until that first day of kindergarten--but I'm not sure I knew what happy was then nor thereafter, come to think of it. I played with my dog or with me myself. I didn't play with anyone else because there wasn't anyone else to play with. I played in the field, by the creek, behind the house, everywhere but on the road (for that was where my dog got hit and killed, and I cringed and howled and cried each time I saw dead squirrels flattened there).

The first day of kindergarten was very strange; the second was very strange but I remembered how the rooms looked (not the kids); from the third day it became routine, bizarre still but routine. I never learned the teachers' names, or their faces either come to think of it; I just followed instructions and stayed quiet.

That went on for many years, until I got out of high school. They stopped driving me to school long before I could drive myself; they sent me to a military academy instead so they wouldn't have to worry where I was. That lasted for a while, but to my relief they couldn't come up with the tuition or the cost of room and board, so they brought me home when I was sixteen, bought me a car for a hundred dollars and let me drive myself to high school in town.

From early in my childhood I had three or four houses of my own, all clustered about the one my parents lived in. In the old days my dad Bill used to from time to time build yet another house on the property if he hadn't recently accepted a new architectural contract to occupy his time. He built those houses by his own hand out of cinder blocks (the closest he could get to adobe bricks such as those from Mexico).

Little Corky ("Lee" by the time I went into the Army, still Corky to my friends) would move from one house to another at random overnight, not so difficult to do even for a child as the houses were only a few feet one from another and I didn't have a lot of toys to move or put away (just an architect's drawing table, a light, a box of paints and brushes and pencils and compasses, a few clothes, a mattress on the floor, a teddy bear and a model airplane my brother made for me when I was a little kid).

In high school I didn't drink at all even though most of my friends did. For no good reason they were convinced I would drink myself to death eventually. By the time

I got to college, then graduate school, we had large wild parties late into the early morning in front of my fireplace so big you could stand in it. I still didn't drink.

I was a fine arts graduate student at the University of Tulsa where all my closest friends were students including the subsequently-famous Mazeppa Pompazoidi who drew and wrote greeting cards until he made it as an actor under his own name. I call them friends, and I believe they were, but beyond intellectual and artistic hypotheses and discussion we exchanged little enough. Perhaps we exchanged little that I can remember, but we shared what we had of some few things--history, memory, opinion, sentiment, word-play.

It pained my friends to watch me burn whatever I had produced; what I sketched or painted had esthetic value to them but to me it was a pointless attachment to an imaginary past. They said I was a genius of design and space, not surprising as my father and older brother were idiosyncratic but skillful architects. I drew figures but they were diagram-like. I made two-dimensional graphics deep but I never sculpted in three dimensions (or four, or five).

One summer day I set the annual fire in the yard, but then I had to hustle madly to put it out so it wouldn't get to any of the houses. Most often I used that massive fireplace to burn my previous year's artwork, usually in August. I didn't plan it consciously, but just before I was fully awake one morning the feeling moved me to gather together papers, canvasses and a match. There were other fireplaces in my other houses but the biggest one was the best because I could stand in it until the smoke got too thick to tolerate.

Every year the clouds of black smoke from the pigments would bring the fire department, a dramatic ritual that gave me some sort of evil pleasure, a rare time I smiled and laughed aloud watching from behind the trees and thick tall brush, dancing. I even put my stop-watch in my pocket to time the interval from ignition until their arrival.

I didn't drink at all because my parents were chronic quiet domestic alcoholics, distant, satisfied enough with their own box wine and rocking chairs but unavailable to the needy lonely abandoned child I had become (unaware I had become so until I raised my own lonely child). My parents' shallow flat odor and colorless inertia disgusted me; when they called out to me to get them something I didn't hear them, didn't come, sat in my own house reading, drawing.

I did drink once, not very notable as drinking but characteristic of my own obsessive mind. There was an arbor between some of the houses of the compound, parallel to a retaining wall between the yard and the creek, where I decided I would resurrect and nurture the residual grapes that had cared for themselves seasonally for many years.

As I usually did, I designed the whole operation in precise detail, researching in many books the pruning of vines, the growing of grapes, the making of wine, sketching out the plans, tacking them to the wall of my studio, checking it off as I accomplished each task in order.

The traditional filtering of the product did not appeal to me, crude cheesecloth or such, so I contrived a system of filtering through diatomaceous earth. I call it characteristic of me, that fine detail of a finer wine filter, because that was the way I did things. I understand it more clearly from this telescopic vantage, not so clearly then when I was closer to it, seeing merely from a more microscopic point of view.

The wine I finally made from those grapes was just for my advertising partner Nathan who did more than enough drinking for the two of us. After he had drunk the first bottle one summer day at the poolside of his apartment building he asked me with some enthusiasm for another bottle, not having expected experimental wine from an Oklahoma amateur to be potable. I hesitated to respond. Eventually, staring at the ground, I told him they were all gone.

A day or two later reluctantly I told him the rest of the story, that I had drunk a bit myself but developed such a headache, vomiting and diarrhea, that in revenge I had lined up the remainder of the bottles along the retaining wall and executed them with my .22 caliber rifle. I grinned radiantly as I enacted the violent sight and sound of the exploding bottles—Pow! Foosh! Pow! Foosh! (tinkle) Pow! Foosh!

Many other examples I recall, planning details, tacking them to my studio wall, pursuing them in an orderly fashion no matter how long it took:

Even in elementary school I contrived an exactly low-tech true pin-hole camera. Camera means “chamber”, a dark chamber which lets in only selected light. I made a dark-box out of shirt cardboards, taped the seams with black electrician’s tape, all light blocked out; in one face of the box I poked a literal pin-hole with a literal pin, and covering the inside surface of the opposite face I put unexposed blueprint paper which turns blue with long exposure to faint light. I got shaded blue impressionistic sorts of images, the sort I could get with my own eyes if I scrunched them up. This was prior to the availability of lysergic acid diethylamide, at least to seven year olds.

To develop my ceramic production methods I spent over six months to re-derive a lost formula for an Egyptian turquoise glaze, eight hundred twelve separate trials. I designed a full set of ceramic service in that turquoise glaze, with precise ratios of foot to height, diameter to depth (salad plate, soup bowl, supper plate, dessert plate, cup, saucer, demi-tasse, demi-saucer, mug, beaker, large service bowl, smaller service bowl, large service platter, smaller service platter, covered cake stand, trivets large and small, coaster, ashtray); I produced specimens of each piece so my partner could show them and sell sets for much money; and he got signed orders for fourteen entire sets of ninety pieces at one thousand dollars per set. And I yawned and I produced none of them. My esthetic appetite had been satisfied for the time being.

I took maple stock that had lain drying for fifty years in one of my father’s other houses to construct a cabinet for a potter’s wheel, turned the ornate legs on my lathe (in my father’s woodworking shop in another of the houses), had motor, shaft and platform machined within specifications to the a tenth of a thousandth of an inch, all fitted precisely inside that fancy cabinet, all this so I could work in my living room

without showing my mess, without exposing my guests to a muddy piece of machinery on which to set their beer cans.

I was as concerned as all of my friends that I would be drafted into the Viet Nam War. I considered going to Canada but waffled, reluctant to change anything, reluctant to make a move. Finally, from the midst of intolerable anxiety I put the crisis to rest by resolving the issue in the direction that was inexorable: abruptly one day I went downtown and enlisted in the Army before they could draft me.

I signed up for a special program (discontinued by the Army very soon thereafter) that let OCS (officer candidate school) graduates commit to four years as lieutenants, but if they decided to quit they could be discharged after only two years as privates or corporals. These specifics in mind I very quickly decided I was not officer material (felt quite pleased about this sanding smooth of at least one rough corner of my identity).

I spent the rest of my two-year stint as a private in the tank corps as a clerk, mostly drawing pictures of army tanks for the walls of the offices of the colonels and generals. For the first time my art was really appreciated, requested repeatedly.

By the time I returned on leave from boot camp I was drinking plenty, mostly beer. It was cheap at the PX, flowed more freely than water at that drought-afflicted prairie outpost.

Back in my home town I joined my old friends again in our carousing, especially at the Village Tavern. I had been there before because that was our first client for Origins Advertising, so I had to have seen it to sketch the right advertising images for it, had to listen to Johnny Bromo while I studied his grin to caricature it in simple lines.

Before I left for boot camp the Tavern had seemed very dark, smoky, loud, odiferous, mostly a seamless elbow-to-elbow crowd drinking beer and loudly singing lewd songs. Certainly it was no place for contemplation nor even for conversation. But after the Army, the Tavern seemed a wonderful place for me to go each night, drink beer and sing lewd songs as loud as I could, not afraid someone would hear me singing the F word or even the C word (always before too embarrassing).

Nathan wrote copy for our advertising and looked for customers, and I rendered line-drawings and logos. I got real good at making one -half column-inch dominate the whole of the entertainment page (it stood out so you couldn't see anything else). "BEER BUST" fit into the outline of a pair of breasts. "BROMO'S BACK" included his shoulders to his butt-crack. When he had gotten thoroughly notorious a mere "BROMO" would do.

I rarely went anywhere on my own, but Nathan shanghaied me one day in August, 1969. I think the Tavern was long-gone by then; anyhow Origins Advertising was finished when he went to medical school and I went into the Army. We were still friends, however, and we were glad to see each other.

We drove down to Hugo, into Little Dixie the culturally Southern part of the geographically southern part of Oklahoma, for the First Annual Salt Creek Blue Grass Festival. "Culturally Southern" means racist, of course. The sign coming into town was a cliché I had seen in many Southern towns, "If your skin is dark, be out of town before the sky gets that way" (or some less euphemistic version thereof).

We hadn't really spent anything but work time and drinking/singing time together since I left for Fort Riley so our conversation in the car was thick and many-layered, full of back and forth volleys of puns. We continued it quieter but still intensely accelerated as we parked at the roadside and ambled in relaxed fashion through the field, past booths and tents where they sold hot dogs and beer, on our way to the make-shift amphitheater.

We wandered about small crowds of country music aficionados, all well-dressed for those "formal" scheduled concerts listed in the printed programs. (In the city at jazz jam-sessions or in the country at hootenannies dress was hypo-casual, never premeditated, but now at least clean jeans and some sorts of shirts, not bare-chested even though it was summer). We two also were well-groomed, especially Nathan who had even shaved his beard to attend to hospital patients as a medical student.

It was good to see and hear some famous artists, Bill Monroe, Doc Watson (and his son Merle, an angry bashful apprentice). There were quite a few other musicians worth hearing, especially a fiddling contest between a very old man and a very young little girl; they energized each other as Doc and Merle did not.

We sipped some cans of beer, but this time we had come to talk and to listen to the music, not to do any serious drinking. We didn't tax our bladders that day, only once or twice through the entire afternoon did we have to go to the men's outhouse (those days before Port-a-Potties). As seemed the custom in that culture, the men's outhouse was far separated from the women's.

After the big concert we picked up our conversation where earlier we had suspended it to listen to the music. At campsites scattered in the trees about the field little groups of musicians and their audiences perched on logs or camp stools or larger rocks or simply squatted or lay on their backs on blankets or bare grass, played and sang well-known classics or performed flashy solos--a colorful bouquet of mini-concerts across the landscape.

It was a pleasant bucolic visit with each other until a black and white car sped up the little road to where we walked, slid to a stop abruptly in a cloud of dust. Two sheriff's deputies ran up to us with guns drawn, whipped out handcuffs and bravely collared our two silent stunned surprised and passive selves.

"You're going downtown."

"What for?"

"Disturbing the peace."

"How?"

"Looking under the women's outhouse."

We hadn't even walked near the women's outhouse much less to have looked under its bottom edge to see something dark in the dark. But, I thought, we probably looked a lot like beatniks to these country vigilantes, Nathan in bell-bottom pants with facial hair (he hadn't shaved his moustache when he shaved his beard), and me wearing sandals.

You don't argue with serious gun-toting constabulary, as we had learned demonstrating in urban streets with Doctor King. It didn't take much hard thinking to consider that even though we thought ourselves innocent of just about everything we weren't going to offer any convincing arguments today.

We tried calmly to ask how come, more than just a bit concerned that Nathan had to be back to the medical school in Oklahoma City and I had to call my wife in Tulsa. We were booked into the Choctaw County jail on the far end of the two-block "downtown"; the deputy assured us that the sheriff would be back to town in the morning and he would certainly talk to us all about it. Meanwhile, no phone calls.

Nothing to read, conversationed out, we pretty much napped through to dawn the next day. We hadn't given up on our concerns to take care of things in those two big cities, but without analysing it I think we knew there wasn't a damn thing we were going to do about it; we were damn angry but damn quiet.

At dawn the deputies brought donuts, a welcome sight. They encouraged us to take two each. For a moment I thought they were quite kindly, until I watched Nathan choking as paroxysmally as I was. Stale dry donuts with no coffee to soften or wash them down was cruel and unusual punishment indeed.

The sheriff came to get us from our cell. Surprise, he was no redneck; he was an Indian. Calm, firm, quiet, he offered, "Now if you boys just leave town quietly and go back to the city I will drop your charges for you." We looked at each other, followed the sheriff to get our keys and wallets, walked to the car, and ran out of town.

Poor token redskin was badly embarrassed by his gung-ho white deputies, and probably at least a bit nervous in the shadowy specter of big city lawyers.

Our friend Ron had a complex involvement worthy of another sketch, more detailed, requiring finer lines be drawn, all about a crazy artist named Karen. Jim was our curly-headed tall bespectacled acquaintance at the University, intelligent, not bright but dull. He had been in love with Karen for years, asked her to marry him just about every week. She was so bored with him that come a time or two after the thousandth time she said yes, bored with saying no.

The night before the wedding at the Methodist church they had a big party at the sandy bottom of the river where there was a broad shallow cave right at a bend of the stream. We often had big parties there, a keg of beer or two, guitars and banjos and a big bonfire at the mouth of the cave.

Ron the best man had not yet met the bride. I stood there with a beer in each hand as I witnessed a unique, dramatic and inimitable scene, their three faces right before me flickering in the firelight. I watched Jim say, "Ron, I want you to meet Karen who is to be my wife." Ron said nothing. Karen said nothing.

But without a word, stereophonically, binocularly and harmoniously their eyes said “Boing!”

I saw it. I heard it. All three were my friends, but Ron had never met Karen, and Karen had never met Ron, and now arcing across an electric gap between moments, with appropriate bright lightning they met indeed.

They said nothing. I knew they knew Ron had promised Jim he would serve as best man, and Ron took commitments seriously. And I knew Karen knew she never took commitments seriously, but Ron didn’t know that. I guess I was the only one who was not surprised at what happened but I didn’t know how to say it, or to whom.

The wedding next day was not so very fancy, but sedate compared to the party the night before which had left me with a hangover. Most of the suits were dark, most of the dresses were bright. The beige minister was monotonous and dull, but mercifully brief.

The subdued hung-over grey crowd suppressed belches and groans. The big black sedan, back bumper draped with white crepe paper ribbons flowing to the asphalt, hummed waiting at the curb (no one then could afford to rent a limousine).

The bride and the groom came down the church steps through a shower of enough white rice to feed the starving children in China. Arm in arm they strode to the open back door of the car and the bride herself despite her full dress slid to the far side. When she got to the far side she opened that door, slid out onto the saddle of Ron’s lime-green Vespa, and off they putted too fast for the big black sedan to catch them in the city traffic.

A classic scene suitable for the movies. Eat your heart out, Benjamin Braddock.

No one would speak to Ron and Karen, not even her mother. But her mother silently let them move into the little room above the garage of their family’s house, and even though it was cold that winter, and even though they were too poor to buy groceries they survived.

Jim, of course, brought blankets and food for them. He asked what else they might need. He asked again most every day, still devoted to the woman who was now his wife but who would never be his lover, still devoted to his friend, his best man, now her best man.

They lived happily ever after.

A pertinent detail--I fell in love with Karen’s equally loony younger sister Jeannie, also an artist, with whom I had a little son. She changed her name from that simple conventional one to something like “Blue Skies”, no middle name, no last name, just Blue Skies. Loose and loony, she abandoned me and the baby to run off with a rock and roll musician who bought her her own island. I couldn’t bear to stay in touch with her.

She had made a children’s book about a little girl who discovered her shit stank, ashamed and afraid tried to keep it secret, worried constantly that she was weird,

but she was abruptly relieved when she discovered with her little button-nose other persons' shit stinks too. I have thought to myself privately that indeed Blue Skies' shit does stink.

Few knew what happened to me. I did not communicate closely or often thereafter, but our good friend Tom Duckworth lived in that city where I and my son had moved (Portland, Oregon); Tom gave me a welcome word of update on our friends every several months, and passed on brief updates on me (not much to say because I am so dull and ordinary.

I failed to divorce Blue Skies. I do not remember even having a date all those years. I worked reliably and quietly in graphic design and I dedicated myself to the orderly and responsible raising of my son. When that lad went to college I disappeared from my friends. They called, they wrote, but I gave no response.

Tom phoned them to tell them that when no one had seen me for several days my landlady had gone to my apartment to check on me. I was not dead, just in the very last incoherent phases of dying, quietly gasping my last. I had imbibed a bottle of laundry bleach. Indeed I did what everyone had long ago divined, I died drinking.

Serena Sewell: TRAGIC HEROINE

I thought I might be unhappy. People who knew me thought I was indeed unhappy. Strangers on the street took one look and *knew* I was very unhappy and they either ran from me or ran toward me depending on their own self-images, whether they thought themselves more kind or more practical. I was a barometer for codependency in others.

I'm not sure what made me so unhappy. It isn't that I was always *unhappy*, it's just that I was never even a little bit *happy*, really happy, even for a moment. I was just dull, blunt, heavy, glum, sad. I guess I knew why, and now I know I'm not the only person in the world who feels this way, who feels *nothing*, who simply does not feel.



Okay, I know everyone feels stuff all the time, technically speaking. And everyone dreams all day and night in some hidden part of the brain, but I don't have to pay attention to my dreams or feelings. What I know about me and at least a few other people is that they just don't have the feelings other people talk about. At least a few other people probably do what I always did with my feelings, ignore them, deny them, act as if my feelings didn't exist, just look right through them like they were a cloud or a sheer curtain. You can look out but no one else can look in.

My mother was like that, I think. I can't know because she never told me how she felt. If she had told me I still wouldn't know, couldn't understand, because I don't know how to read faces or voices and I don't know how people are *supposed* to feel or what makes them feel that way. I understand jokes but I never *get* them. I see a car about to crash but I get no adrenaline, no fear, not even when it is my own car and I'm in it.

Yes, I understand that my mother was abused and deprived, that she was afraid to complain because she would be hit again, or killed. I think I screamed when my mommy was beat up again and again, but that was so long ago I can't even remember whether I loved my mommy, or what love would feel like, or sadness when she died, or anything good to remember, or anything good at all.

I know that I also was abused and neglected, I know it but I don't feel it. The facts are there but not the pain that should go with them. I don't even have much feeling about not having much feeling. I do some things well, they say, but I say I just do

them. I don't know how to feel good about myself, but I'm probably lucky that I don't know how to feel bad. I don't know how to feel.

I went to school. I did what I was told to do. I didn't get into trouble so I didn't get punished at school. But I got punished at home even if I didn't do anything wrong. My mother was always quiet. My father always wore a belt. I was told that my mother went into the hospital; I believed them even if I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know what kind of hospital, the surgery kind or the crazy kind. It didn't matter; she didn't come back.

My father took me to his mother, my grandmother. He still wore a belt and he would use it. I never did anything they told me not to do, but he used his belt anyhow, sometimes just because "It has been too long since you were disciplined. It's for your own good." That was the theme of my upbringing. I knew that discipline hurt; I could feel it but I didn't cry. I didn't know how to cry.

I was so quiet in school that some of the teachers liked me for it. On the other hand, some of the teachers seemed confused by me because I didn't talk back, the happy ones seemed a little bit afraid. Most of the kids didn't talk to me and I didn't talk to them. I never had a pet. I passed most of the quizzes but I didn't write any essays, poems or stories. I could write the words I had already read but I couldn't write any words of my own. That had to be okay because that was the best I could do.

When I was in twelfth grade the counselor asked me what I wanted to do. I didn't answer. She asked again with slightly different words. I wondered what she meant. She told me to go to secretarial college. I said okay. I went to secretarial college; they tried to teach me to read and write and spell and count. I already knew those things, so when they told me to do them I did them.

They said I was a good secretary. I had come to understand what it was to be a secretary because I had gone through their secretarial college. When they told me what to do I did it. They said I was a good secretary. If I told you about that already I'll try to remember not to tell it to you again. I don't really know what they think a bad secretary is, but if I were that I guess they'd just throw me right out. Good and bad means in and out.

I lived neat. I lived small and neat. I worked as a secretary for a small company, but it was owned by two old people; when the old man died the old lady couldn't do it all by herself so she let me go. I understood. She told me I was good, not bad. She told me I was out because there was no place to be in. She told me she was out too.

I went out and got another job. I was not sad about the old lady. I thought she was good too. I didn't have any hopes for her. I didn't have any hopes for me. I know you think I'm glum. In ordinary terms I am, I am sure. I do know exactly what the facts are. I remember them quite well. I can report them to you reliably. I do not editorialize the facts. I do not disapprove of anything or wish what is not so.

I did my new job. I wouldn't really call it work; it was pretty easy. I lived not far away in my neat little apartment. I ate cereal and TV dinners. I did what I was told at work. I did crossword puzzles only at home, never when I was out at work or even on

the bus. I read the newspaper so I would know what was happening, in case someone asked. I never had anyone over. I did not communicate with my father, hadn't heard from him since I moved to my own apartment. My grandmother called about once a month. I told her I was fine. I didn't ask her how she was.

I bought my clothes from the catalogs, Sears or Montgomery-Ward. If they didn't quite fit I altered them myself, not difficult. I didn't much care to look beautiful, just neat. I was never late for work. I didn't usually go anywhere but work. I tried church once but even though I was boring myself, church was *really* boring. I didn't go back.

I preferred to be bored tacking hems and doing crossword puzzles. I knew I didn't have a "real life" like other people had but I didn't know what I wanted, and I didn't want it. I knew what I was doing, exactly what I was doing. I was doing what I was told to do.

Then something happened. I told you I got another job. The office was bigger than three people, close to two dozen if I count the janitor. I was the secretary for the property management division, filing a lot of documents of sales, taxes, leases, invoices for repairs and equipment, accounts receivable for rents, typing letters for correspondence and collections; and I kept the schedules for the agents, the maintenance team, and I made the coffee.

I was new but I was a good secretary. I could do all those things and more. I wasn't paid much but I didn't need much being just myself. There were no other women in real estate management but there were other women in the rest of the office. I didn't think much about women or men. The manager of the real estate department was Branson Pringle. I did what he said to do. He told me what to tell the rest of the department to do and I told them. They did it sometimes.

Mister Pringle seemed polite and nice. He always asked me if I understood things or if I had any questions. He gave me instructions but he wasn't bossy; he often said please and thank you. I noticed that. He did other things to try to be nice to me, not that he wasn't pretty nice to other people. One day he asked me to go to lunch with him so he could get to know me better since we worked together and he depended on me for important things.

He took me to Rosie's, a nice sandwich shop close by the office, nothing very fancy. He asked about where I was from, where I had gone to school, where I had worked before, things I guessed had something to do with work. He asked if I was married, if I had any children, if I had a boyfriend. I'm not stupid; I thought those were personal questions. But he was my boss so I just answered him.

He asked how I got the name Serena; I told him I didn't really know. He told me to call him Branson, but not in front of the other people we worked with, just alone. On the phone or for business I was to call him Mister Pringle. I'm not stupid; I knew it was a little out of the ordinary for me to call my boss by two different names, but I knew my job was to do what I was told. We walked back to work.

The next Monday he told me it was good to go to lunch with me, that we had so many documents to read and file, so many letters and accounts to review, that he needed me to tell him about a lot of office business and we could concentrate better

at lunch when the phone wasn't ringing or other employees going in and out. He told me to have my lunch with him every Wednesday. I made a mental note not to pack my lunch on Wednesdays.

I tried to be ready to report to him about accounts and schedules and calls and correspondence. I thought about it a lot because I was trying to do what I was told. We went to lunch at the same sandwich shop the next Wednesday and I gave him a report until he told me to eat my sandwich. I ate my sandwich. The next Wednesday we went to the same sandwich shop and I tried to lay out a folder for him to review, letters for him to sign. He looked at them for a moment, signed them quickly without reading them. I ate my sandwich.

He was proper and polite. Mister Pringle pulled out my chair for me when we finished. He touched my shoulder softly as I stood up. I felt that. I thought about it; it seemed ordinary and polite, pulling out someone's chair for her, touching her shoulder with a hand that was so close. We walked back to the office together as usual but as we went down the sidewalk some other people were coming the other way toward us so he walked closer to me for a few steps. And he stayed closer to me even when no one else was coming.

The next Wednesday he said we would go in his car, that he was tired of that same little sandwich shop, that he knew a place I might like. I had my folder of letters and papers for him to sign. He drove not real far from the office to a place I had seen from the bus but I had never been there. I had hardly been anywhere but my own apartment. It was a nice restaurant called the Persian Garden, with tablecloths and curtains, subdued looking because it was a bit dark.

They brought menus. I looked but I didn't know what some of those things were, so I kept looking like I was thinking a lot about it. When the waiter came over again I kept looking at the menu. Branson was patient but I knew I needed to order something. He said, "I think the lady ought to have the Waldorf salad, a cup of *consommé* and a small filet mignon; and I'll have the same but with a Porterhouse well-done."

It made it easier for me for him to order. I thanked him for that. I opened the folder in front of him. It looked like he started to push it away, but instead he quickly looked at it, signed at the right places and then closed the folder. I put it back in my big purse. We ate slowly. I started to talk about the office. He asked me how I was. "Oh, fine." He asked me how I felt. I had nothing to say to that. He asked me how I liked the salad, the soup, the steak. I said just fine.

We were there longer at the Persian Garden than at Rosie's, but it was because there was more to eat (too much for me, so I politely asked for no dessert), and it took longer for them to cook and to serve. I understood that. But we sure didn't take very long discussing business, and he was asking personal questions again, and I was answering. As we were slowly finished he politely pulled my chair out for me and politely touched my shoulder for just a moment on the way past. We went to his car and he opened the door for me. I said thank you.

It wasn't real far from that restaurant to the office, but he started talking with more and more speed and accentuation. It seemed a little strange because he was mostly talking about me, how I was a good secretary, how he couldn't do his important work without my help, how he was a little surprised that I could be so good so young and I was pretty too, how when we got back to the office he really wanted to look at those papers more carefully.

He seemed a little excited about those papers, or at least his voice got more enthusiastic as he spoke. He reached out to touch my shoulder briefly as he was emphasizing a point. I guess I was used to him touching me briefly in passing. After all, we were working together. Then he got even more emphatic and put his hand on my knee.

I didn't sleep so well that night. I thought it might be because I ate too much, or maybe I had too much coffee that day. I stopped drinking coffee. Friday was a pretty busy day, and without enough sleep I was sure tired when I got off the bus on Friday evening. I made my supper and I sat down to do my crossword puzzle. It was difficult. I couldn't concentrate. The words kept changing on the way into my head and on the way back onto the paper. Strange.

I was a little restless so I read a book until I finally fell asleep. Saturday morning I decided I'd better get some exercise, take a walk. I went to the mall. It wasn't very practical because I really didn't need to buy anything, but it seemed okay to look, and maybe there was something I could use, something very inexpensive. I walked past the big picture windows in front of the shops, glad I could look without having a sales clerk trying to help me, glad for the quiet of just walking by myself.

Absent-mindedly glancing through the windows and thinking of nothing I saw something move, a jumpy wiggly moving thing, reddish brown and longer than it was wide or tall. It didn't take a moment to look and see it was a little dachshund puppy. It looked cute. I don't know why but I went inside Henry's to see the dog more closely. Now I heard it yip, a sharp punctuation to my thoughts. Perhaps it was saying something. I had never had a little dog speak to me. I had never had a pet.

I slept better Saturday night and I was more bouncy Monday morning on the bus on the way to work. Or the bus was bouncy. Or I still had a puppy in my head. That wasn't so neat and organized, I thought, to have something on my mind. I usually just paid attention to what was right in front of me, not to something a day or three ago, not to something not on the agenda, not to something a block or a mile or a world away.

It was Monday. It wasn't Wednesday yet. I was not uncomfortable with my job. Actually, the volume of work and the level of responsibility suited me. I was not pre-occupied with the puzzling behaviors of Branson Pringle. I pretty much put that out of my mind once I had sized it up. He had paid attention to a new team member at work, had welcomed her and encouraged her with compliments. Those little touches were common from men to women, as we all know who listen to the radio.

I gave Wednesday a thought, but I ran smack-dab into my self-imposed conditioned response to thinking two days ahead--that it is dangerous to anticipate. I would continue to do as I had been told to do, to go to lunch with him, to use that time to catch him up with business in a time and place not interrupted by phone calls and other employees. There. No uncertainty, and no cause for concern. I still felt a bit uneasy, something I was not at all used to.

He looked at me from his office. He sat there doing nothing, or not much, just looked around a little bit, fiddled with some papers, but he looked at me. He even looked across at me and looked me in the eye, but mostly he just kept glancing rather than staring. I had already decided just to do what I was told, to do what a good secretary does, not to worry about two days from now, not to worry about last week. I was used to focusing on what was right in front of me.

I did my work and I didn't make mistakes, but I think I was slower that day than usual. I waited until it was really five o'clock before I picked up my stuff to go. (I really had an impulse to leave earlier but I didn't know how to justify leaving earlier, didn't know how to justify it to *me*.) As I calmly made my way past his office I said good evening and he reciprocated without elaboration. It was a clean getaway, but from what?

I went to the grocery on the way home, got instant de-caf and skim milk and a turkey TV dinner and a six-pack of cans of little Coors Banquet seven-ounce beers. I had half a can of creamed corn for dinner with a saltine cracker, and for dessert I drank one of those beers. You'd better believe I slept well that night, didn't even try to do a crossword puzzle or read a book.

Tuesday morning I didn't even have a hangover from that beer. I carefully avoided any thought about how Mister Pringle had been looking at me on Monday afternoon. I realized some girls have girlfriends to confide in, to ask about feelings when they don't know how to feel, but I never really had a girlfriend. I didn't give the slightest consideration to asking Branson what his thoughts were on all this. (I thought I didn't know him well enough to ask him about personal matters, and I really couldn't figure out how well Branson himself knew Mister Pringle.)

Mister Pringle was at a meeting downtown on that Tuesday. (I knew because I'm the one who kept his schedule.) I sat at my desk, worked through the morning just catching up on typing letters from my stenography notes. The phone rang sixteen times that morning (I know from the message slips) or I would have finished the correspondence earlier, but I couldn't mail it yet anyhow because Mister Pringle had to sign them.

About noon I turned on the hot plate and made some hot water for tea, Lipton's of course. I just put it on my desk and sipped a bit hot, then later warm, then after that cool while I opened the mail and sorted it. When my tea was finished I rinsed out my tea cup and started filing, a stack at least a foot high. Then it was about two o'clock. There were eleven more phone calls. I hadn't finished filing but Mister Pringle was supposed to be back by three, so I hurried.

At four-oh-five through the office window I saw his car pull up. I plugged in the percolator for his coffee.

"Good afternoon, Mister Pringle."

"You can call me Branson, Serena. No one else is here right now."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I will call you Branson."

"No, here comes Elizabeth," he whispered as he nodded his head toward the hallway.

"Yes, Mister Pringle, I understand."

"Did anyone call?"

"There are twenty-seven messages on your desk. If you want me to return them for you just tell me what to say to them."

"That's a good idea, Serena. You're a good secretary. If you'll stay a little late today I'll go through those with you and tell you what to say."

"Thank you, sir. There are seven letters there also for you to sign."

"Oh, it looks like we'll both be here a little late tonight."

I don't get worried or anxious. I don't get afraid or confused. Sometimes I get puzzled or distracted. When I'm not sure what to do next I get puzzled and remind myself in an orderly fashion what seems to be happening, and I decide what to do next. When too many things are happening at once I get distracted trying to keep them straight. Like when I have work to do but the phone is ringing; I get used to that. But like when I'm used to working alone (like I always do) and someone else is there.

"Thanks for helping me with all these calls, Serena."

I quickly whispered, "Mister Pringle, Elizabeth hasn't left yet."

"Oh, thank you Miss Sewell. You are certainly a good secretary. Quite a load of calls today, huh? Let me see..."

"I think none of those is pressing, Mister Pringle. I can stay a little late and go through them, attach the files or contracts that go with them so you don't have to remember all the details, and I can give them to you in the morning. And I know I can make most of these calls for you then, Mister Pringle."

"Good. Let's just go through these messages. Oh, that one's no problem...Let's see, he probably just wants to sell us some insurance...This one isn't urgent. You could check that in the morning; it's after five now and their office will be closed...But Miss Sewell, please come look at these with me. Here, pull your chair closer so you can see. Don't be bashful; come up close."

"I can see from here, Mister Pringle. My eyes are really pretty good."

"Yes, they are indeed, hazel...I just heard the door close; that must have been Elizabeth leaving, Serena. You can call me Branson."

"Yes Mister...I mean Branson."

I pulled up a little closer and Branson pulled up a little closer. His knee touched my knee. I thought for a moment to pull my knee away or not to pull my knee away. I left it where it was. I could see the messages just fine. Branson must have been a little tired; he yawned.

"You had a long conference today, didn't you, Branson. You came back to the office later than you meant to."

"Well, well. You sure look fresh and perky for the end of the afternoon. I wonder what you'd look like when you get up fresh in the morning."

"You've seen me when I first get to the office. I guess that's as early as it gets."

"We'd better finish going through these messages, Serena, unless you think we should do something else. You can pull your chair closer...or even closer, you could sit in my lap."

"I see. No, I don't think that would help me see these messages better, Mister Pringle."

"Branson."

"You're the one who needs to see these messages, Branson. I've already seen them. I'm the one who wrote them out. Don't you recognize my handwriting?"

"I recognize everything about you, Serena. Now if you really want to be a good secretary..."

"I think I am tired, Mister Pringle. Would you mind if I go home now?"

"You've missed your bus, haven't you, Serena? I'll give you a ride home."

I'm not stupid. I had never been pursued by a man before (that is, not so I would let myself be conscious of it) but I knew what he was doing and why. Women are forbidden to chase men, but they do it. I am forbidden nothing because I only do what I am told to do, not what I would have an impulse to do if I allowed myself to have impulses. I do not have impulses to chase men.

He opened the passenger door for me and I stepped into the car. He asked my address and I told him. He drove directly to my apartment. I opened my own door to step out before he could. I said "Thank you for the favor of a ride" over my shoulder as I walked briskly to the front door of the building, key in hand. He followed briskly but not frantically (as it would be too visible to the entire neighborhood). I stood at the inside of the entrance holding the door a bit open, ready to close it quickly.

"You are quite welcome for the ride, Serena. It is not difficult to drive if you have a car. Do you have a car?"

"No, Branson, I don't even have a driver's license."

"That is unusual in this part of the country where most everyone has a car, or at least most everyone has a driver's license. Would you like a car?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Do you want to learn to drive? I can teach you."

"Thank you for the favor of a ride."

"We'll go through those messages and letters in the morning, and go to lunch at noon. Okay?"

"I'll do what I am told."

"You are a good secretary, Serena. You are a very good secretary, Serena."

"Good night, Branson."

It wasn't what I wanted but I wasn't sure what I wanted. I knew what to call what he wanted, and I knew he wanted it, but I didn't know how to choose what I wanted from what was in front of me. Choices distracted me. I only wanted to do one thing at a time, one thing that was there in front of me, one stack of notes to type, one stack of documents to file, one telephone to answer if it rang.

Now it was a choosing between what I knew he wanted and what I wanted, and I did not want to choose anything, I wanted not to want anything. I knew I would do it if he told me to do it, but not if he asked me to do it. I couldn't get my head clear and I couldn't sleep, not even with a hot bath, a book, a crossword puzzle, a cup of hot Ovaltine, counting sheep. I went sleepless again most of the night, but I was quite asleep when the alarm clock rang and rang and rang and rang.

I have never been late for school or work. I was late for work. When I had missed the first bus, the one I usually take, I almost missed the second one because I didn't know exactly what time it was supposed to come and because I was distracted I didn't see it coming and it had stopped and the door was closing when I snapped into awareness and pounded on the door.

I was late but no one else seemed to notice. By the clock I was just about twenty minutes late, but in my head and heart I was terribly late because I had never been late before. Everyone else in the office was drinking coffee or sitting talking on the phones. Mister Pringle was not at his desk in his office. So I sat at my desk and quickly thought what was in front of me and what I was told to do. It was the day for me to count hours for payroll for the department, total up the time sheets, give them to Elizabeth.

Mister Pringle came in at about eleven thirty.

"Are you ready to go to lunch?"

"Yes, Mister Pringle, almost immediately. Let me get those messages from yesterday and those letters from off your desk, and I have the payroll checks for you to sign."

"Will the Garden be all right with you?"

"How about Rosie's?"

"The Persian Garden it is."

Men.

Thursday morning there was a small package on my desk. There was no name on it so I didn't know whose, who to take it to. It was a small gift-wrapped box, taller than it was wide. I organized my work for the day. The phone rang seven times before noon, five tenant complaints. Each time I finished a call, hung up the phone, I would see the little package, wonder again what I was supposed to do with it.

Then I figured it out. It wasn't likely for any of the staff in the field, which was most of them, so it must be for Mister Pringle. When he came in and sat at his desk I took the package to him with some letters to sign. I just set it on his desk with the folder of letters.

"You don't like it?"

"Huh?"

"Your little present?"

"I didn't think that was for me. I thought maybe I was supposed to deliver it to someone, but there was no name on it, so I guessed it was for you since you are the most important person here."

"Don't be silly. Of course it is for you. It was right in the middle of *your* desk, wasn't it? So open it."

I do what I am told. I opened it.

"This looks like a bottle of perfume."

"Right."

"I usually don't wear perfume."

"Try this one. I usually like it."

"Did you get this for me?"

"Of course. You don't see anyone else here, do you? Don't you know you are the most important person here right now, Serena?"

"Oh, Branson. I don't think I ever got a gift from a man."

"Open it. Put on a little bit...You smell wonderful."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Be happy. And give me those telephone messages."

At the next "meeting" at the Persian Garden Branson asked me if I liked him. I said I liked him fine. He asked if I would like to see him more often, on our own time. I said I wasn't quite used to such an idea. He asked me to try it. I always do what I am told, usually do what I am asked. He asked if I would do it this time. I said okay.

He picked me up at my apartment Friday night to go to a movie. We sat in the very back of the theater. I don't remember the movie. He was all over me trying to touch

me and to kiss me. Luckily I didn't know how I felt about it but I had opinions as to what other people might think about it. I asked him to stop. He said he couldn't. I asked him to stop. He said he couldn't stop but he would try to wait.

He said unless I really liked the movie we could leave early. I said I didn't even know what the movie was about so I couldn't especially like it. He said let's go be alone with each other. I thought quickly that I had felt something during that movie, that if that was what feeling was I might like to feel some more, that in the movie theater it might be embarrassing even in the dark but that if we were really alone together it might not be embarrassing.

He said let's go now, took my hand, and I followed him out to his car. He drove right to my apartment. We went up. When I closed the door he closed in, started kissing and feeling me even more energetically than at the theater. I let him. I wondered what it would be like to let him have his way. I am not stupid, I know what men and women do sometimes. But I know it like from a diagram rather than feeling it directly. I was feeling this directly.

Branson was taking off my clothes and I let him. Branson was taking off his clothes and I couldn't do much about it. I was curious, but more than that I had a sort of hunger. The more he kissed me the more I wanted to kiss him, to devour him. He started kissing me all over and I started kissing him all over. I felt hot and my skin tingled.

His penis was big and remarkably hard and he put it inside of me. It wasn't rough and painful as I feared but smooth and full and tingling inside, as if my skin went up inside. I had feared the first time would be difficult somehow but it was easy. It was easy and it was nice. Now I knew I could feel something with my body (not sure about whatever they call "emotional") and I sure felt a lot. I felt it because Branson was with me and all over me and in me. It had something to do with him, but I felt it in me.

Without really thinking about these things I was realizing I was holding him tight to me without meaning to. It was as if what we were doing were really natural. Then I remembered, it was exactly natural. I'm not stupid; I know about these things, I just have not felt them. I wanted to keep doing these things, I wanted to keep feeling these things, I wanted to hang on to Branson, I wanted to keep hugging him, I wanted to keep kissing him, I wanted him in me, in and out and in...

He got dressed and left without saying anything and I lay there on the sofa wondering what I would do to get back what had just walked out.

I was happy through the weekend, imagining my life with Branson Pringle. I did my laundry but while I stared at the little round window of the washer it looked more like a porthole onto the spinning kaleidoscope of my future, bright and colorful at the closest, but darker as I looked deeper. I still felt good through my entire lower abdomen and in my breasts, the whole front of me that had embraced him and taken him in.

I sat on the sofa where it had happened and started reading a book I had kept with me since junior high school, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's exciting story of girls becoming women and catching men. There was something about it that had made me keep that book on that shelf, along with a very few others (certainly *not* the Bible).

It was a strange story from the point of view of my own experience and feelings, but I took it from my shelf and read.

I'm not stupid. I knew I was fantasizing and I knew I was actively seeking to feel good, to feel happy. I was not ashamed, just cautious one moment, enthusiastic the next. I was bending some of my own rules, but I knew those rules were tentative, might need to be readjusted. To wish meant for me to get out of the present where I knew what I was doing, where I knew I could pay attention to what I was being told to do and to do it, to avoid criticism and abandonment.

I was bending my experience about feelings. As long as I did everything on the basis of what I could calculate and on the basis of what others demanded I didn't have to have feelings. I wanted everything to be good for me, as anyone would I guess, but I didn't want to have to wish or need. I'm not sure of what I had been afraid of for so long but now I was flooded with really warm gratitude for what I had felt with Branson and really warm wishes for more.

I was consciously thankful that he seemed young (older than I was, but not old), bright (at least enough to direct the real estate department), handsome (certainly not ugly, really rather handsome if you compared him with the average). My feelings, though, were in and about *me*, about the change I had earned for myself by being so careful about feelings all these years. Now I was having *some* good feelings, not a *huge* frightening flood of them but quite a lot, and no bad feelings whatsoever.

I was thankful that Branson seemed good and attractive, and I was glad that I felt good with him. I couldn't help letting my dreams go way ahead of where I was at, but I knew what was happening and I trusted me not to lose control of it all. But I wanted these good feelings to keep growing within me beyond my being able to contain them. So I wanted to be the conservative self-contained me at the same time I wanted to be carried away.

I'm not stupid. I could see all these things, and I could see the contradictions. But my feelings were what I was following. And even then I gave it a thought and realized it was not Branson himself so much that I was "in love" with, but my warm and growing self. I felt some freedom I had never really felt, and though I was not practiced at living it I was able to understand it. It was not a mystery, just that I had started a new adventure and I wanted to chase after it.

"Good morning, Miss Sewell. Do I have any messages?"

"Oh, Branson..."

"Don't you see Elizabeth at her desk? Contain yourself, Miss Sewell."

"Oh, my mistake. I understand why you don't want people to know about us. I agree. Don't worry. When they're around you will be Mister Pringle, Mister Pringle."

"I'm not worried, Miss Sewell, just polite and proper."

"That sounds a little like Jane Austen."

"Did she call too?"

"Of course not Bran... I have six messages for you from yesterday and from earlier this morning. The Capitol Bank loan officer called for you, said it was important. The painting contractor wants to know when to expect his check will clear. A woman named Lydia called, didn't leave a last name, said you know her phone number. Mister Phelan cancelled his appointment with you this afternoon, said he would call you later. Miss Briggs called twice, didn't leave a message. A woman called this morning to ask if you were in yet, but she wouldn't leave her name, said you'd know, and I didn't recognize her voice; it could have been that Lydia..."

"You are a very good secretary, Miss Sewell. Thank you. I'll be making some calls, and I'll be concentrating on some accounts, so my door will be closed."

I didn't have a chance to say anything before he smoothly and efficiently had closed his office door.

My feeling good got kicked in the gut. He didn't say anything about feeling like I had felt. Maybe he was careful because of Elizabeth, maybe he was really busy. Maybe he didn't care. But I wouldn't believe it. I'm not stupid. I thought he was busy. I thought he was worried about business. Maybe the call from the bank was worrisome. Maybe the painting contractor's check had bounced. Maybe that Lydia who kept calling was a bill collector. Maybe Mister Phelan was a prospective investor who lost interest because of the things that made the bank and the creditors and the bill collectors call. Maybe he needed me to console him.

I felt better for a minute. I tapped on Mister Pringle's door. He barked Yes. I opened the door a crack. He was sitting pensive, almost glum-looking, but as I opened the door further he put on a smile.

"Branson, are you okay? I was worried when you went right into your office, shut yourself away."

"Oh, I'm just fine. By the way, I had a good time with you the other night at the movies. We'll have to do that again some day."

"Really? Did you really enjoy that? I really really enjoyed that..."

"Right now I have to make those calls, and I have an appointment downtown at eleven thirty, so please close the door on your way out."

My feeling good hadn't even really come back when it got kicked in the gut again. I still thought he was worried by some kind of trouble, by exactly what I had imagined or something very like that, and I still was convinced I would have to find a way to comfort his worries. It was just that he thought he had to handle all these things himself. He was trying to be a real man about it, not seeing that he needed a real woman, this woman.

Now that I could see he was in trouble I was more interested in him personally. Friday night and all through the weekend I had been increasingly focused on my own feelings, on my good feelings, on my very good feelings. I was interested only in me. But even though I was not a very good girlfriend to overlook his feelings good and

bad, I forgave me now only so I could shift my attention from me to finding out about his problems and helping him with them.

I sat at my desk hoping he would have enough time to have a brief personal talk with me before he had to leave for his appointment. I was so flexible that even though no other woman would wait when he was busy, no other woman would understand all of his problems when he wouldn't explain them, no other woman would be so sympathetic with him as to know intuitively what were his worries and to use all her power to focus on those worries to dissolve them, and no other woman would give her body to him the way I had. No, no other woman.

His door opened at eleven-oh-eight and he went right out to the parking lot to his car. He waved one little part of a circle, or maybe he was just reaching toward the car door. I thought he would come back to the office for the afternoon, then we would step into his office, he would grab me and kiss me and he would tell me what was eating him up, beg me to comfort him, and even more important than that, he would ask me to think very hard and fast of a way to solve his problems.

I held to my previous conviction that it was his worries, his hurry, some disturbance from outside, not a problem between him and me. I am not stupid; I am rational. Only moderately frantic, I thought that there are several positive things I really have, that he has said I look good to him ("perky", was it?), that he said he had a good time with me, that he said we would have to do it again some day (I try to figure out which day he might mean), and it seemed he probably waved to me just now. At least he said more than once that I am a very good secretary.

Branson didn't come to the office Tuesday. He didn't call in. I did my work with my mind machinery set on automatic pilot, my jaw set to show no smile or frown or growl. If I didn't feel better as a robot at least I didn't feel so bad. I put the field reports in order for Mister Pringle in one folder with a yellow tab, the expenses to be paid in another with a red tab, another folder with a green tab for receipts of rentals. I put his telephone messages in a folder with a purple tab.

Messages. There were twenty-eight messages between Tuesday and Wednesday. I was getting to recognize Lydia's voice though she never gave a last name or a number to call back. "He knows who I am." The bank officer called most every day, "This time, ask him to call me, please," (as if I hadn't, every time). Most of the calls were from the field or the downtown office, it's true, but a few of those others were as inscrutable as Lydia's. Hortense Briggs called twice also, once to say, "Tell him I'm on for Saturday night."

I didn't sleep well. I finished reading Pride and Prejudice but I didn't remember a word of it as I sped through the pages in order. I couldn't do a crossword puzzle. I thought of listening to the radio; I hate listening to the radio, all lewd loud rock and roll music now, no Perry Como. Correction: there are religious shows and hillbilly music. I ran out of dirty laundry, seriously considered for a moment washing some clean clothes. I drank the other three of my Coors Banquet beers, all that were left after I drank two on Monday night to fall asleep.

Wednesday morning I certainly didn't feel "perky". I was on time, of course, despite the distractions (all internal). I put my machinery into gear but it kept slipping a cog and stalling. All I could think of was that I expected him to walk in on time (an hour later than me). When he was not pulling into the parking lot at nine-oh-five I began to wonder where he had been for two days. Too easy to slip into a completely different direction--that he was really sick, or hurt. Or dead!

I knew if those were so I would likely have heard. He would at least have called. Unless he was dead. Anyhow the main office would have called. Then I thought, the main office wouldn't know unless I had called to tell *them*. Now I was really worried, but I knew I must not panic. If I ran out to find him I wouldn't know where to go. Anyhow, you can't go chasing around town in a bus. I could call the hospital, even the jail.

The newspaper! Where was yesterday's newspaper? It was still on the back of the toilet down the hall in the lavatory where someone had been reading it. And today's paper, I had put it on his desk. I read through Tuesday's news entirely, quicker than Jane Austen, and I didn't miss a page or column or item. Then I started on today's paper. No front-page horrors, automobile wrecks or fires. Nothing on the police blotter report (as if he would ever show up there). I scanned the whole thing again while I was thinking I was silly and I was panicked that he might be in pain, in need of my help.

Then his car pulled past the window into his parking place at nine thirty-seven. I looked to see, to make sure he was coming in, that he wasn't bandaged up or limping. He walked through the door and up the hallway as brisk and chipper as ever. He didn't really look at me but he must have glanced because he said, "What's wrong with you?" and went into his office and closed the door. He didn't give me a chance to ask what had happened to him, that I was worried for him.

I got my folders together on my desk so I would be ready for our lunch meeting. I really was queasy, and though I don't think I had eaten much in the past four days I knew I couldn't stomach a steak or even a salad. Perhaps a cup of consommé. I might feel better if I had a small cocktail before lunch. He hadn't said anything to me by phone or in person since Friday night when he up and went away. Oh, a lot was said about it all, about how he felt, about how I felt, about when we would be together next, about anything important, just that he had had a good time. Yes, a lot was said, but it was all between my two ears.

He hadn't said anything about the bank or the check to the painting contractor. He hadn't said anything about which calls he wanted me to return for him. He hadn't said anything about anything as far as I was concerned. He hadn't said anything about who Lydia was and why she called so often. He hadn't said anything about an appointment with Miss Briggs. Saturday night! What sort of appointment could he have with a Hortense Briggs on Saturday night? He wasn't even in the office on Saturdays.

At eleven forty-five I tapped on his door, paused a moment, opened it a crack.

"I have a lot of things for us to go through at lunch today."

"Lunch? Oh, that won't be necessary. Just leave them in my in-box. I have a meeting at the bank right now."

"But some of these things look pressing."

"I'll take care of them later this afternoon, Miss Sewell."

"Yes, Mister Pringle."

I went to the powder room. I did not cry. I sniffed a bit but I did not cry. When I came back his door was still closed, and I saw his car in the parking lot. I started to smoke a cigarette, but I don't smoke. I tried not to think until he was gone because I didn't know what to do. I knew I didn't want him to walk past me at my desk on his way out because either he would say something to make his way past or he would say nothing. I didn't want to hear it.

I took the time sheets to Elizabeth's desk around the corner in the accounting department and I stood over her shoulder asking her about one detail after another, my back toward our end of the office. After a while she said she thought I knew all these things I asked about. I told her I was afraid I forgot something. She said she knew I knew all about those things. I saw his car move and I said thanks to Elizabeth and went back to my desk.

I thought. I am not stupid. I thought about what I already knew before I let myself think about what it meant. I thought about the several possibilities in order, not all jumbled together. I thought he might be busy. I thought he might be worried. I thought he might be preoccupied. I thought he might be in trouble. I thought he might be bashful. I thought he might not be hungry for lunch today. I certainly did not think he might not be hungry for me.

I thought he really might not be hungry for me. I thought that what I always thought might be the problem, that I was not pretty. The things that would be obvious to you, to anyone, were not obvious to me. If I had seen them as possibilities I would have refused to see them. Today, now that I have gotten past my blindness, I would see those as the obvious truth. I would feel bad but I would know what was happening.

Maybe I could figure it out if I made a couple of phone calls. I was his very good secretary, after all, and no one could have a problem about me checking on his appointments or his business affairs. I called the bank.

"This is Miss Sewell, Mister Pringle's secretary. I need to reach him about a matter that needs attention now. Did he come there for a meeting today? Is he there now?...Oh, okay, Maybe I got the wrong day. Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Thanks. Have a nice day."

Well, I guess that was a sort of a relief, that he hadn't really been called in there, that he wasn't in *that* kind of trouble.

I called Miss Briggs.

"Hortense Briggs? This is Miss Sewell, Mister Pringle's secretary. I wanted to be sure to make your meeting with him Saturday night easy as possible for both of

you...How can I do that? Well, if you'll tell me what you are meeting him about, which account or which property, I can be sure he has a complete file to bring with him. Even Mister Pringle can overlook a detail or a figure now and then... He can't overlook *your* figure? I don't understand..."

But she had hung up with a bang.

Lydia. I didn't have a phone number for Lydia. Why would she call pretty often, why sometimes two or three times in the same day? Why would she say he knows who she is, and why would he know her phone number? It sounds like he knows her well. Maybe he knows her well. Maybe she is a relative or a good friend. Maybe she is his sister, or his mother. If she is his mother her name is probably Pringle. If she is his sister maybe her name is Pringle, if she is unmarried. Lydia Pringle.

I looked up Pringle in the telephone book. There was no "Lydia Pringle". There was no Pringle with the initial L. But there was a "Branson Pringle". How foolish of me. I could have looked up his home phone number in the telephone book any time. But that would be nosy, and I was glad I hadn't. Maybe he lived with his mother or with his sister. I could call and find out. I hesitated for a minute or two. I did some filing like a good secretary. Then I hesitated for a minute or two. Then I called.

The line rang, and the line rang. It rang several times. I recognized the voice.

"Hello."

"This is Miss Sewell, Mister Pringle's secretary. I hate to interrupt you at home, but I have a rather important message for him. Is he there?"

"Yes, I know who you are. I recognize your voice. Just what do you want?"

"Have you seen him?"

"Not since I fed him and the kids breakfast this morning."

"Are you the cook?"

"I'm his wife."

"Oh."

Lydia his wife! And Hortense Briggs has a figure? I looked back through the carbon copy pages of the message book. Only four other suspicious callers in the last four weeks, women who had called at least three times who were not from the bank or from the downtown office or from a tenant or a contractor. Four women who had not left their whole names, or had declined to state their business, or especially those two who had asked for Mister Pringle as "Branson".

Six women, Lydia Pringle, Hortense Briggs, Sally Cullerton, Beverly LaBaine, Sylvia something (she didn't say), and one whose voice I know because she cackles or crackles every time she says "hello". I'll call her "Chickie" until I know more about her. And who else? How many others? I thought I wanted nothing more than to have him

talk to me again, and now I'm pretty sure I don't want that at all. I don't even think I would like it if he confessed or apologized. I wouldn't care even if he crawled.

It wasn't anywhere close to five o'clock or I might have run home to hide and fume and cry and take a long hot bath. It was so far from five I couldn't even make an excuse to go home early...unless I had an errand, an important errand. I did have an errand, come to think of it. I had a very important errand, and I had better be quick about it because Mister Pringle said he would be back this afternoon, and I certainly wouldn't want to miss Branson.

I hopped on the bus and I went to the mall, to the sporting goods store. I went to the back, walked up to the counter and calmly waited for the clerk. Casually I asked if he had a small automatic pistol that would fit in my purse. He showed me several. It took no more than two minutes for me to decide on a crisp new little Beretta 950, tried it in my purse to see it fit. It took a couple minutes for him to find the ammunition that would fit, not more than two more minutes for him to record my name and address and to make change for me.

I wanted to feel confident and I wanted to resolutely do what I knew was right. I took the bag with the two boxes (the pistol and the ammunition) into the ladies room in the hallway of the mall. I carefully loaded the clip with eight rounds (one for him, one for her, five for them and that left one for me). I fit it into my purse, took a deep breath, started back to the office to finish off my assignment.

But as I stepped out of the sporting goods store and out toward the street to catch my bus I had a touch of light-headedness, I felt a little weak, and I was afraid if I thought about it I might back out. I had to sit down somewhere. The Village Tavern was right there, its Coors Beer sign bright in the window. I had felt better lately when I couldn't sleep with a small can of Coors beer. In the Village Tavern it was dark but quiet. I sat on the last stool at the edge of the bar closest to the door, so I could go right to work after one small beer to relax my nerves.

"Good afternoon. What can I get you, ma'am?"

"I guess a glass of Coors beer."

"Tomato juice?"

"No, beer."

"I mean do you want a little tomato juice in your beer?"

"Do people really drink tomato juice in their beer?"

"Around here a lot of people do, especially women."

"Okay, I'll have tomato juice in my beer."

It tasted good, cold, sweet. I sipped again and thought again. I knew what he had done, but I wanted him to admit it before I blew his head off. I would worry about those women after I took care of him. I took another sip of beer. There was just a bit left in the glass so I tipped it up and drank it.

"May I please have another beer?"

"Certainly. Will you like tomato juice?"

"Yes, please."

I took a sip and started thinking again, and then I took another sip and then I really thought. "I'll bet he's been doing this to women for a long time," I thought. "I'll bet he has," I answered me." I took a gulp of beer. "I sure would like to get all those women together to fix him up." Another little sip. "Yeah we could fix him up all right; we could hang him up, and castrate the son of a bitch." A big gulp finished the little glass.

I nodded to the bartender. He nodded back. I went to thinking again. "Yeah, I'll bet those other women have all been victims just like I have been. I always feared men when I was a little girl. Not much of a surprise considering my father. But then I just stayed away from them. Scared? Not so much, just cautious; and as time went on I considered my caution to be wise. If he weren't my boss, and if he hadn't flattered me there would be no way for him to breach my defenses."

I nodded for another beer. I was solid now in my resolution to do what I should do. After all, the rest of the women in this town deserved protection, and I deserved revenge. And the little girls, the ones who hadn't even grown up yet, they wouldn't know how to take care of themselves. And how about the unborn babies? That monster! Going after little babies and young girls, unthinkable! Now, even though I didn't believe even a little bit in their religion, now I knew what hell was for, eternal hell.

"Is everything okay, ma'am? I mean are you okay? Can I get you some pizza? Or some coffee? I'll make a fresh pot."

"I don't feel like eating right now, thank you...What's your name, sir?"

"Dan Tanner, the best of bartenders. Pleased to meet you. And you are...?"

"Serena Sewell, the best of secretaries. And I don't drink coffee this late in the day. Please just bring me another beer."

I didn't need to think any more, just to drink. I knew what I thought, and I knew what I felt. I sure wasn't grateful to Branson Pringle for shaking me up so hard I learned to feel my feelings, but right now I was very angry, and I was glad to be mad. Some day I might become happy, but not today. I had another beer, to hell with the tomato juice. I knew what I was going to do, and so I had better get to it.

I looked at the clock over the bar. Four forty-seven. The office would be closing in thirteen minutes, and of course he usually left early. There was no way I could get there in time to confront him anyhow. Shit! I grabbed my beer off the bar and went to the pay phone on the wall between the men's room and the ladies. There was just a chance...I dialed the private number on his desk.

"Hello."

"Mister Pringle, I presume."

"Is that you, Serena? Where are you? You're supposed to be at work."

"I've been working, all right. I have been working very hard for you, your 'very good secretary'."

"Yes, you are a good secretary, Serena..."

"Miss Sewell to you, buster."

"Okay, Miss Sewell. I thought you were going to have some letters and messages and accounts for me when I got back from the main office."

"I have some accounting for you, you bet, you no-account philanderer."

"Serena, this is no way to talk to me. I need you to help me keep the business straight."

"Okay, you already know I'm really angry with you, and if you say you don't know why I'll tell you every detail, because I've sure been thinking about it. But for now, let me just ask you a few simple questions, and if you don't answer me straight I'll kill you. Hell, I may kill you anyhow."

"Serena, have you been drinking? You sound a little crazy."

"I'll ask the questions right now, Mister Pringle. So listen, and answer the truth without bothering to think of any lies. Here's an easy one; do you know Lydia Pringle?"

"Well, of course I do. She's my wife. I guess you know that."

"I guess I do. And how about Hortense?"

"Hortense Briggs? Yes, she's a friend of mine. You know that too, obviously."

"And Sally Cullerton, Beverly LaBaine, Sylvia..."

"Sylvia Williams."

"You know them all."

"A man has an appetite."

"Do you have trouble juggling all these victims?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, obviously. Do you think you've made me feel bad enough? You are a punishing unkind person. Please clean out your desk."

"I don't think you want me to do that."

"Do you mean you think I want to keep you as my secretary?"

"Do you mean you think I would even consider that an option?"

"Then, please clean out your desk."

"If I return to that place it will be to kill you."

"You've been a real good secretary, you know."

"And you've been a real bad son of a bitch."

"I don't know why they all leave. It's unfair."

I all but ran back to my stool at the bar for two reasons, first, I left my purse there and I didn't know the people around this place so I didn't trust them; and second and most important I needed another beer.

"A pitcher. And eighty-six the tomato juice, Dan."

"Are you okay?"

"Okay? Yeah, I guess I am more okay than I was last week. But I went from no feelings to bad feelings, real bad feelings. I just want to sit here for a while and drink beer until I feel better or pass out."

"Give me your car keys then."

"I don't have any car keys. I don't have any car."

"Okay, then when you get ready to go home I'll call you a cab."

I remember some of what happened then. Since I wasn't going to the office and since I didn't even have a job, and since I wasn't going home, at least not yet, I went to the ladies room again and peed. By seven o'clock the place got really crowded, elbow to elbow. They started playing music and singing, really loud, but that was a lot better than soft because it was loud enough to blast out the voices in my head. I guess I knew what I thought, but it would be going around and around and around and it would drive me crazy.

My purse was on the bar so I could watch it. The only problem was when I had taken out a dime to make that phone call I hadn't zipped it up, and lying on its side unzipped like that, it worked itself a little open. I learned a little later that the butt of the Beretta was showing a little bit through the open zipper. Some big Viking bouncer must have seen it and he made a lot of commotion running out the door; luckily he was running so fast and the crowd was so loud that no one heard him.

A young fellow walked by on his way to the men's room and he reached over as he passed me, took the gun right out of my purse and handed it to the bartender. I saw that but I was so dulled by the beer, and depleted of adrenaline after the excitement of my fury at the son of a bitch, and really depressed about the whole thing, the whole week, my whole life and especially having that kid grab my secret and the bartender obviously not going to serve me another beer, that I put my head down on my arms on the bar and started crying.

"I'll call that cab now. Don't worry, we'll all pay for it. What's your address, Serena?"

"I'll have another beer."

"I don't think so."

"Okay, I'll just have one more."

"No ma'am."

"Just one for the road."

"No, Serena." But he put my gun back in before he handed my purse to me.

"Hey, Uncle Bulgie, is that cab here yet?"

Then a terribly handsome man stepped up to the bar. He told Dan he'd take me home. Dan introduced him as Jerry, a regular at the bar, that they all knew him well, that I could trust him. And he added that Jerry wasn't as drunk as usual because he just came in a while ago and he had only had one or two. I knew I had had a lot more than two, and anyhow I couldn't drive when I was sober, so I agreed it was okay.

He led me to his car, a really beautiful Italian sports car. Okay, he didn't so much lead me as he carried me. With the little bit of functioning brain I had left I figured that since I couldn't stand very well, much less walk by myself, he had to touch me somewhere to keep me from falling down. He touched me some but I didn't feel it very well, and like I said, some touching was unavoidable under the circumstances.

Under very different circumstances I might have taken advantage of the opportunity, a really nice guy, a handsome well-dressed guy, a guy with a really beautiful European sports car. But without the adrenaline that had powered my afternoon I was about to pass out, and I decided to be satisfied with my relative safety and my own bed in a few minutes.

But then it was clear his touching me wasn't accidental since I was sitting in a bucket seat separate from his. The console and the gearshift were a barrier between us, but not a very solid barrier. He reached and grabbed just like a man, just like my father used to. I woke up some and pushed his hand away. When the car started to veer he let go of me and quickly saved his car, probably saved our lives. But at the next red light he had his chance, and with that "Oh, come on, Baby" look on his face and hands he started again.

I am not stupid. I grabbed the door handle, opened the door, jumped out onto the street, fell against the car, pushed myself to the next car behind, opened the door and jumped in. I looked and quickly (for a drunk person) sized up the situation. I was in about the same spot, a man in a sedan. He said "Hello *Babe!*". That was enough to confirm for me he was just another grabby man, and I was in no shape to protect myself.

But I did have protection, I remembered, my Italian sports model, the Beretta in my purse. I reached inside, pulled it out, aimed it at his head and said, "Drive, you bastard." He drove. "Turn left at that light...I didn't say to stop, drive on, or else." I looked into the mirror on the visor. I had never looked so good to me. The shadows flickering across my face as he sped on were really very becoming on me, something like a black lace veil on a hat at a funeral.

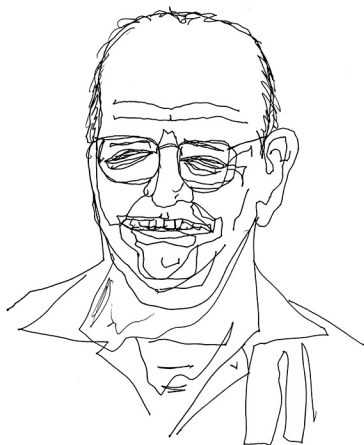
I had never looked quite so beautiful to me. I had spent my life mostly as a skinny pale sad little girl, but now I had red color even in the dark. My face radiated visible heat and when I turned to the side I could see my profile was beautiful as well, apple cheeks and a graceful nose. "Drive. Keep driving." I saw for the first time what had attracted those men. I was so beautiful even I loved me. I thought of those men and my beauty, and my mouth and its lips felt hungry, they almost writhed to get around something, to swallow it.

I brought the barrel to my mouth. I sucked it for several seconds before I squeezed the trigger.

Erik Swenson: the DEFENSIVE LINEMAN

I'm a good man. I have led a good life. I'm not exactly sure why you are asking me about myself when I see people here some of whom I vaguely recognize from long ago, but I have reason to believe none of them was as solid and upstanding as I have been. I have always chosen to be good and successful, and even though it is always hard work I have done it well. I know they don't always give trophies for living a good life, but I have earned one.

I was the oldest of four well-known athlete brothers. We led the Duluth Wildcats to many wins and several championships over fifteen years. Of the four of us only I made the big time, almost chosen in the 1968 NFL draft. My dad had played varsity quarterback for the Wildcats twenty-seven years before that. ("Whip'em Wildcats!")



Where our family was really well-known and outstanding was in the church realm. My mother and her mother and *her* mother organized the church dinners for many years at Trinity Lutheran. They all won the Saint Louis County Fair pie-baking competition at least once, my grandmother three times. Church competition for prizes at the fair was almost as bitter as football rivalries. Trinity was usually the best, but the Methodists have improved in recent years.

As to church, I myself did not lead the family in the religious arena, my brother Martin did, for he became the minister of Trinity from the time he finished divinity school until he retired just last year. A real champ, Marty the Mighty Martyr. His sermons were fire and brimstone, almost as fiery as his chili. (He was a champ at that also, best chili cook five years running at the county fair. "Tromp'em Trinity!")

I guess I've never given up being a jock, and come to think of it, neither has my wife Shelly. Well, not a jock but a cheerleader. I was the captain of my high school team, of course, and though I could play any position on any team in any sport I fit most easily into being the captain of the team and quarterback. Shelly was the lead cheerleader. She was the most beautiful girl at Duluth High. She was my steady from the junior year on.

We didn't date each other much in college because we weren't in the same town, but when I came back to Duluth and she was still here we took up hanging out to-

gether more and more. I was pretty bummed when I wasn't taken in the NFL draft, but by then I was informally engaged to Shelly and working in her father's shoe store so since there was a baby on the way (Shh! I didn't mean to say that) I took the raise and promotion he offered me and settled in.

I was still a local hero, and that helped sales at the store as well. After Maurice came Charles, and after Charles came Oliver, and that was it. I couldn't very well afford to raise a whole football team, eleven sons, too many even on a store assistant manager's salary. (Anyhow the next one mighta been a girl.) All my boys were outstanding athletes as well. Our living room was overloaded with trophies, mine and theirs.

Her father retired and he and her mother moved to Florida. They seemed a little too happy with the move away. We kept in touch with them but we didn't have to see them too often. That would be a little sad if it was just the family relations, but since he still owned the store I was glad he was away most of the time. I'm a lot more lucky than I am smart; I didn't plan it but it just happened that way. The only thing I did was to be a horse, working long and hard like I was trained to do.

Shelly's father still owned the place, and I didn't. The store was doing well at making money, but the town was growing gradually and there was a new mall planned, so over a period of time, with some consistent pressure, I twisted his arm to plunge for a new store in the mall. With that much more to manage, and me being the one to do that work (him drinking iced tea and playing bridge every day, going to the track sometimes) I became his equal partner in the business.

My boys grew up here in Duluth, were great high school stars, and then, like me, they ran off to college in other states. But they never came back. My fourteen grandchildren by eight different mothers lived in Montana, Vermont and Alabama until last year. Maurice was unemployed again, so we agreed he would move back and manage the stores.

Shelly and I are retired in Duluth (so I can take care of my poor widowed mother). The stores are still going great, a local institution, and so we are "comfortable". Since Shelly was an only child, and since her mother died a few years ago and Bob finally died of a heart attack at the bridge table drinking iced tea and smoking a cigar, we own all of the shoe business. So as far as I'm concerned that's pretty much my success story.

What? You want to know about the shadowy underside of Erik Swenson's life? Everything I said so far is true. Isn't it enough that I have been successful, domestic, pious, a loyal married man for all these years, a community leader, a stalwart of the Lutheran Church, a prominent supporter of the Republican Party, a giant of a man, a hero, a saint...and all those other things? Why are you asking nosy questions? Aren't I good enough?

You want the truth? *Which* truth? There seem to be so many questions, and so many answers. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to think. Because you can't do anything to punish me (for I am dead now), because I have nothing to lose, I

guess there's nothing I have to withhold from you. I don't so much mind telling you most anything, but I don't think I want to hear it myself.

Oh, so all of you are talking about your lives and deaths and I'm not convinced you care much about me. But like I said, I've got nothing to lose, so if you want to know what I remember about that little sliver of ignominy when I was in college, I'll give it to you. Just don't think for a minute you are so hot; I've watched a lot of people do a lot worse than I have, honestly.

I went to Tulsa University on a football scholarship. I planned to be the outstanding quarterback of the entire country, at least the Missouri Valley Conference. After the Heisman Trophy ceremony I wanted to graduate to a long and happy and lucrative career in the National Football League. As I look at it now, especially thinking what I would tell one of my boys in such a situation, it is not so realistic to believe you will be a great star. But it's nice, it gives you a goal to work toward, and it's possible it will happen.

Just don't bet the farm on it. Despite all the strength and skill I already had and all the speed and strength I added with harsh training, all the other players were just the best also. So I probably looked more middling to the coaches, not bad, just not as great as I had imagined, just middling. I didn't give up. I kept working hard through the summer at home. But when I came back in the fall they told me my scholarship was reduced by half. I was a regular on the bench in my sophomore year but not as quarterback. I was a defensive lineman. No Heisman.

My mother never gave up on me but the University did. My grades weren't so good because I spent all my time working out and going out. Then when I was demoted and deflated I started drinking a lot more beer. If I had been a real Viking like my ancestors it would have been mead. By my junior year I knew darned well I was through there. My mother wanted me to finish my degree but my heart wasn't in it.

I was still in school officially, but I was making C's and D's. By the second semester of my junior year my grades kept me off the team. I know that now, but then it seemed like it was the coach's favoritism. I was hurt and angry. I was broke because even though my folks made up for the room and board and tuition, without what the scholarship had provided I didn't have enough for beer. So I got a job in a beer joint. Good thinking.

I was big, six foot six, and I was thick, two hundred twenty-five pounds, and I was strong. It was easy for me to get a job as bouncer at the Village Tavern, three and a half bucks an hour, all the beer I could drink and all the co-eds and sorority girls I could escort home. For a while it didn't seem so bad.

But my folks were getting judgmental about my grades and I was getting increasingly pissed off about the school and the Oklahoma hicks and the unfair coaches and the stupid dean. So I didn't leave any books or clothes in the dormitory basement stored over the summer, just threw the books into the alley behind a dumpster and packed what I really wanted on my Suzuki, and I didn't ever come back to Oklahoma.

The Tavern? That wasn't a very big part of my life. As I told you, I was the oldest boy in my family, the biggest and fastest and still a well-remembered athlete of the

Wildcats, a candidate for big league football, a successful merchant and community leader in Duluth, a loyal, loving and exemplary husband, father and grandfather...

The Village Tavern? Why would you ask about that tiny sliver of my career I don't really remember? I think you're nuts. Okay, I'll try to tell you some of that, but understand, it's all the rest that's important. Well, now that you ask I'm starting to remember.

I was in college. That year things weren't going exactly as I had planned. Yes, I was passing my classes but I had lost my full scholarship, I was not the first-string quarterback, just a defensive lineman. I was bummed. I was broke. I needed a job so I went to Dan, the manager at the Tavern. I knew him from drinking beer there, everyone did.

Dan told me I was too clumsy to be a bartender. I told him I was a star athlete, very excellently coordinated. He told me he meant socially clumsy. I cocked back my arm, ready to cold-cock him. He calmly said, "I thought you wanted a favor from me." I put down my fist. He said I could be the bouncer if I promised never to speak to anyone, that I was too socially clumsy to enter a conversation, just to break up a fight.

We agreed I would be as precisely disciplined at quiet invisible security-in-reserve just the same as I had been trained to be precisely disciplined in athletic teamwork, only doing as I was told by the captain and the coach (the bartender and the manager). He told me firmly, almost like a Marine sergeant, that if I followed orders I would get good pay (three and a half dollars was a lot then), all the beer I could drink as long as I could stand up and do my job, and no hitting on girls while I was on duty.

They hit on me. Not girls all the time, especially women. If they came up to me and spoke to me I could nod and even smile, but I couldn't say anything and I couldn't touch them in the Tavern. At closing time I would meet one or two of them at the door on the way out, however, and sometimes I would have a rocking good time with a sorority, or I might be paid more after work than I had made on my shift.

It was wild. It was the opposite of what I had expected, what my parents had expected. After the spring semester was over I ran back home to Minnesota fast, still hung-over, on the highway on the new motorcycle my folks had bought me as a graduation present from high school. I planned to get my shit together and go back to the University in Tulsa, but that felt bad, like a big hangover. I planned to finish my degree at the University of Minnesota in Duluth, but no.

After I got back together with Shelly and we got engaged that summer and Bob Wiggins hired me in his shoe store, I hardly had time to be a college student. I was very happy at first, back close to my folks, newly married and not chasing girls, working where I was pretty special, assistant manager and son-in-law.

It is true I graduated from college, but it was Hibbing Community College business courses. I took one course at a time in the evenings. It took me three years but it was a good deal because even though I was a pretty dull student (to tell you the truth) it helped me not be so confused about figures, and that helps in business. Bob paid the tuition but I was the one who had to go to class. Bob gave me a raise and a promotion. Bob bought a little house for Shelly and me when Maurice was born. Maurice was Bob's middle name.

I had it made.

The Village Tavern? I left the Village Tavern. It's not important. Okay, some of what happened I forgot. No, I didn't have a poor memory, I was very smart, I just was very tired sometimes, and, yes, very drunk. Yes, I guess you'd say I blacked out sometimes. But not all the time. All college students drink and sometimes they drink a lot because they're young and strong, and I imagine everyone blacks out sometimes. That's not important.

Yes, sometimes I met older women, but only the pretty ones. Sometimes I'd go to their houses, or if they were married I'd go to a motel with them. They admired a young tall athletic fellow. I didn't get much sleep when that happened because they'd usually go all night. I was up to it, sure. If I made it to class the next morning I was usually very tired and at least a little hung over so it was hard to remember lectures or even to take notes. I had to borrow notes from sorority girls.

I even remember a time or two when two of those ladies together would take me to a motel. They were very good friends of each other, of course, so they weren't embarrassed to get naked in front of each other. They weren't even bashful to kiss each other and stuff. They certainly weren't embarrassed to kiss me and stuff. They weren't embarrassed to both kiss me together and stuff. I kissed and kissed and stuffed and stuffed all night.

Sure, they gave me money, but I didn't ask for it. It's just that they knew I was a poor college boy and they were sympathetic rich ladies. There's nothing wrong with that. Unless you read the Bible. Two ladies lying together isn't exactly legal. Or people who are not married doing it. I guess I never did confess that to a pastor; but it was too long ago to count.

You're trying to make me feel bad. You probably even want to make me admit I speeded on my motorcycle. That's what motorcycles are for. Anyhow I sold my motorcycle pretty soon after I got back to Duluth, the winter after we got married. It was a cold winter even for Minnesota. It wasn't real easy to ride a motorcycle in all that. Anyhow, I had to get a car for her to go anywhere with me during the winter, then as soon as Maurice was on the way I traded that in on a station wagon.

Sure, I went out with a lot of other females from the Village Tavern, a lot of girls from the college. I wasn't shy or stand-offish with them, but when they would get sentimental in the back seats of their cars when it was over, or sometimes in the mornings if we were at their apartments or in a motel, asking me about calling them back or would I like to go to dinner or to a college dance I felt uncomfortable and made excuses. Scared? No, I wasn't scared of getting "hog-tied"; it was just a time of youth, a time of wondering what I would be when I grew up.

Nothing else remarkable happened there. But thanks for reminding me of those pretty wild times as an athlete. I guess I was a real stud, a good football hero, a handsome young buck. But until Shelly was pregnant with Charlie I never even thought of doing anything with anyone but her. Thinking back, I think I was sort of afraid to, too

much to lose. Shelly even gave me hell, even before we got married, if I had more than two beers.

And I thought what Bob would do to me if I ever got caught. It gives me chills even now, and he's dead, and I'm dead, but he would have killed me. Worse than that, then he would have castrated me and then he would have fired me. And Shelly would have divorced me for sure. I got into a very stable and successful life, very contented, very satisfied. I didn't mess around unless I could get away with it. I was too afraid.

Too afraid? Me afraid? I hope not. But now you're asking me too many questions at once. The Village Tavern? Afraid? I sure wasn't afraid of any of the drunk *guys*, not even a whole fraternity at once. It was easy just to look tall, quiet and tough, unmovable, solid, thick, just like a wall, ready to roar forward just like a big snow plow or a bulldozer or a steam roller. One man can do that if he puts his whole mind behind it and silently stares them down as he strides firmly toward them.

But I was afraid once at the Tavern. I was never afraid of any man who came in there, but there was a little woman... She had been crying when she came in, small, pale except for her red face, especially around the nose and eyes. She was looking down at the floor, walked across to the bar, stepped up to the last barstool at the end, put her purse on the bar next to her, ordered a beer, held on to it more than drank it, slumped a little bit forward like she was about to put her face down on the bar and bawl.

My job was to stand tall against the wall out of the way of the barmaids because they were walking through the place fast carrying trays above their heads loaded with pitchers and mugs of beer. The place was always packed by that time of the night, the tables almost right up against each other. They only hired very thin barmaids because a fat one would never have squeezed through without dumping a full tray of beers all over everyone.

I slowly scanned the place from there against the wall looking over the tops of everybody's heads. As I glanced across I saw her purse was open, and as I swung my eyes across I thought her wallet might fall out to the floor. But that kind of thought is very quick and I know I thought it but I didn't pay attention to it because in a fraction of a second I was quickly cataloguing the big guys standing across the room.

When my eyes made their next pass they were ready to check the status of her wallet so I could be a hero if I picked it up off the floor and handed it to her. I imagined her crying face changing and smiling in gratitude as I gently handed it to her. She wasn't bad-looking, really kind of pretty even in that dark smoky bar.

When my eyes made their next pass I looked for the wallet but I saw the handle of a pistol! I jumped and ran for the door and out. I wasn't afraid of fighting with someone but I was terrified of bullets. Too much television when I was a kid.

As I looked over my shoulder to see what was happening I saw Norman walk by that corner of the bar on his way to the men's room. His head turned a bit toward her as he walked past. A bit toward her, but not quite toward her, a bit more down at her purse. He didn't jump and run, he just side-stepped one step, like doing the waltz,

reached smoothly into her purse, and in a single move pulled out the automatic and handed it to Dan.

I realized later he had just seen a sad lady at the bar who needed the favor of someone to relieve her of her dangerous suicide instrument. He was just assisting the bartender who in each and every bar is the counselor, protector, confessor and healer. The kid wasn't afraid, just helpful. I was afraid of the gun and he took it away as he was paying attention to the lady. He told me later it was easy for him, not heroic, because he worked with children and calmly and unafraid took weapons from them all the time so they wouldn't hurt each other.

I wasn't ashamed of what I did for a couple reasons. One was that when Norman and Dan and I talked about it later we figured out sad Serena didn't really mean to scare anyone, just to kill herself. And after all, my quick action was proper self-protection. And Norman picking it up and handing it to Dan was no heroism, just doing something natural as he was walking by anyhow, something smooth and easy and automatic. Anyhow, no one else saw what had happened. It was our own little secret. I never gave it another thought.

Leaving Oklahoma way back then, riding my motorcycle hard and fast to Minnesota, all those hours with the wind rushing past my face fast, sort of washed the memories away from me, memories not only of that moment at the bar but the whole year of disappointment and shame. It is as if a chasm spread open as Serena's purse lay open on the bar. A big sea parted to separate Oklahoma from Minnesota, my childhood from my life, my failure as a student and as a second-stringer from my great success in the shoe business.

When I retired successfully from the shoe business and successfully left it in the hands of Maurice I did what any successful man should do, I went to the golf course every week in Minnesota, every day in Florida. We spent at least three months a winter on a golf course in Florida at the little retirement bungalow Bob Wiggins left to me when he died. The warm sun helped Sherry feel better, a little relief from her arthritis. She really wasn't able to move if we stayed all winter in Minnesota, she would have had to stay indoors all the time. At least in Florida she could sun herself on the porch.

Staying at home all the time was hardly what I could do, energetic athlete as I was, so most days I drove my golf cart from the house where it had its own little garage to the first tee right beside the concession stand where we got enough beer for the first nine holes. When we finished our round of golf I sat with the guys in the clubhouse smoking cigars and having a couple or three drinks until I had to go home for dinner.

For a change of scenery every other day or so I'd ask Sherry if she needed anything from the store, that I was going to play golf at another course with the guys. She usually didn't need anything because she had the groceries delivered.

I did go to other golf courses pretty often, but sometimes I went to see another friend, my mistress Zelda. Sometimes she even played golf with me and some of the other guys and we all did the nineteenth hole at their clubhouses. Or sometimes Zelda and I just skipped the golf and did the nineteenth hole at her apartment. It

didn't cost me an awful lot to rent that apartment for her. And the same delivery boy brought her groceries too.

One afternoon on pretty hot day I forgot to wear my golf cap. After only the tenth hole I felt a little hot and dizzy, and I felt short of breath so I even put down my cigar, and I felt a little cold, and I felt a little sick to my stomach (should have had some breakfast), and I realized my stomach ache really reached up in front of my chest, and it was really up to my throat, and more than aching it was wrenching, and pounding. And I fell over on my face on the tenth green and I stopped breathing and moving, and my face was up close and personal right into the closely trimmed bentgrass, and I died.

Carol Lynn Carey: the GODDESS

She scrawls from beyond her dying:

Why did I let you make love to me?
Because I love you
and I wanted to act that way
before I died.

Why did I die?
Because I loved life
but I could not live it forever
or even so long as I wished,
or even so long
as to see my child love.
I wanted to act alive
before I died.

My whole life
I could not act freely
because the penalties
for doing that
were just too rough.
I had made love,
made my child,
but I had not loved a man,
had not lived it
for a moment,
so I loved you
hoping *you* could love you.

Why did I die?
Not because life is rough
for I was experienced,
expert at surviving that.
I died because disease was killing me
so I killed myself first.

I punished me
before that tyrant could.
I killed me
so my dreams could live.

I killed me
for the sake of my daughter,
so that little girl could bury me

before she had to
 nurse me like a baby.
 I killed me
 to preserve the woman
 whom she must become.
 I made love to you
 so my hope could outlive me.
 The exploding weapon
 floated into my hand
 and I used it
 to liberate my life
 by ending it.
 It didn't hurt;
 it was a comfort,
 as were you.

At the Village Tavern she was referred to as "the Goddess" but not to her face. Her face was beautiful in all the conventional ways, and beautiful uniquely in itself. She was strikingly beautiful. Her body was beautiful as well. And she was sweet, kind to all, usually quietly mellow, tipsy but never giddy. She sat and sipped, was openly present but did not participate much, not at all haughty but aloof.

She herself would not assent that she was beautiful for she didn't believe she was beautiful. To herself she was plain, just ordinary, a mouse perhaps or a fly on the wall. She treated the inside as if it were empty, but she was open to the world around her—spring warmth, autumn color, a rare brilliant bright white crystal day in winter when even the usual muddy brown glistened under its smooth snow gown and the trees and roofs reflected back that brilliant magic. The world around her was beautiful.

She was polite and pleasant, and though she was deep as any of us in our hearts she was quiet, almost silent. I don't know what she really thought or felt. I don't know what she said, if anything, to her silent self. So I will turn my back now and let her speak it to you.

I am but a few things, and I know it. Mostly I am hopeful and afraid. I know things are different now that I am dead but I don't *feel* the freedom to be honest even though I understand it. I learned to protect myself early, but I wasn't very good at it.

Saint Louis is old to me, a city as ancient as Paris. The tenements we lived in were barely upright, the core still standing only because of solid nineteenth century workmanship, but each detail was old and sagging.



We had a very rickety balcony when I was six but I wasn't allowed to play on it or even tiptoe out to see the big world outside. My world was limited to the couple rooms we had to live in, a bedroom for my mother and her boyfriend of the night or week, a "living room" where I slept on the old smelly sofa, and a little kitchen.

It was worst then when the War was over and she lost her job. At least during the War she had to get up every day and go to the office downtown, so she couldn't dance and drink until dawn. Since she was sober a lot those days she made food for me, and she even helped me with my schoolwork sometimes.

The fifth floor bathroom was at the end of the long hall, but I peed my pants or bed (the sofa) rather than to go *there* by myself. If I tried to go to the bathroom boys or men would follow me. When I had to take a shower because my teacher at school told me I had to, I had to wait until my mother was awake and not too hung over.

The boys were pests, but I took it very seriously because I might have to see them on my way home from school. They always wanted to see me naked and used a lot of threats and fists to make me show them.

But the men were completely beyond my imagination, horrid. They were big and smelly and hairy, made me touch their things and tried to get me to lick them. They took them out and jabbed them at me, tried to get them between my legs.

I crossed my legs and screamed as loud as I could. I didn't do it because I was smart, thinking of ways to protect myself, I didn't think at all. I screamed but not because the priest had told me not to be naked with boys (actually, I refused to go to mass because a priest had done all that to me in the confessional).

I didn't learn to protect myself, just screamed and curled into a ball to live long enough to take a next breath. I knew they would kill me, and despite my sad life I didn't want to die. I learned to be on the lookout for them, to stay away from the bathroom, to cross my legs, to scream, to run.

We lived on the south side of the city. The negroes lived on the north side. I didn't have colored friends until I worked downtown when I was grown, sixteen. I didn't even think of having a colored boyfriend--but I dreamed of it.

We hadn't always been poor white trash (as we would probably say today). My grandfather came to Saint Louis from a Kansas farm in 1904 to work at the Fair, a strong young laborer. I always liked him. I always loved him; he was kind and old and wise, and strong. But toward the end he mostly just sat on his porch and thought about his girlfriend, my mother's mother.

He was a very brave soldier in France during the First World War. I was in awe of his army uniform, and his medals. I really liked his overalls too, the blue-striped kind with many big pockets and loops for his tools.

When I was born we lived with him, then came the next War and my mother worked in a government office. We moved into a small apartment with another woman and her two children. I wanted to keep living with my grandfather, but I had to go with my mother. That was when he traveled with the army, before he got hurt.

He was too old to really be in the army then, but he had a job going around with a construction crew building army barracks. He travelled a lot. I got to see him if he came back to Saint Louis for a week or even a couple days. He didn't stay at our little place because there was no room, but he had a friend he worked with whose wife and kids lived in a house and he stayed there. But he never stayed for long, then off again to build for the army.

He had made good money working as a machinist in the factories by the rivers (Mississippi or Missouri, depending on which job he had), but when he got older he got weaker and slower and a carload of scrap metal crushed his leg when I was still pretty little, in the sixth grade. He didn't do physical work after that, he couldn't, but he did travel sometimes as a supervisor.

I had to change schools pretty often because we had to move pretty often, especially after the War was finally over and my mother lost her government job. Sometimes I was lucky and didn't have to change schools because we didn't move far and I could keep going to the same school.

Most of the time it was a "new" little old apartment, but we didn't live with other kids after the War, just my mother and me, and sometimes, or usually, men in the middle of the night, or a boyfriend or another "uncle". Anyhow, I didn't have very many friends.

I didn't miss school if I could help it because it let me go somewhere out of the apartment, and there was something to eat in the cafeteria even if I hardly had any money. I usually worked as a "cafeteria girl", wiped trash and slop from trays and dishes into the garbage, put them in the big steamy dishwasher.

I didn't hang around with other kids, no close friends. I was ashamed to invite them to our place, and they never invited me to theirs. So I didn't play much, just did my homework carefully and neatly to please the teachers. I drew pictures of princesses and ponies and listened to the radio when I was allowed to or when I was alone and sneaky and dared to (not when other people were there). I never had a pet but I loved puppies. When all the other girls were gossiping about boyfriends they said they had or wanted to have, I dreamed of princesses and ponies.

I read Nancy Drew mysteries then, and classics assigned in school (Black Beauty, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Little Women). I took "home ec" to learn to cook and sew, to feed babies and to change them. I thought I would never have a baby because I never had a father, so my baby couldn't have a father. Anyhow I wasn't very beautiful so I couldn't even have a date with a boy.

Of course I came to love Shakespeare, the plays (especially "Romeo and Juliet"), not so much the histories as the soap operas. And when I discovered the Sonnets my private life was complete. Oh sure I read other stuff, but Shakespeare was the most reliable, the gentlest even when he was having people killed, gentle because he seemed to know them inside out, cared enough about them to open them up and look inside--intimacy between me as a reader and the heroine, or even between me and the villain.

King Lear awed me. I never knew a king could cry. I never had a father of my own (no need to discuss that, but I will if you wish). I certainly didn't know a father could love *and* hate a daughter. I had never thought of a father as someone who could feel emotions. A grandfather was different, at least mine was.

My own emotions came awake in King Lear's storm, and I guess every reader's fears boiled up when they came to read that part. I hadn't thought a fool could be so wise and kind. Making bad jokes is something my friends did later at the bar, and they were my friends even if they were unreliable, wise and kind sometimes, especially when I needed that the most.

My teachers were pretty sweet to me most of the time, but they started asking me if I had eaten breakfast, so I said yes (of course) whether I had or not. One time a teacher asked me if I had another dress or if I just liked that too-little one the best. (I didn't tell her I only had this one.) I was ready to describe my whole really beautiful princess's wardrobe from crown to slippers if she asked again.

My mother got really angry when I told her what they asked me, and she got furiously angry the next day when someone came by asking more questions while I was at school. (I don't know who it was, maybe some big boss person, because my mother wouldn't be afraid of just an ordinary person, not even a grownup.) She didn't hit me but she screamed.

The next day before school was over a lady told me I was going to get some real treats, a new dress and good food and my own bed. That sounded good, so I'm sure I smiled and my eyes opened wide. Then she said she would take me to a new place to live but my mom couldn't come with me yet, maybe later.

I stayed at a big dormitory at first. It was good to be with other kids, not so lonely, but kids kept changing, moving in and out. No one teased me or beat me up or tried to see me naked, but maybe that's because there were always grownups around and because every day kids left and every day new kids came.

My social worker at first was pretty nice, but I was still afraid of her. She'd tell me she had seen my mom, but she didn't let my mom see me. Finally my mom and I got to visit and she wasn't drunk or even bad hung over. She brought me a ragged old doll and kissed me, and she cried for a minute. But after another minute she started blaming me for moving out on her, said I had conned the social worker out of all those favors.

After that the social worker used to say my mother was busy with a new job, or that she wasn't feeling very well that day, or other lies I was afraid to argue with. I got to visit with her at the social worker's office once for almost half an hour. Mom tried to be nice; at least she didn't yell, but she really was hung over, I could tell by the smell.

My Grandpa had been working in Indiana for a long time, but when he got back to Saint Louis and didn't find me with Mom he got quietly worried and went right to work to find me. I guess Mom had to tell him what happened and give him the social worker's phone number, and I guess he called.

And real quick even before school was over that day I was taken out of class and driven to her office by a policeman. I was afraid I was in trouble; or then I was more afraid when I thought they might be sending me back to my mother. But I missed her too. I was afraid she was arrested again. I was worried because I always tried to take care of her, and I didn't know how to take care of her this time.

The social worker said, "There's someone who wants to see you." I was afraid it was that big person in dark clothing, the boss I had never seen, the one I was afraid of. I sat on a chair in the hallway, quiet, real still, pretending to read a book.

I felt like I had to pee, but I had to hold it and not move. I thought everything in my whole life was scary, that big people always told me what to do and I had to do them or else. I got no choices, only wished to run away.

I almost did pee when I screamed, "Grandpa!" We hugged and hugged. He said, "Let's go get ice cream." First I peed in the Ladies room then we went to get ice cream. It tasted wonderful. Wonderful. It was just what I wished, and I hadn't even wished it out loud.

My Grandpa told me what I really needed to know, that my Mom really couldn't take care of me well enough--and I thought I knew why, because she had to work too hard and was tired and couldn't make enough money, and besides that I was bad sometimes.

Really, as I told me later when I could face the truth, she was drunk or hung over and irritable as hell, and she used all the money for booze and cigarettes, and she didn't want to cook because she wasn't hungry anyhow even if I was.

He told me I wouldn't have to be adopted away as long as he was alive (and I got scared that he would die), but he had to work and it was always out of town. He said my social worker was nice and that he would send her some money to buy me a dress and a new doll (not a ragged one) and he would come back to Saint Louis whenever he could, just to see me.

When we got back to the social worker's office my Grandpa asked her all the questions I couldn't think of, especially about what would happen. She said out loud so even I could understand it that unless my mom got sober and got a job she couldn't take care of me, that the Department would keep me in a foster home and watch out for me, but sometimes I might have to change foster homes or change schools.

I lived in nine foster homes the next six years. I never again got a new dress, but I did get some hand-me-downs when I outgrew the old ones. I got three meals a day of some sort. I got my own bed wherever they put me, but not my own room. I had to change schools every time I changed families.

Miss Sandra was really nice to me. She never told me I was stupid or worthless. I only saw her about once a month, but I hugged her when I saw her. She was right, I did have to change foster homes, and schools. I went to three elementary schools, four junior highs and three high schools.

I changed foster homes the first time because I wet my bed. I tried not to, but I was so used to staying away from the bathroom in our apartment building because of

the men and boys, that I kept being afraid to go to the bathroom at my foster home even though it was just down the hall. Besides, if it was late at night I was afraid of making noise to wake someone, especially if I flushed the toilet. And if I didn't flush the toilet...

I changed schools again because my foster family moved to Kansas; they weren't too bad and I started to like them even if they weren't my own mom sober; and I wonder if they started to like me. I had never had a sister before and then I had two of them. Those girls got all the good stuff, like the bigger pieces of chocolate cake, but I worked hard at the first half of fourth grade and got almost all A's, so that was good stuff too.

Another time I was moved to my fifth foster home in another part of town, so I couldn't see my Mom. By then I didn't really much want to see her, but I knew I missed my Grandpa. I tried to feel at home in any house they sent me to, but I kept some clean clothes in a brown paper bag under my bed, and a toothbrush. I was ready to protect myself from anyone. And in school I got a little less afraid of the teachers and a little more happy to be reading or drawing.

The next family had four boys and no girls, and they were older than I was. Miss Sandra was cautious and told me so. She said, "I know you are in the bedroom with the littlest guy, and I think you're safe with him because he is only four. But call me on the phone if the eight year old or the ten year old or the twelve year old do something they should not do--and you know what that is, don't you?"

They did, and I did. But it took me a pretty long time to decide I really wanted to call her. I thought maybe I trusted Miss Sandra, and that was the time I found out that I really did trust her. And I memorized her office number forever--314-555-9908. See? I still know it after thirty years. She got me transferred quick after I finally called her.

I guess I wasn't as afraid any more because I didn't wet the bed any more, and usually I slept okay. One place when I was in junior high school the man told me to sleep in his bedroom when his wife was at work. That one was easy to see through, and I called Miss Sandra quick.

The other foster homes were mostly not so bad, but they weren't home. Come to think of it, my mom's apartment wasn't home either. By the time I got into high school the boys and men chased me harder because I had breasts, but I was ready to slug them, ready to scream bloody murder and ready to call Miss Sandra, or dial zero for the operator. I had a switch-blade in my purse. When I was grown I got a little gun.

When I was a little girl I didn't get it. She had a job until after the War; then we moved from one little apartment to another and all I knew about her was not to make her angry (but she got angry anyhow). If she said "I want" and she didn't get whatever it was, she exploded, struck out, especially at me because I was the closest.

If she said "I don't want" the rage was the same, so I tried to steer down the neutral middle as best I could, very difficult to accomplish for a little girl. When she was "sick" I learned to take care of myself, feed myself and do my homework, and not to

knock on the bedroom door if it was closed no matter how much noise came from the other side.

She had one man after another but I didn't get it. Then they took me away and I missed her because I felt lost. I really didn't understand how she felt, how lost *she* was. I didn't like the foster homes and I thought I missed her, but school got easier and I got to eat regularly so pretty soon I missed her less after the Welfare Department took over my life.

At first I felt sad when she didn't show up for our visits, but after a while I didn't care very much. When she did show up it was hard to get excited because the presents she got me were really cheap and stupid. But they certainly were surprises because no two were similar at all. Once she brought a set of crisp new man's handkerchiefs, once a used lipstick, once a paper bag full of bottle caps each from a different brand of beer.

Pretty quick I started to catch on, just one layer at a time. I didn't want to think about it but I had a clear sense she didn't want to take care of me. I thought she just wanted to have her own fun, then I realized she didn't have any idea of what she wanted except to drink and smoke. I thought she liked men, but she just used them to be able to drink and smoke.

And they used her, and she didn't care. She used to talk about a boyfriend she was in love with, then boyfriends, then just men who stayed with her. When she just had a room and didn't really have a place for them to move in she would stay with them at a motel, but not for very long. She used to talk about how much she loved someone, and named him; but it got to where she didn't even know their names.

I did graduate high school, you know, and I even went to college classes in the evenings, mostly in stenography and bookkeeping. I didn't get very excited about those courses, of course, but I could read anything I wanted, and I wanted--more Shakespeare, and the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen, Tolstoy, even a little Dostoyevsky.

I didn't have to be in foster homes any more or check in with a social worker. I still called Miss Sandra once a month because she couldn't call me and she didn't have any way to make home visits. She wasn't very old, but she got breast cancer. I called her right to the end, visited her at the hospital before she died. She wasn't my mother but she was my mother.

I felt a very little guilty having long ago left my own mother alone in her chaotic world. The thought crossed my mind to take a little bit of my earnings to give her toward her rent--but I wasn't crazy, I wanted away from her and out of foster homes or any other dangerous "supervision".

I wanted my own life. Besides, I had never been able to get my mother to improve her life from bruises and exploitation, never got her to see that her "fun" would never be fun for me (that in fact her "fun" wasn't even fun for her). Maybe I owe her a little thanks for my being afraid to be a "crazy teenager".

I was really excited about being grown up, graduating high school at sixteen, taking a job as a clerk in the five and dime downtown, renting a tiny apartment above a

tavern, the Town Tap. I was excited for the freedom for me, I swore to myself it was not for the freedom to be with boys, not for the freedom to drink and dance--just for the freedom.

Over all, childhood seemed deprived and sad because it was. My loving grandfather and my natural innocence protected me just a bit from seeing how lonely and painful life can be and that you can't get out of fear or pain just because you want to, that maybe the only way out is to die. But for the moment I was alive, and free, and really looking forward to work the next day, and weekends at the colorful unreal delicious amusement park.

I saw her from time to time, more rarely as the months careened by. I never let her know where I lived, rarely went to where she lived because she moved so often (anyhow I didn't even care where she kept her cot and clothes; it couldn't have been very fancy).

She said she had a job in a bar, but when I went to find her she didn't look like she was working *for* the bar, just in it. She tried to dress up to attract customers but her wardrobe got worn and ragged and she got worn and haggard. Most of the time she couldn't talk without slurring, but she managed to get someone to buy her one more drink.

She didn't have a car, didn't even have a license any more. She didn't have a phone because she didn't have a place to have one. I called her at the bar. I knew which bars she hung around in, at least which neighborhood, and luckily for me they were not in my part of town. If she wasn't in one bar she was in another, and they weren't far from each other, within staggering distance.

I'd usually try to take her out of there to eat something but she usually wasn't hungry. Whenever her father came to town we'd go out with her for a meal, pretty fancy considering our pocketbooks. We couldn't let her get drunk--had to limit her to one glass of wine--because she'd get loud, or worse. One time we had to drag her out when she started throwing chairs.

Of course the impossible times came step by step but rapid steps, until it was almost a gallop downhill. We knew the end was coming. For the very long three and a half years between my high school graduation and the funeral it just got worse month by month.

There were some times we thought she might get sober, usually when she was in the hospital for a few days. I can't count the times she was beat up by a man or was hurt bad falling (once down a flight of stairs). It got to where she didn't know which of the two had happened (a man or a fall), couldn't remember, so she made something up, sometimes a thing we knew just couldn't be so.

She got thin and yellow, and at the same time fat. That is her arms and thighs were sticks, no flesh, but her belly and ankles were very very fat, like mush or Jello. She was so weak she could hardly walk. She mumbled and she wouldn't eat. If she did eat she would usually puke it up.

It got to where she could hardly drink, and when she would smoke she would drop the lit cigarettes on the floor around her chair in her room. There was a circle of burns around the chair, a circle of spots that looked like a ring of toadstools in a clearing in the woods, a fairy ring. And the stink of puke and piss and stale cigarettes and burned carpet.

She saw my baby one time before she finally died, but I doubt either of them remembered it.

When I started meeting the public at the five and dime I tried to get my hair right and I sewed three new dresses for work on the Singer machine Miss Sandra left me in her will. I missed her even more than I needed a new dress--and I really needed a new dress.

I kept trying to get my hair right, and my makeup and to have my dress drape just right so I could look a little like Audrey Hepburn in "Roman Holiday". But I couldn't look at all like Audrey Hepburn even though I was about her size and build, same coloring.

I wasn't very brilliant either, just ordinary. I graduated high school and I dreamed of going to college, but there was no way to eat *and* go to college. A night class let me feel a little like I was a student, but that didn't make the courses exciting or edifying.

I was pretty ordinary and pretty dull and I knew it. I would have waves of tearful disappointment sometimes, whether I thought about it or not, then calm days when I told myself it could be worse. People did say nice things about me sometimes, like I was very polite and a good worker, but even if I heard them I didn't think they were right or that it was very important.

Luckily I lived downtown close to work, and the business college was only a few blocks away. I had a driver's license for an ID but I didn't have a car. The bus wasn't far but I didn't take it very often; work and classes were walking distance from where I lived.

Work made me tired some days, but work was fun. I met so many people, always liked everyone because I could see them and observe them but I didn't have to live with them, just to serve them.

Very soon I could find everything in the store because I was the one who stocked the shelves, and I was good enough at math to work the cash register and make change. Stocking the shelves and taking inventory was boring for most of the other girls, but not for me. It gave me a sense of orderliness in an otherwise chaotic world, and it helped a lot in finding what they wanted for customers.

My life was orderly those days, and pretty exciting even without a lot of money and without going out at all. My schedule was the same almost every day, so when my alarm clock went off I knew what to do. It didn't take me very long to get dressed for work because I gave up on wearing makeup, gave up pretending I could look attractive.

For breakfast I had a bowl of corn flakes while I read yesterday's paper at my little kitchen table (just about big enough for one person to sit). For lunch I went back to my apartment for a sandwich and to read the paper; or I made a sandwich in the morning, took it to work in a brown paper bag. I never did eat fancy, didn't know how to, just a bologna sandwich or peanut butter.

Supper was too expensive but I had to eat. My kitchen was so small I couldn't cook anything big or fancy, but cooking for one person was a pain in the neck, hardly worth it. Eating didn't seem very nourishing because all I had was me and the newspaper, and the food didn't count.

A bowl of cereal or a peanut butter sandwich didn't take much time or energy, but a pork chop took time and cleaning up after (even if I could afford it every once in a while on my seventy-five cents an hour). The bar and grill on the street level below me had soup and bread. That was good enough. When I got a raise to a dollar I started eating a hamburger sometimes, and fries.

There I could read today's newspaper before tomorrow morning, but I really didn't care about the news so much as my grandfather had during the war, following the troops and battles. I guess I read the newspaper for company, to find out who got married, who won the baseball game, who got robbed and killed. Perhaps my mother.

I had no reason to think I might be pretty, no real desire to try to be that way. The girls I knew in school all wanted to wear makeup and got excited about going to dances and on dates, even when we were too young to do any of those things. Girls who wore powder or lipstick were known to be "loose" or "hussies".

I guess their attempts to be attractive were seen as signs of a wish to attract boys. Yes, I guess that makes sense to me now, that to try to be attractive shows a wish to attract. But I wanted to hide, not to attract. I didn't do what other girls did to be attractive, not at all.

That didn't mean I didn't have fantasies about boys (or later, men). But I didn't magnify them, just felt them in the parts of my body in subtle ways, in my dreams when I wasn't paying much attention. When I woke up I dressed and went to school, to work; I did what I was supposed to do. I didn't even know what I had any impulse to do.

I did want one thing very much, to be free. I wanted to be safe and I wanted to learn and I wanted to be busy, but I didn't waste much energy wanting to be pretty and I didn't waste much energy dreaming of being rich or having a lot of stuff (no chance of that). So I had no reason to think I was pretty. That was just the facts of life.

Yes, to tell the truth, I was not so much motivated by guilt but by fear. How about you? Later, when I started raising my own child I paid a lot of attention to what I could give her to guide her to be free and happy, not afraid, not guilty. Since I didn't know how to do mothering and since I hadn't had much mothering myself I always feared I had failed, even though Diana did her part to convince me I was a good mom.

But back then, before I was out of my teens, I never thought of being a mom. I certainly never thought I could be a good one, and I didn't want to be a bad one (like mine was). I really didn't think about that part of life. If I had thought about it I would have wondered how a baby could be born without a father, a puzzle to me from the time I was a little girl, for I knew I had been born but I knew I had no father.

No. That wasn't the grown woman thinking. That woman knew how babies are made, and the woman knew that even if she had never met her dad there was a "sperm-donor" out there somewhere. It was the little girl who couldn't understand, and her deprivation of understanding tormented her all her life, and the shame of being deprived. And she had not been bad, just unlucky to have no father. And no mother, really.

The woman knew all this and confirmed it when her life had changed to orderly, with her own place, modest as it was, and her own job, modest as it was, and her own reading and studies, modest as those were. I still looked for some kind of understanding and companionship through what I could read in the newspapers.

All these details. I realized I had always carried all these details, never-ending. I just was so wary, afraid of everyone and everything, so I paid attention to following instructions like a little prisoner. I sunk into childish fantasies (like unicorns) without ever getting past the surface of them. Shakespeare went beneath the surface.

Now I was able to think freely. I wasn't afraid of the deep end of the pool of life. I had begun to get what I always wanted, freedom to have a little life, to let it grow. But I still felt afraid when I wasn't reading or working.

I don't want to argue with anyone, but there are a few things I am convinced of and I don't think anyone will change my mind. I know I'm not pretty but some people want to argue with me. I don't understand why they would argue with me when I know what I know.

I ought to be the world's greatest expert about me, but I'm not sure I know *anything* about myself. I can see the plain outside of me, but even though there ought to be someone inside--after all, when I read about someone like King Lear or Juliet I feel their feelings--but when I ask about how I feel I just don't know.

I don't very much like looking in the mirror, but if I do, don't I see what's there? If someone says they look from a different angle I guess that's okay, but to argue with me about something as simple as whether I am pretty...well, I don't think so. I certainly don't look like Audrey Hepburn.

I look plain. Even when I make myself up I look plain, flat beige instead of full round powdered pink and rouged; I am still flat, colorless. My hair is just a dark flat slab of felt tangled flat against my skull, unless the hairs stick up, and that's even worse.

I got a perm once--never again. At first there were bouncy coils, but an hour later they sagged back into lazy strands in every direction. And the color--muddy medium

brown, too dark to be turned blonde, too light to go to black. Just cursed to be flat and colorless. But I guess I'm used to that.

Whenever I'd go into the bar and grill below my little room men would hoot or whistle. I thought they were making fun of me so I would ignore them. It's true I had breasts but not the big ones men go crazy about, and even if they were pretty those guys couldn't know because I would never show them.

Besides, I didn't want to attract men. I was just going to get my supper and to read the paper. Couldn't they respect that? Sure, I wanted to believe I was pretty, but I knew that just wasn't so. Every girl wants to *feel* she is pretty, but that doesn't mean she wants to be whistled at and chased, not necessarily.

One night I let my guard down. A sort of average-looking guy, not too tall, was sitting two stools down from me at the counter; I had noticed him. He had never whistled at me or hooted, never made faces or stared. I was just sipping my soup, reading my paper.

I tried not to meet anyone's eye when I was in a public place, tried to keep my gaze to myself. At work when I was paying attention to customers it was different, of course. I met them face to face so I could find out what they needed and get it for them. After all, they came for what they needed, and I wanted to get it for them. Simple.

But other people, in the street, in a restaurant, even in school, I didn't come there to find out what they wanted and I didn't want to give them anything they wanted. If they asked me what I wanted (in words or gestures), I didn't trust them and I didn't want them to know. I just didn't answer personal questions.

I guess I didn't trust many people, and I didn't have to think real hard to understand why. From as long as I could remember, from the time I was a very tiny girl, strangers had often frightened me or hurt me. Even the people who were close to me hurt me or disappointed me often, especially my mother.

My grandfather was the only person I knew who was purely good to me, and perhaps Miss Sandra, and a little bit a few school teachers. I liked my supervisor at the five and dime because I needed her to like me, not so much personally but through every workday--that's a big part of the time, come to think of it.

I didn't trust men or boys, and I didn't have to think about it to know automatically I didn't trust men. They had scared me and pushed themselves on me when I couldn't understand and couldn't defend myself and couldn't cry out to anyone for help. They never said anything nice to me, never said anything nice about me until I started to grow up and develop breasts. I had no reason to trust any of them, ever.

And now this man was looking at me. I didn't panic. I didn't run. But I wondered what to do, realizing that most women already knew to look back at him or not look back at him. That was the simple signal between men and women, to look closer or to look away.

I glanced at his face when he was looking at his soup. He wasn't pretty--that is he wasn't especially handsome in a magazine-cover sort of way. He looked more young than old; his face was soft-looking, maybe relaxed and kind--well kinda kind, not harsh.

When he looked toward me I looked toward him. When his head did not turn away, stayed facing toward me, I faced him. He didn't turn away. I looked for his eyes. For just a moment his eyes met mine, then he looked just past them at the headlines of my paper.

"Who's gonna win the World Series?"

"The Cardinals, I hope."

"Me too."

He raised an eyebrow just an imperceptible half millimeter. I understood without understanding just how I understood. (I had never studied faces or expressions except scowls and gritted teeth.) I raised my head the other half millimeter to tell him it was okay to move over one stool to the empty one between us.

"Not half bad for bar food."

"Better than a bowl of cornflakes."

Herb was in the retail industry too, bigger items than five and dime, he sold furniture. He had done that since high school, over five years. Now he was assistant manager, made a lot more money, over four dollars an hour. I didn't know exactly why he told me precise details of his business. I was reluctant to tell him I just made a dollar.

"Do you come to this bar often?"

"Not often, really. I just come to eat supper sometimes."

"Do you live near here?"

"Pretty close."

"I live just up at the Coronado."

"That's pretty fancy."

"Yeah, pretty fancy, but my apartment's just a studio. Well-furnished though."

"Nice talking with you. I'm finished eating. I'd best be going now."

"Just soup? You have to eat more than that. Can I buy you a steak?"

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry for more right now. I've got to go."

"You want a beer before you go?"

"No thank you. I'll move along now."

"Are you sure you don't want a beer? A whiskey sour? A Tom Collins?"

"No. I have to go."

"Do you like tequila?"

"No, really. Thanks the same."

"Do you like dancing? Just thought..."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a dancer. Well, it's nice meeting you."

"Bowling? Would you like to go bowling?"

I didn't want to change apartments and I didn't want to stop eating soup, so I didn't quite know how to evade Herb. When I thought about it, I didn't really have any reason to run from him. So, I didn't know what to do but to go home and likely run into him in the same place the next day, or the day after that. Then what would I do?

It got me thinking about several things, especially that I try to be alone, it seems safer. Also that I am in the habit of staying away from men, but my feelings are probably not a lot different from other women. When I was a girl I was afraid but now I am a woman and I don't have to be afraid; cautious maybe, but not afraid.

Bowling? I had never thought of going bowling. It might be fun. I needed to do something besides wander around the amusement park people-watching on Sundays. I really needed a girlfriend to go with to be safe, but I didn't have many friends. I could ask Christine from work; asking a woman would be easier than asking a man.

I read the newspaper and I went to work. I came home and I read the newspaper and I went to sleep so I could go to work. Even I knew that wasn't quite a full life. I did like my work, but it wasn't really full enough, not well-rounded. I could read some things I liked besides the newspaper. I started reading Shakespeare's histories.

Christine and I did start to go bowling on Sundays, and I beat her with sadistic relish. And Herb and I started to go to movies a couple of times. I still went to work and I still liked it. I was a pretty happy person, but I was nosy about my own business. I wanted to understand the parts that powered me, just like I wanted to understand from Shakespeare the parts that powered Juliet.

Christine had had a rough childhood, like me. She said therapy had helped her a lot. I considered that, put it away and forgot it. I continued to seek my own answers in movies and in Shakespeare. I never stopped feeling for answers about me, but I needed to sharpen the questions.

"Carol, you know I fell in love with you the first time I saw you."

"I know you believe that. Have you ever fallen in love with another girl that way?"

"No, I really never have."

"I don't think I know what falling in love is, except to die for each other out of foolishness, like Juliet and Romeo."

"I've heard of it. I'll have to see that story if it ever comes out as a movie."

"It has, my dear, it has."

"Can we do that? Will you marry me?"

"I am comfortable with you, Herb. Maybe that's a way to love."

"I'm crazy for you, Carol."

"Maybe you're just crazy, Herb."

"Maybe you'll get crazy right along with me. Let's do it."

"I guess so. Okay."

Not very romantic now that I look at it from here, but no sillier than the average marriage. We had to go to a doctor's office to get blood tests for our marriage license, wait three days (five over the weekend) to find out our blood types and that we didn't have syphilis.

I picked out a pattern with Christine and I sewed a nice simple white wedding dress, really just a pretty plain frock for a pretty plain girl. Then we had to find a justice of the peace, but it turned out we got a judge at the courthouse between trials. We were ready, but we had to wait until he was ready. We lost the afternoon of work for us and Herb's friend John and his mother and Christine. We didn't tell my mother until a week or two later when I finally found her.

The wedding party took place in the bar below my apartment in the big booth in the back corner. It was friendly enough after we got started, without my mother no fist fights. My grandfather had come to give me away. He bought the first round for everyone in the bar, and the third round just for the wedding party. Herb bought the second, then he just bought his own and mine, and let everyone else buy their own.

I don't remember exactly when or how we got to the Coronado, but there we were alone together in Herb's bed at dawn. He was snoring away. I tried to remember but I guess I had blacked out. Christine told me later I had danced on the table until closing time, sang "How Much is That Doggie in the Window" about a hundred times but generally kept it to the back booth, no cops.

Herb just woke up smiling. I had his coffee ready at the kitchen table. He said it was too weak and I made another pot. I thought of making eggs for him but I was too nauseated to smell bacon so I made toast and jelly. He didn't look happy about that but he was still smiling from the night before.

I was too embarrassed to ask him about anything that happened. I thought to myself two things I can remember: first, that I was glad I was deflowered while I couldn't remember it and it didn't hurt too much down there; and second that this was my first big hangover and it hurt an awful lot.

Married life was married life. Herb was a nice guy but around home he couldn't do anything for himself. He probably was really good at managing the furniture store but he wasn't any help around the apartment. I guess if we had had to have a car he would have taken care of that, a man thing. I sure couldn't.

I had to cook his breakfast, pack his lunch, cook his supper, clean up after him (socks, underwear, ashtrays, dishes) and do the laundry at the laundromat down at the next corner. I had to think ahead about groceries. The store wasn't so far, four blocks, but if I bought too much it was hard to carry. Anyhow, the refrigerator couldn't hold a lot.

I tried to make the apartment pretty, but the building was old and dark so nothing I did could make it really great. The furniture was fine, of course, but getting plants to stay alive without sun was a challenge.

It took a lot of energy to keep up the apartment and work full time, and it took a lot of energy to stay up until three every night pleasing him. Don't get me wrong, I liked it too, making love, pretty much, but he was obsessed. He wasn't so very slick to get me going, but we would go over to my old building to the bar, and after several drinks I was in the mood even if I didn't black out.

Thank goodness he worked all day six days a week, and I worked about the same hours he did. Housekeeping and meeting his needs took a lot of energy and didn't give me much sleep, but I liked my job and sometimes I even felt a little new energy, juiced in a way with the change of rhythm from home to work, from work to home. It was like two different worlds, and I belonged in each of them.

Herb was moving up at his store, probably would become head manager if his current manager moved up or out, and I was moving up at my store, head salesgirl now. We made enough to save a bit, I made out a budget and wrote checks for the bills, and he signed them before I mailed them. I gave my paycheck to him to take to the bank with his paycheck every other Friday.

We made love a lot, except when I had a "headache", but with a couple drinks I usually didn't have a headache. I thought about birth control but it wasn't so easy to figure out or to use those days because it had been illegal not very long before and all the doctors and all the normal people thought it was shameful and illegal and all that, and it really wasn't.

So my next period was late and Christine assured me I was pregnant and it was okay, and my husband would be happy until he was unhappy, and his mother would be very happy and want me to name the boy after her late husband Hiram, Herb's dad. And Christine was right on all counts.

The first six months went fine. I felt okay and I was hardly nauseated in the morning. Herb passed out cigars at work even though it was too early. I didn't miss a day of work and everybody congratulated me even though I wasn't even showing yet. Christine planned a shower for me at eight months. I tried to keep my drinking down, and I had never smoked.

Herb didn't like my fat belly much, but if I left the lights out he didn't complain much. I didn't complain but that didn't mean I was happy about it. I didn't want sex much but I tolerated it even without a drink or two because I didn't want a drink

very much. I didn't have to relax, I just had to knit baby clothes and ask Herb to bring home a crib from his store.

I was elated and he was deflated. I didn't do things to get him fired up and he started to say it was okay because he wasn't really so hot as he used to be. I was getting tired easily, so many nights I didn't go to the bar with him, stayed home, went to sleep early so I could go to work. If I did go to the bar with him I would get lubricated enough to make love, but I started sleeping more and screwing less.

I went to bed early but I didn't sleep soundly if he wasn't home yet. He came home pretty early at first when I didn't go to the bar with him, but after a while, and when my belly was getting bigger and bigger, he stayed later. When the doctor said it was too close to the last month, that if I had sex it could trigger labor, Herb stayed even later at the bar, but he didn't ever dare to stay until closing.

Giselle, Christine's fellow student at the nursing school went to that bar frequently, the one on the street level at my old apartment, the Town Tap. Christine went there once in a while with her after their class. Herb recognized Christine and waved hello to her, but he seemed not to know Giselle even though he must have seen her before.

Herb didn't flirt with anyone when Christine was there but he didn't connect her with Giselle. He certainly did chat a lot with women at the bar, not many men. He didn't engage Giselle in talk; perhaps he did not recognize her as Christine's friend or maybe she just did not appeal to him.

Sometimes he danced with women to the juke box, innocent enough, and I didn't get upset about it when I got my reports through Christine. After not very long he started dancing mostly with a tall blond named Marie more than any others, then instead of any others.

Then Christine got the word from Giselle that he was meeting Marie in the bar most every evening, but not dancing much, at least not at the bar. They met and then quickly left together.

I think I knew increasingly all the time, but I only became conscious of it gradually, fully conscious just before Diana was born. Giselle told Christine she saw Herb one night going into a little hotel with Marie. After that, she said, they didn't come to the bar any more.

Herb was a fool but I didn't care much any more, especially when I had Diana. Labor was not so bad, painful twinges up to the really forceful part, and then a pretty quick delivery. Diana was beautiful and petite, sweet and quiet. We were totally in harmony. If our need for food and rent had not been so real I would have quit work, just stayed home alone with her.

Herb actually showed up at the hospital but he left pretty quick. He brought some flowers, no candy. He put on big smiles for the baby but he was afraid to touch her. This time I think he didn't pass out any cigars, at least I didn't see them or smell them. He came again for about twenty minutes when she was two days old, about fifteen

the next day, then twelve minutes and twenty-three seconds the next day (I timed it on the big clock in the hall).

Home. That was a good question. I knew I had no more use for Herb but I didn't know how to be shed of him. He had the apartment and he had the bank account. I didn't expect he would give up control of anything. But I was wrong. He wanted out even more than I did because that fool was pussy-struck. He was totally into Marie.

We talked, pretty civilized. He wouldn't give me any of our savings but he would let me have my job (really white of him, as we said then in the fifties). He wanted the apartment (I didn't wonder why) but he would give me three hundred dollars so I would have enough to put down a deposit on my own place. I told him it was *our* own place, Diana's and mine.

Christine understood. She said she'd help me. She could stay with Diana most days so I could work since most of her classes were in the late afternoons and evenings. When Diana started sleeping for a couple or four hours at a time Christine could study for school (we had no television set). Days when she couldn't stay Giselle came over. Giselle was plump and sweaty but we liked her.

Christine helped again. It happened that her own lease was just about up, only another month. She didn't have a job since she quit at the five and dime to start nursing school, but she had the GI bill for school and expenses and a little left over for rent. We looked for an apartment for all three of us, Christine and Diana and me.

We found a third floor place on a quiet street with a big bedroom and a little bedroom perfect for a little girl. It wasn't big but it was bright. And it was close to Christine's school, and later to the hospital when she was ready for her practicum. And I could catch a bus to work.

It was fun to pick curtains and paint. I got them from my own store. It was fun to paint Diana's room, robin's egg blue even though she was a girl, because I liked it. The other walls weren't too bad so we left them as they were. The kitchen was cozy, just big enough for two and a half. The little bathroom was really small but we put our makeup on the dresser in our bedroom. It would do fine.

Our new neighborhood was pretty far from our old one. Herb's apartment was very near our old regular bar but we weren't worried about him, for after all he was very busy. We didn't want to go there, just in case Herb and Marie went in there. I didn't change men (didn't really want one) but I did change bars.

It would be a pretty deficient city not to give a choice of bars. We used to be in the middle of downtown where there was a bar on every corner, but even in the suburbs near the nursing school there were neighborhood bars on every *other* corner.

On the nights when Giselle came to stay with Diana, if Christine was not in class she and I would go around the corner to our new place to talk. There was a bar there in a strip mall, the College Inn. It wasn't at all quiet inside but there was a little park

on that street, so it was noisy and quiet all at the same time, just for us to cradle our noisy or quiet moods.

We did get close, Christine and I, even before Herb got tired of me. We two continued in a bowling league until far along in my pregnancy when I pretended to be angry at the men's bad jokes about did I swallow a bowling ball. Really I was just getting too winded and clumsy, my back hurt and I had to pee all the time.

We were close generally. She helped me more ways than I can say, so I'll try to say some of them. When Herb dumped us she shared the rent so Diana and I had a place to live bigger than a breadbox; she watched Diana so I could work; she kept me company so I didn't need a damn television set; she knew a lot about cleaning up babies from being a nurse aide in the army and now from nursing school; and she wasn't a bad cook.

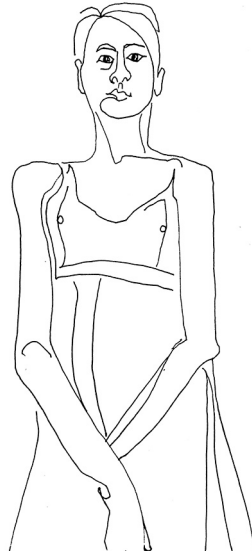
Sooner than I could imagine a handful of years had flown, but with great joy for all of us (mixed with all the necessary fears) Diana started kindergarten every morning, then first grade all day. She loved school and we loved helping her with homework and encouraging her. Neither of us had had warm encouragement from parents and this was our chance to participate in parenting.

Staying away from men for our own good reasons allowed our lives to be neat and orderly, but still really a lot of fun. Neither of us had family much, but we had each other; and even though it sounds almost too simple, trips to the zoo and the museum and the library were our frequent special treat.

One morning after I put Diana on her bus to school I had to go to my bus, then I remembered and had to get off the bus at Dahlia Street, jump out to cross the traffic at Seventeenth and catch the other bus back home. I had forgot my going-away present for our store manager, really a good friend now, Cecile who had gotten a new job at a new branch in a shopping mall in our new neighborhood; and just to prove myself mindless I had also forgotten my lunch on the kitchen table.

I remember the event in brilliant electric tones, a thrilling high point of my life. I came in the apartment door looking to the kitchen for my lunch and the gift-wrapped package I had left there on the table. I glanced down the little hallway, saw by the subtle film of steam on the mirror that Christine had just taken a shower. I peeked around into the bathroom door to say hi, maybe to say boo (since she wouldn't expect me to return so soon).

She stood still dripping, her back toward me, no towel, her hair flat against her head shining, her left foot up on the closed lid of the toilet, her knee angled out, her right hip pressed against the edge of the vanity, her right arm raised, hand pressed



flat against the wall. At first I didn't see her left hand, then I saw it was between her legs.

She was masturbating. That didn't shock me much, but those days such a thing was never mentioned much less shown. My mind was not shocked, for after all, didn't we know everyone did that? My mind wasn't shocked but my eyes were galvanized and my breathing stopped and my nipples came alive and my pussy tingled.

I meant to step back quietly but I stepped forward. I didn't say a word and neither did Christine. I stepped smoothly right behind her and put my hand under hers and let my fingers work as if it were my own private party. She reached back and gently firmly grabbed mine through my clothes. I leaned forward, she twisted back; we kissed deeply. Slowly we did what we had to do.

When we had breathed and smiled and said not a single word I broke the silence saying, "Ah well, my dress is wet, but a little water never hurt anything, did it? It will dry on the bus on my way back to work. Is my makeup smeared? I'll see you when I come home again." Nothing changed, but when the girl was asleep we moved into quiet comfort together every night.

Those few years slid by so fast it seemed like no time, but it was heaven. Diana grew so fast I could not see it day to day. I sure am glad I was not alone and that my daughter didn't have to be my only family, for that's too big a burden for a child. I had friends in the neighborhood and at the College Inn. And I had a partner all along. I love her.

Christine and I knew we were both Diana's mothers but in those times such a thing could not be said, not even in private, lest the child let it slip and be punished for it forever. So we settled for being roommates like every other "homosexual" couple. It wasn't especially simple for us, even privately. It took us years of closeness and loving to finally even mention it in whispers in the quiet of the night.

When we finally opened it up we found that we were very much alike. We had been frightened by boys and men all the time we were growing up, neither of us had a father. A big part of being a girl was supposed to be to get excited about being beautiful, wearing beautiful clothes, attracting lots of men, getting married and having babies. It's what we were taught from the time we got our first doll.

Christine and I feared we were not very good at all that. We were interested in other things as we grew up, me in stories, she in fixing hurts and cleaning messes. When we did have sex with men we liked the sex but not the men. I was a virgin when I got married because I was afraid of men and didn't let them get close until I finally caved in. And then I didn't really get "close", just that I was drunk or passed out.

Christine had had sex with a lot of boys in high school because it was part of being wild, but in the Army she lived with other women, worked with them, ate with them, bathed with them, slept with them. Liking sex with men was not a sin, but making love with women was sweeter, and it was easier to hide from prying noses.

We recognized that being mothers was hard to do because our own mothers not only were not very good, but they were really horrid. They were both really bad drunks and had to be sluts or whores to get a drink. They didn't know how to care for a child. It's a wonder Christine and I survived; our mothers didn't. Now that we had a daughter we agreed it was not so we could feel like good mothers for our own sakes, but so we could provide a good life for our child, for her sake.

Yes, we loved each other, and yes we enjoyed our sex, a lot and often. But that was just part of having to go to bed, and it was very private. Everyone had to go to bed, or at least find a place to sleep even if it was in a bus station. The two of us had a bed, a place to sleep, a place quietly to be happy together.

Another secret we somehow managed to mention in the silence of the night was that it might not be exactly average for a couple to share their own "home bar" in every neighborhood they live in, to be "regulars" there, to have most of their friends from there, to be there together any time they weren't working or when their child was asleep. That sounded like a lot of drinking, but not nearly so much alcohol as either of our mothers had needed, that was for sure. We laughed about it and tried to forget it. It wasn't funny.

Another year grew fast, went past. Diana was a beautiful cheerful little girl with dark pigtails, bright eyes, white little pearls of teeth. She sang from before she could walk (I think I heard her sing before she was born), so by the second grade she was the star in all the class recitals (big events for me, very big).

By the time the next year blossomed, Diana's third grade year, we were no longer in Saint Louis where the three of us had lived all our lives (except Diana's Army stint). My old manager Cecile had moved with the company as it grew branches. She was now a regional manager in Tulsa and asked me to move to help her as manager of a new store there.

Without my old Grandpa there was nothing to keep me in Missouri. What I had left of him was portable, a couple of pounds of ashes in a nice urn with old Japanese bonsai trees on it. Mostly what I had of him was his spirit always with me, and so did Diana. He was ninety-two when he stopped breathing, and she was four and a half. But she remembered him sweetly. So did Christine.

Christine could get a good job anywhere because she was a good hospital nurse, one of the first trained and experienced in intensive care units. We had a car, we gave away our furniture, we packed our few important things, Grandpa's urn tucked between bath towels. We had no dog but we all looked forward to just the right one when we got a house in Oklahoma. We were off on a really new adventure, together.

Our store in Tulsa was right between a modest nice old neighborhood of bungalows and newer developments of what until recently had been wheat and alfalfa and milo fields at the edge of the city. The new shopping mall was one very big flat rectangle of asphalt scored by very bright new yellow lines between parking spaces.

The mall was surrounded by outward-flowing expanses of courtyard apartment complexes, smaller rectangles than the big mall, each with a dozen and a half apart-

ments ringing the first floor, a swimming pool plopped in its middle, a second floor of apartments reached by open stairways with wrought iron railings, the same monotonous railing about the dozen and a half apartments overlooking the not-so-scenic pool.

Not so very high above the pool but deceptively far out from the water's edge that railing perilously invited a drunk to dive from the second floor into the pool. Late night attempts were made with some frequency (Christine saw them in the emergency department). We never heard in the gossip at the Tavern that anyone had made that leap without hitting the concrete at least with a trailing foot, usually with a leading chest or head.

My work was in in the mall and Christine was going to work at the new hospital not far away, but we had no desire to live in the rectangles planted on the cornfields. The three of us simultaneously had imagined the same neat little house with an identical clumsy shaggy drooly dog in the back yard. Unanimously we decided to call him Herb.

We got to that town and we drove to the mall. After we scoped out the outside of the five and dime we started cruising around looking for our own place. And we found it in less than half an hour, precisely and exactly near the mall but in that neat little neighborhood across the way with mature trees for shade, its painted wooden fence around the back yard that would belong to our new Herb dog.

There was a neat "For Sale" sign at the front of a little yellow house and neat square windows around it as bright as winking eyes. At the drug store I called the number on the sign, asked how much the house was and said we'll take it. Neat clean, exactly as we all three together had seen clearly before we even left Saint Louis.

There was much more to the city, of course, but this little slice was all we needed. Going from my store, even before we got out of the shopping center we saw a sign for my dry goods store, a movie theater, Henry's Pet Shop, the drug store and a neighborhood bar--the Village Tavern. Across the main street that bordered the front of the mall were the bungalows, ours not right on the main street but one block in. We were home.

We got our dog at Henry's Pet Shop, a little clumsy funny red puppy. Every thing he did made us laugh. We called him Herb. He liked the name okay so it stuck. But even though we all as a family only heard from the other Herb with a Christmas card every three years or so, Diana got a present from him every birthday, her unimportant inattentive biologic father.

Our Herb (the one who was a member of our family) was a big dumb loving Irish Setter. He barked in the middle of the night, but we got used to it and ignored it; the neighbors didn't. He loved to dig, made big piles of red dirt all over the back lawn, but even though many of his holes went under the fence he never went out. It's true the holes were not large and he was, but the truth is he was afraid to leave the yard, afraid to leave his family. He was home.

We liked being close to the grocery store and the drug store and the pet store and my work store and to the movie in the mall, and especially to the Village Tavern. We liked the gang of regulars at the Village Tavern. They quickly adopted us because

we became regulars and I guess we were fun to talk with. Christine sang as loud as anyone if she had a few beers under our belts and I hummed along. The regulars were each nice people even though they were quite various ages and backgrounds. We were home.

We didn't want anyone to know the two of us were in a long-term intimate relationship. It was okay to be roommates and old friends, but not a hint at lovers. Though old friends can hug and kiss cheeks in a bar, we didn't dare. That would have been an inestimable disaster. There was a fairly easy way to protect against that, to flirt with men, at least to let them flirt with us.

Another really nice thing was that since the Village Tavern was just about two blocks from our little home and thirty feet from my work we could be there any time of the day for a short time or a long time. If Christine was going to be off work one night, sometimes we would get a baby sitter for Diana so we could go out for some dinner and then go to spend the evening at the Tavern.

When Diana came home from school on the bus if Christine wasn't there Diana would very carefully cross the avenue at the light and come check in with me at the five and dime. Also, everyone at the Village Tavern knew her and so when she walked by they often would give her a cola or some ice cream. She didn't complain about that. They loved her.

If Christine was scheduled to be on duty at the hospital I would usually stay home with Diana, or sometimes after she fell asleep I would go over to the Tavern for just a beer or two, or to watch the crowd and listen for a while. She was a good girl, quiet, obedient, independent, so I didn't feel a lot of pressure to go right home. Anyhow, she knew where I was and she knew how to call me at the Tavern.

One little incident got my attention, however, and I had to get baby sitters more often or stay home more often or wish Diana would just grow up the rest of the way. I got into a conversation at the Tavern (despite the noise) and I had a beer or two more than usual, actually lost track of the time. Diana woke up with a stomach ache. When she didn't find me in the house she grabbed her teddy bear and walked to the Tavern.

I can't get the image out of my eyes, even now. A beam of light from the street flashed across the entry of the bar as she pushed open the door, and hidden by tall people and clouds of cigarette smoke in the thick dark, peering to look for me, in her pajamas holding her teddy bear by his little paw came Diana.

Tourists were alarmed at a child coming into a bar but before they could make a fuss or call the cops a couple of the regular women brought her to me. They offered to walk us home. With tears flowing down my face I told them I could handle it. They



told me I didn't have to, that's what friends are for, and walked us the two blocks home.

I was horrified. I hadn't realized even for a moment how much I was like my mother, how much Diana was like me. That was a hard shot right between the eyes. After my unforgivable misbehavior if Christine was at the hospital I didn't go across to the Tavern with nearly the same frequency, and if I went I didn't stay nearly so long as I had that particular night. Besides, the regular women at the bar formed the Diana Committee to come to the house and stay with her if I had an important appointment, or if I just wanted a beer.

One night Christine felt a lump in my left breast. She called it a nodule. I thought it must be nothing because I remembered when I was breast-feeding Diana I had painful lumps like that all the time. But Christine said this was different because it was hard and irregular, and if it didn't get smaller real quick it probably was a real cancer.

I was only twenty-nine. We cried at the scare and the threat but I still thought it must go away. It didn't. Christine got me into the office of the best surgeon she knew at the hospital, Doctor Kutler. (I told her it sounded too much like "Doctor Cutter".) He said it was a cancer and we'd have to look at the cells under a microscope as soon as possible. He said the biopsy wouldn't hurt very much, just putting a very small needle into the lump in my breast. It did hurt, a lot.

It took almost a week to get the report. He called it adenocarcinoma. He said I would have to undergo radical mastectomy as soon as possible. I didn't want that because I remember my mother's mother having that, and my mother's sister. They both died within two years because the surgery didn't cure the cancer. I guess my mother didn't live long enough to grow a breast cancer.

I told Christine I wouldn't want to lose my breast and neither would she. She said she'd rather lose the breast than to lose her partner. I felt immediately the same stirring in my breasts before they really started growing. It was that sensation that I felt now, not a memory in my mind but a physical reality that had birthed the woman in me, the sensation that started men to chase me as a woman.

I felt at the same time the awakening of my motherhood before Diana was born, the sacred process of my body becoming my baby's life. The placenta was fine for feeding her in the beginning, but I didn't really feel the placenta itself, just the fullness of my belly. I sure did feel my breast, and even though the memories were of good sensations despite what seemed pain then, what was happening now was really pain, and a threat to my life, like a loaded gun to my head.

I didn't want to do anything but hide. I said nothing to Diana but there was no way to keep Christine from knowing. She felt the fear and pain as if they were her own, because they were. She wouldn't let me hide from it, forced me to ask for the surgery. She told me my grandmother and my aunt had not died from the treatment but from the disease, that the surgery was the only chance.

Those days we knew that cancer was a death sentence. Even though there were some cures they were uncommon, and no cancer went away on its own, only grew and grew until it killed you. Surgery would take away a part that let me be a woman,

and it would take away the part that let me be a mother. I couldn't stand the idea of losing those, except as Christine said, the thought of losing my whole life.

It hardly looked like a chance to live, but I didn't want to die. All I could think of was Diana. I needed her or I had no reason to live. I really wanted to kill myself before the cancer or the surgery could. I didn't want the pain, it's true, but I was willing to go through any kind of pain if it would help her.

Then I realized I didn't want her to have to take care of me the way I watched my aunt take care of my grandmother when she was too weak and pained to take care of herself. And then my cousin had to take care of that very same aunt for over a year while she was dying right in front of her.

I wanted Diana to have herself and her own life even if she had to give up her mother. She was only ten by then. As I thought about it the best I could, I realized she couldn't keep her mother anyhow, but at least she didn't have to sacrifice herself. And I thought I had at least enough time to discuss it with her honestly, and to hug her while I could.

Then I had my first positive thought, and I had to hold onto it. Diana had another mother, Christine. She had known her as a mother since before she was born, and no one loved her more, except me, perhaps, but we didn't compare and we didn't compete. We all loved each other.

And Christine was not completely alone in mothering Diana. She had the Women's Committee. We were almost like a real tribe. If one of us failed to do what was essential the others would come in to make it full, to make it right. If one of us was drunk, not all of us would be drunk at the same time.

No matter what I did, no matter what I decided, Diana would lose her mother but she would not be alone. I was no longer confused and anxious. Without misgiving I had to kill myself before it was too late.

There was a young man at the Tavern. No one treated him like he was one of us, but I saw he was a regular. He was too young to show the degenerations many of us had, the sadness, the slurring, the stumbling, the vomiting, the weight loss, the memory loss, the confusion, the slowness of thinking.

Norman was young and still beautiful, even though I knew the way he drank each night was as bad as Dan had been, the jet pilot who couldn't find his car keys, who couldn't find his car; it wasn't as bad as Johnny Bromo, burning himself out for the applause, drinking himself into oblivion every night; he wasn't as bad as any of us who had years more of drinking than he did, as long as he didn't drive. Norm was bright and funny. He also was wise in a hundred ways, every way except to live. He was doomed like me, but he wouldn't die as soon. He was only twenty-one.

I couldn't tell Christine I was going to kill myself, but quietly together in bed, afraid and cautious I told her what else I would do.

"We love each other."

"Very much."

"We like sex a lot."

"Indeed we do."

"We love each other, but we both have liked sex with men."

"We have talked about that."

"I'll die some time and leave you and Diana together."

"Maybe not, I hope, Sweetie."

"There's something I want."

"I'll give you anything, everything."

"I'm going to seduce Norm and fuck his brains out."

"I understand, and I'm not jealous."

"You know I love only you."

"And I love you, forever."

"But I'm anxious to grasp anything of life I can before I die."

"I think I understand that, and I feel that way with you. I don't want to have anything to do with you seducing the kid, but I want you to be thoroughly thrilled. I want to feel that in you. Do you know what I mean?"

"I love you."

I spent more and more time at the Tavern, more time than I really had. I had no intolerable pain yet but I had to get a new bra, and I had to pad the other side because they were not the same. I didn't feel like I got drunk, just sipped at a beer, but when I stood down from the barstool I was unsteady and I couldn't always hold my urine completely.

Norman came into the bar every night, sometimes earlier, sometimes later but always before six. He usually stayed until closing, last call when the staff locked the doors from the inside and stayed to clean the bar. Often he stayed even later, until the staff had finished cleaning up and it was time to leave and lock the doors from the outside.

It was easy to walk over to where he was sitting and sit down because we had known each other several months. I asked him how his work was and was he happy. I really didn't care if he was happy because this time I wanted to be happy. He answered me by going off on how Plato described happiness, and on the other hand how Aristotle analyzed it.

Even though he was well-educated and also a good original thinker (he didn't get his ideas from the books, just referred to them) I really didn't care about his thoughts, just his cock. My ideas got carried away and I wanted to do it right then. But I had started too late and he and I were both drunk. I was very hot but very sleepy.

I am a good thinker, and despite my fear I am a good gambler. I thought if I pulled him into bed I might be disappointed because this might be the wrong time. I only wanted to have to do this project once, and do it thoroughly. I said good night and staggered across the avenue to home, fell into bed dreaming.

Next day at work I was distracted by visions of the lad, but nothing was missing in my work. Even hung over I could do my job; it had become second nature. I thought as best I could and I decided not to go to the bar that evening, that I would give him time to think about it. I knew he would. I might be much older, about ten years, but I could tell even though he kept his eyes away and polite that my image was in his unconscious thoughts.

It's funny how my sense of my own beauty blossomed as I lusted after Norman, and my delay intensified the ardor. I felt wise. My sense of beauty, my active willingness to be a woman, was becoming stimulated also by something I had always disliked and steered clear from--men making moves toward me, especially Dan. He had chased me since I walked into the Tavern, and he was always there, since he worked as the head bartender.

When I poured cold water on him it made him very demure, timid, obsequious, but he never backed off, always wanted me but acted less aggressive every day, thought he would wear me down with mildness. He couldn't know I was deeply and flamingly in love with a woman and that for all his favors and the puppy-dog faces he made I couldn't care less, he couldn't impress me.

Wednesday I came in just after seven, to give the boy a chance to get a buzz on but not enough time to begin to get drunk.

"You don't know how to choose curtains."

"How did you know that?"

"You told me. But maybe you were too drunk to remember."

"I don't remember being drunk."

"You said you had painted your apartment but that you didn't know what kind of curtains to get, or what color."

"Oh, did I say that?"

"You did, and my heart went out to you. I thought you might need the expert advice and feminine touch of a professional. I deal with curtains and colors all the time."

"Oh, really? I didn't think of you. I thought I could do it myself. But I know you manage the dry goods store. That's where I got the pots and pans for my kitchen. I've been in that store a couple times, and I've seen you there, but you were busy, and the clerk was helping me. Besides, I wouldn't want to say, 'Hello. I know you from the Tavern. You might not remember me, but...'"

"I remember you, Norman. Well, do you want me to look at your curtains or not. I may get called away any minute."

"Yes, thanks. That would be great. I don't live far from here, about a block and a half. I guess we could walk."

All the apartment buildings looked the same to me, brick and square. I was glad he was in one of those cubicles; made it look like chickens in a coop, cages lined up evenly. I didn't know if he was going to be my chickie or my duckie, or maybe my guinea pig.

We walked to his apartment, and I wanted to drop the silly small talk. I didn't have to plan what I would do as soon as the door to his apartment shut behind us. I didn't have to plan, I just naturally did it. I pushed him up against the inside of the door, slipped my hands inside his jacket in both sleeves and slipped his jacket off. Without taking my hands off his body I slipped them down into his waist band and slid them to the front to undo his button and his zipper.

Quicker than his quick little brain could think I had slipped to my knees and slipped his penis in my mouth. Oh, all the rest followed, as you may well imagine, every angle, every position, every panting, every grasping, every kissing, every touching, sweating, oozing, smiling, fainting, gasping for air and falling over sideways.

Dawn came and woke me. Norman was sound asleep. I dressed and slipped out quietly, ran all three blocks home to be with Christine.

"How was it? Did I have a good time?"

"You loved it. You liked him a lot because he was so sophisticatedly innocent. You liked him, but you *loved* the love. I love you."

"You smell delicious. I love you."

"I don't know how to leave you. I have to leave you. I refuse to leave today. I have to talk with Diana."

"We have to talk with Diana."

"Her parents."

Horrible things happened but I didn't let them keep me from drinking more and more straight whiskey. I started with ice then I went neat, at least seven a day, well-spaced. Then more, and quickly more. I stopped going to work; I don't know what they did then. I couldn't care.

Within a week Johnny and Dan had had another fire, and John was dead. I couldn't see Dan in the ICU because he was too sick Christine told me, maybe sick to death, and I knew he was sick but that she wouldn't let me go there anyhow. She knew my own death was too much.

When I heard about Serena I was stunned. She was as beautiful as I was not, but sad, so sad. I was glad she had never become close to me. I was sadder even for Jerry, for he had been my friend off and on (when I wasn't too withdrawn). Everyone blamed him for her suicide, and especially he did too.

But I was preoccupied with me, and I focused on what I had to do. The time was coming that the cancer would have me down. I wasn't hurting too bad yet but I felt it

coming. It hadn't come through the skin, but it was pushing. Christine knew all this, but we didn't have to talk out loud about it, not even in utter private. We knew and we held each other desperately.

I stalled but the cancer didn't. I wondered if I had made a big mistake not to take a gamble on the surgery. I knew some people took chemical therapy, but it made their hair fall out and made them weak and sick. They vomited day and night. Radiation meant burns; that sounds worse than sticking your hand into a hot flame. To me that means no life left.

The hard irregular lumps hurt and the skin was tight over them, red. My nipple hurt as well, and nipples are very tender under ordinary circumstances. The skin over the biggest lump began to split and a round red ring grew around the part of the lump that was sticking out. And the next morning worse. And Herb the dog knew too; I could swear his whimper said, "Goodbye, Carol."

I had talked with Diana, told her not to forget I was doing my best to save her life, to give her a chance to remember me in one piece, to know I was always with her, would be, forever. I told her she couldn't understand now but that I hoped some day... She said she understood, and I believed her. I assured her she would never be without her mothers, Christine alive and me in memory, and always with her.

I had told Christine with a silent tearful loving look, and I knew as always that she understood. Maybe she didn't like it and maybe she didn't agree, but she understood and she wouldn't argue about my decision in my own life, in my own dying.

I went to the Tavern as I had to, for there I was at home. A bleak home in the afternoon when the lights were on and the last of the sunlight came through the little window in the back.

I had Dan's replacement Pete pour me a couple doubles. After all, it was Happy Hour and the drinks were two-for-one. I made him pour a couple more. When I asked for more he stalled, I cocked one eye at him and he poured.

In my purse there was a little .22. It was small but it would do the job. That little projectile would bounce around inside my skull shredding my brain randomly but with a lot of oomph. And maybe if the bullet didn't break out through some hole there would be a minimum of mess.

I stepped off the stool at the bar, toward the Ladies room down the little hall. I glanced into the mirror for the last time; I didn't want to see what was coming next. Halfway down the hall was the back door to the alley. I went out to the remnants of the day. I stood with my back against the brick wall. I put the barrel stuck right in my



nose aimed back like I had learned to do with nasal spray and I squeezed the trigger. I heard the boom before I died. I didn't feel a thing.

[Nota bene: At the beginning of this story the author had a note but it was too clinical and candid for the reader, prevented those with sensitivities from even beginning to hear what Carol herself had to say. So, I put the author's impression at the end. Reading it is optional, I assure you.]

I dream of her fifty years later:

I see the slight dark woman before me. The wen on the left side of her neck stands out irregular in texture, red, pocked with small pores, cobbled with shining excrescences. Overall it is a rounded cylinder protruding from the surface of the skin fully two centimeters. It is full of pus pressured to eruption. What it most resembles is a uterine cervix protruding from the left side of the neck, a sinister cervical cervix. Then I see it in the fetus's abdomen, growing still like it did on her mother's neck, and though the infant is intact her little belly is slit open so I can see the swollen wen in the middle of the bowl of her pelvis. With mild reluctance I reach out to touch it with the little finger of my right hand, gloved to protect me from contamination and to protect the infant from my finger. The carbuncle bursts, its white flood with red streaks runs out of the body. I lavage the cavity completely. The infant lives.

Carl Duesenberg and Dina Patton: the EXECUTIVE and a WAIF

Dina: In case it worries any of you, I apologize before we start our story that I am not dead yet.

Carl: But if it comforts any of you, I have been quite dead for some years.

Dina: While Carl was still alive we didn't get a chance to show how close we had become.

Carl: So now we want to tell our little story together, because we are always together.

Dina: And we will try to keep it simple for you, because real life tends to get really intricate.

Carl: Layered with ups and downs and ins and outs, at least ours have been.

Dina: It was only because of several accidents we met, mere coincidences.

Carl: I never would have been caught dead at some beer joint, a loud low dive crowded and smoky.



Dina: And I never expected to get a job at such a fancy place.

Carl: I don't consider myself haughty, it's just that we financial types are used to downtown clubs.

Dina: And poor girls desperate for a meal don't expect to get jobs in brand new suburbs.

Carl: I came into the mall to pick up my heart pills at the all-night pharmacy, needed them.

Dina: And it was my first night as a barmaid at the Village Tavern.

Carl: My prescription wasn't quite ready so I stepped into the Tavern for a beer.

Dina: It was early but pretty busy and I was nervous and clumsy.

Carl: I was tired. My chest pain wasn't quite killer, but bothersome at least.



Dina: I was afraid they'd find out I was only seventeen, too young to serve beer.

Carl: I needed those pills.

Dina: I needed that job.

Carl: I was afraid the pain would get worse, like it had before.

Dina: Maybe I could fake it through my first shift, get used to things, not get fired the first night.

Carl: Maybe the nitroglycerine and the beer would help.

Dina: I saw a man come in who reminded me of my father.

Carl: The barmaid came toward my table, but she sure looked scared and shaky.

Dina: I was afraid he was my father, and I hated my father, hoped I never saw him again.

Carl: In a way she reminded me of my daughter, but it was dark in there.

Dina: He wasn't my father, thank goodness, but he looked severe, angry maybe, or in pain.

Carl: I was in pain, and it was getting worse.

Dina: He ordered a beer. I brought him a beer without spilling it.

Carl: I looked at my watch. My prescription would be ready now.

Dina: He drank that beer fast, like my father might, but he left after one beer, *not* like my father.

Carl: I calmly walked to the pharmacy next door shaky and afraid.

Dina: He swallowed that beer fast, left a ten-dollar bill on the table and walked out.

Carl: The tablet under my tongue worked quickly, or maybe it was the beer.

Dina: I took away the glass and wiped the table down.

Carl: When the pain eased up pretty well I went back into the Tavern, to the same table.

Dina: He came back in, sat down in the same seat, smiling sweetly--not my father.

Carl: Too diffident, too young, this was not my own daughter who is independent, confident, older.

Dina: He asked for another beer, and said "Please", then "Thank you, my dear."

Carl: I needed to be waited on, needed a bit of kind contact after feeling scared by my heart again.

Dina: I needed that encouragement, just those few syllables.

Carl: I needed that beer a bit too. I had been drinking more, I noticed, for about three years...

Dina: I brought the beer to him and he smiled. I felt more confident, like I might keep this job.

Carl: ...since my wife had died, my partner forty years.

Dina: He sat there sipping beers until just after ten.

Carl: I was tired. The office all day, this chest pain. I headed home about ten.

Dina: I made it through until closing time, cleaned up the ashtrays, the glasses and the tables.

Carl: I made it to my condo, went to sleep, wept a bit through pleasant dreams of Candace.

Dina: I caught the last bus. My motel room was small and grungy, but the cheapest I could find.

Carl: Meetings not so bad the next day. I got good secretarial help, senior executive you know.

Dina: That tip from the night before let me buy breakfast.

Carl: Finished by mid-afternoon, aimed the Caddy toward the mall.

Dina: Boy, was I glad when I saw you walk in.

Carl: I felt at home for the first time since Candace died, since she left me alone three years before.

Dina: I didn't feel really at home except when I was with you, and I didn't really have a home.

Carl: And loving? Was I a good lover?

Dina: The gentle best. I never even dreamed that we...

Carl: I did. I dreamed. But it seemed silly to think it could happen, foolish to try to make it happen.

Dina: You didn't make it happen, Sweetie. And I didn't either. It was unbelievable, wasn't it?

Carl: I think I knew from the moment I came back to the Village Tavern to see you again...

Dina: I never felt alone again once I saw you walk in that next day.

Carl: ...and the next time, and the next. Seeing your face warmed my face.

Dina: Everyone there would have said "May-December" and "Gold-digger" and "Dirty old man".

Carl: And I would have punched them out.

Dina: A cardiac cripple at seventy-two? I don't think so.

Carl: All I did was to offer a poor girl a ride home to her motel after the buses stopped running.

Dina: And all I did was to say thanks and go into my room.

Carl: I drove home smiling, not for lustful fantasies but thankful you would accept a favor from me.

Dina: And you kept giving me rides home, every night.

Carl: Those people didn't know, couldn't make fun of us because I picked you up around the corner.

Dina: And we just felt good with each other.

Carl: I never thought I would make love with you, ever, never even let myself imagine it.

Dina: I never wanted to make love with you, but being with you just for the ride was sweet.

Carl: Later, when you asked me into your room I was elated, I felt I was not alone.

Dina: I wanted to be able to sit right with you to chat, not sit in your car with the engine running.

Carl: How long did we sit in your room talking?

Dina: We didn't talk. There were no chairs, we sat on the bed and right away I pushed you over.

Carl: I didn't know I had it in me.

Dina: You didn't have it in you. You had it in me.

Carl: From that moment I wanted you to have my baby.

Dina: That's what it's for. That's why we did it.

Carl: I was reluctant to tell anyone at the Tavern, really afraid to tell my bossy daughter.

Dina: I wanted you to be happy. It never occurred to me to take your money to be more "secure".

Carl: But I wanted you to have everything, everything you needed, everything you wanted.

Dina: I wanted you to see your beautiful baby.

Carl: I wanted to leave you with my baby and all the stuff I had ever worked for.

Dina: It didn't work out.

Carl: It worked out wonderfully.

Dina: But you didn't stay with me even until I was sure I was pregnant.

Carl: I was sure enough for all of us.

Dina: We could have been a happy family.

Carl: Sorry, I was born mortal.

Dina: When you had your heart attack...I've never been so frightened in my life.

Carl: I told you I'd take care of you.

Dina: But I wanted you, Carl, not your estate.

Carl: And my baby? Didn't you tell me you wanted my baby?

Dina: Yes, and it was the truth. But I wanted you to *see* him.

Carl: I've seen him every moment of his life.

Dina: My Carl Junior.

Carl: You're the world's best mother, Dina.

Dina: And your son is the very best kid.

John Brautigam: PIANO MAN

I can outline some of my early history more easily than I can relate my later mystery. I was a nice kid, an obedient kid. I don't remember a lot about Ghent where I was born, but I remember something of when we ran from the Nazis when I was about five.

My mother had studied, history especially, at Ghent where they settled for a while, but she didn't graduate. My father had studied engineering in Antwerp close by, but what he really loved was music so he spent a year in France before my parents were married.

In 1940 despite the Nazis' offer to respect Belgium's neutrality my cultured young parents wanted to leave even before there was an invasion. We were among the last to get over to England via Dunkirk, and because my father had a music teacher who had emigrated to New York (if you call a penurious refugee an immigrant) at least we had a person to go to and we were allowed into the United States. My father played the violin in the orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera for a time, an understudy really, third string, on the bench.



I remember even in Belgium being emotionally transported hearing music at home. A small child, I wasn't taken to concerts or recitals then. My mother played the piano pretty well so she and my father played together after supper or when friends came over; sometimes other professionals from the Met would visit and join in. I was no Mozart, no child genius. I didn't start formal piano lessons with anyone other than my mother until I was seven.

We lived in Rutherford, New Jersey. Because of his engineering background, and even though he was an immigrant, my father got a job in a machine shop in Rutherford, made good blue collar wages making weapon parts (better than even a very good violinist). My mother finished her teaching degree at Ramapo and got a job teaching third grade in Rutherford. Even though we lived pretty close to New York City we weren't really there. We got a car when I was twelve, drove into the city sometimes, sometimes for a concert.

My mother got pregnant twice without even discussing it with me. I didn't much like my little sisters then but they became important to me when I left home for college. They ran around and interrupted my piano lessons and my piano practice. My

teacher Annabelle Lynn came to the house once a week. I only had a spinet but at least it had a keyboard. By the time I got to junior high the school had a real piano, not a grand, just an upright, but it had a better sound. I liked clean treble and rumbling bass.

In high school, music was the most important thing in my life. I did well in all my other courses, but the band, the orchestra, the solo recitals, those were what I lived for. Until I grew a moustache, for that made me look really older. I could pass for eighteen at fifteen and I could go to places that sold beer, including pool halls. I lost a little money at pool because I really wasn't very good, but my moustache got me into a honky-tonk where I got paid five bucks a night to play the piano.

That was the end of the classical music for me, no more dreams of being a concert pianist, but it got me familiar with jazz. I sat in on sessions with good but intoxicated professional musicians and I did more than just okay. In high school, mind you. I heard my first ragtime then and I fell in love with Scott Joplin. I learned something about his music and about his life. He had struggled against a lot and he had suffered a lot. For me he was a genius and a tragic hero.

I went to Rutgers in New Brunswick on a music scholarship. Even though it wasn't far from home I lived in a dormitory because I wanted the independence. Even with the scholarship I could barely afford the dormitory but a car and gas and all that would be even more expensive, and I couldn't drive and I couldn't afford the driving lessons because I had to pay for beer (students have to drink a lot), so I got jobs playing and singing at bars around New Brunswick (if you can call my singing singing).

Playing until after two every other night (into the morning, actually) I became a bit sleep-deprived. Hangovers didn't help either. So my grades went from four-oh to three-five. If I dropped to three-oh I would lose my scholarship, so just in case I might lose my scholarship, for insurance I got jobs two more nights a week so I might save some money. And when you are a musician in a joint the beer is free. I went to less than three-point-oh and lost my scholarship for studying piano, and all because I played the piano.

I still loved music and I still loved playing, but I sorta loved paying rent and tuition and drinking beer, so I looked to change majors to something easier. Philosophy was appealing, but I didn't want to spend the rest of my life pumping gas. English was out for similar reasons, and so was Flemish (my native tongue). I didn't want to be a medical doctor... Psychology. I could make a good living in psychology, couldn't I? Weren't psychologists in great demand?

I started passing my courses more easily, made a three-two-five and then the next semester a three-seven-five. I was on a roll. I still played piano, pretended to sing, and I drank a lot of beer. By the time I finished my bachelor's I wanted to keep going to school because my life was good (my schedule let me drink), so I applied for a slot in the psychology graduate department. They turned me down. The other applicants all had four-point-ohs.

I still played piano every night, and I was pretty popular, well-known enough to always have a gig at one bar or another. I was fairly settled in my little apartment,

didn't eat much because I really wasn't a very good cook. And I wasn't very hungry. I applied for the graduate program in psychology again the next term because I wanted to be able to be billed as "*Doctor Brautigam, Pianologist of the Mind*" or some classy thing like that.

They didn't admit me to the graduate program the next term either, nor the next. It seemed unfair. But I kept playing at the clubs, and I studied Scott Joplin's music. Some of it was so hard to play even he couldn't play it well, but I suppose the more those screwball syphilis bacteria messed with his brain the less well his fingers worked. So far as I knew I hadn't yet contracted syphilis but if I did at least we have penicillin now.

My life was grungy but I made pretty good money. Now that I could pay for gas I got a car, a really cheap one, eighty dollars. I taught myself to drive in my spare time. Even though I wasn't in school I didn't manage to have much spare time. So I didn't learn an awful lot about driving, and I couldn't even find my way around New Brunswick. At least I could get onto the highway slowly and drive to New York slowly on the right shoulder.

It wasn't easy to drive and it wasn't easy to park. Parking was tight on the city streets and parking cost more per hour than I made per day. So I just pulled up onto the sidewalk and locked the car. I got a lot of tickets, but I was from out of town so what the hell. I asked my New York musician friends where they parked their cars. They laughed so long and hard I couldn't make out what they said. Finally, when I had bought them a round of drinks, they told me they didn't park. They didn't drive. They were New Yorkers.

I thought about that, went back to New Jersey, packed my stuff into the car, drove to New York City, parked my clunker on a sidewalk and went to find a room. I didn't worry about the car because it hadn't cost me nearly as much as my outstanding tickets. Now I was a New Yorker, and it was really easy to find jobs because there were bars and clubs on every block. Every musician I knew had a day job, worked in a record shop or a garage or a restaurant. Jazz musicians out of musical work always want to organize a band, so I always could sit in.

My room was really small and dingy, but what did I care? I was hardly ever there. It was a little corner room without a window—it was in a basement. I was on top of the world. People milled about in the street around the clock, always in a hurry unless they were panhandling. If I had to eat I could go into the corner deli (not a Jewish deli, that was different) and I could get an apple or a week-old ham sandwich. Or I could go to the Automat.

I still wanted to be a doctor (a psychotherapist) because I really sympathized with sick and crazy people, didn't want to watch them suffer. So if only they would come to me I would tell them to get well quick and stop that suffering, or to just get out because I didn't want to watch them suffer. Every spring I still mailed my application to Rutgers psychology department graduate school for the following fall, and every summer they told me no. I finally thought to apply to some other school.

I applied to several dozen universities. I only was accepted at one, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. How could I even consider it? Oklahoma? Was that something like the Bel-

gian Congo? Here I was in New York City. Oklahoma was a couple universes away. Sure, I was familiar with New Jersey. Yes there were a lot of cows in New Jersey. Yes it was close to New York City. But Oklahoma? That's nowhere close to New York City even though there are a lot of cows there.

I had to catch my breath. I had been serious about becoming a doctor of Psychology for a very long time. I also had been serious about music and I also had been serious about jokes (because they were part of the routine, between the songs). Now it seemed I was faced with a serious joke, a Jersey boy in Oklahoma. Now I was faced with a serious joke, a farm town with an ivory tower of higher learning. I like serious jokes. I took it.

Rubes are dumbfounded when they get to New York City, wander the sidewalks staring at the skyscrapers above them because they cannot see the sky, pushed along with the flow of foot-traffic on the sidewalks, overpowered by millions walking against them they flow with the throng. I was startled and dumbfounded when I came to Oklahoma; the sky was an oppressive bright blue and the buildings were hard to see because they were so flat. I went from a crowded vertical world to a sparse horizontal one.

I found the university and I found a room and I found a neighborhood bar. How efficient of me, how convenient. The second day I met the chairman of the department and we agreed on my schedule and my proposal for a thesis, something I could identify with, the experience of the immigrant child. I could even aim at my secret remedy for the distress that comes from being thrown into a strange place, a strange language, a strange culture--ethanol the remedy, and music in a dark dank smoky basement. What a relief!

I pursued this "Brautigam Remedy" for all I was worth. Classes were easy, mostly seminars, and I was glib enough to convince most everyone (including my instructors) without really *knowing* anything. I missed playing every night because I couldn't find a jazz club or a honky-tonk. I played most every day, though, on a baby grand in a practice room of the music department. No audience, no beer, no smoke, no dark. It was quite an impossible compromise for an artist like me.

Life was orderly but I was restless. I hung out in a little campus beer joint, K.L. Snoozer's, drank some beer, drank some more beer, fell asleep in the corner booth, made some notes for my thesis. I read some helpful texts not on the assigned reading list, psychology classics like Aristophanes, Ovid, the Marquis de Sade, Pierre Louys, Sacher-Masoch, and the dirtiest of all Sigmund Freud. Sometimes some undergraduates came over to buy me a beer while I explained my thesis to them.

Then a wonderful thing happened. At the new mall just a few blocks from the campus a new beer joint opened, advertising for bar staff and auditioning for entertainers. I went immediately to see the owner Jack Aguilar. The place was drenched in sawdust, intolerably noisy from power saws, full of fumes from fresh paint. He told me to come at ten that night to audition. The place was not at all promising by daylight, but I was used to seeing better in the dark.

So I went back that night, and there he had a brand new upright piano, a Wurlitzer. (Wurlitzer really made pianos before they made juke boxes.) It was shiny, lit up the

whole corner of the bar just by reflected light. I sat on the bench behind it, facing the empty room (no carpenters banging). I was waiting to hear the sound of that piano, afraid even if new it might be badly out of tune, or tinny just because it was small. Jack and his wife Terri and the new bartender Dan were waiting to hear not so much their new piano but to hear me, to hear if I could play, perhaps I would be their new piano player.

Could I play? I could play. Even that audience of merely three was the best crowd I had had in many months. I was excited, so rapid-fire Johnny restrained himself, paused a dramatic moment with his hands hovering above the keyboard, then rained down the brilliant shower of notes of "The Maple Leaf Rag". The piano was brilliant and I wasn't half bad. The three of them smiled and clapped and brought me a beer. That wasn't enough, so I bargained for all the beer I could drink, and a hundred dollars a night.

None of us guessed how quickly we would fill the place. And it stayed that way. And even though they crowded in more tables until it seemed people were sitting on the ceiling, and the lines at the front door got pretty long. It was a relief to me to be entertaining again. I could do it without a conscious thought. I didn't have to plan a program because they all shouted out for what they wanted, what they really liked from what I had played for them before. Once or twice a night I wedged in something new.

I had finished my class schedule and my seminars. All I had to do to become a real doctor was to write my thesis and have the committee accept it. The faculty committee was rather conservative and reluctant to accept new ideas, and when one of them accidentally came to the Village Tavern for a beer that tilted the whole boat into the drink. Even though my thinking was brilliant I wasn't making a lot of progress on my thesis-writing because my brain wouldn't tell my fingers what to do, and my brain didn't want to do it any more, and playing piano was working better than playing psychotherapist.

So, I fell into a stable spiral for the next two years. I played and sang and joked at the Village Tavern every night from seven to two. I drank at the Village Tavern every night from six to three. I took cigarette breaks and pee breaks. Everyone loved me and I loved everyone. Dan tried to wake me up and get me to work on time, but I guess he wasn't very good at it, so I solved the problem by suggesting that I move in with him. Good idea.

A stable spiral. I kept getting older (against the odds), I kept making money for doing what I really liked (but I missed the high culture classic stuff), I slept a lot (at least I didn't remember going home, and I had to really try hard to wake up late in the next day). My energy went progressively down. But I swelled up. And I lost weight (muscle anyhow). And my breath got worse and worse and worse. Even I stayed away from me.

Dan kept my clothes clean, but not my songs. Dan kept me fed, but not very much. Dan kept me in cigarettes until I burnt up all the cigarettes. We shared a nice room in his mother's house, a little apartment really, above the garage. She was at work downtown all day so I went into the house if I was awake. (I usually slept late.) She had a grand piano in her little living room. If I felt up to it I would go there to play clas-

sical music, especially Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev, maybe some Liszt or Schumann. I had scores of all of them, until they burnt up.

All I could really concentrate on was performance. If I had pursued being a concert pianist it might have been much the same. My performance was good for me because I had immediate gratification from it. If they clapped or laughed they had given me everything I could use or appreciate. The money was necessary, came from the proprietor Jack, but he gave me what he gave me because I got him what I got him. Without me he wouldn't have it.

As I said, to have pursued being a higher class of piano player might have made little difference. My energy and skill belonged to the audience, and progressively I lost what little life I had of my own. I guess I knew it couldn't intensify progressively this way without coming to a crescendo, that eventually I would crash and burn. At some level I knew that, but what could I have done to change it even if I had seen it coming and even if I had chosen to get free of it? I didn't see it and I didn't have guts enough to change.

The tragedy of little John Brautigam, immigrant boy musician, kept rolling down hill, and I couldn't change it and I couldn't take care of the hopeless little tyke. That's what my thesis was about, the spiral down that drowned the kid who was a displaced misfit in a society in which he did not belong. No wonder the thesis committee didn't accept it, too simple, too common, too sad. It didn't happen to me from the outside, but corroded me from within.

The first clue I ignored was when Dan had to wake me up every day to go to work. A next one was when he had to feed me. And next he had to get my cigarettes and go to the cleaners for me. Then I couldn't even drive my car so he picked me up and took me home. Then he moved me in with him just to make it easier to take care of me. He gave me drinks around the clock so I wouldn't get the shakes, the DT's, have a seizure.

Dan tried to keep me from smoking in bed, but that nicotine addiction was stubborn, kept at its job, and finally killed me. It killed him too eventually. I loved smoking. It made me look a little bit like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* (who died of lung cancer too). I guess I should have done a study on how alcoholics die, many from the toxic effects on liver, heart and brain and many from the trauma that comes from drunkenness, and even the ones who stop drinking die later from smokers' diseases.

It was all those dependencies that did me in, central of which, perhaps, was dependency on applause from the audience. I could get no satisfaction directly from myself, only through them. I should have paid *them* to watch *me*. I should have paid them to laugh. They did help me perform. They told me what to play or sing. They set me up for jokes, either canned ones or improvised responses to their stereotypic provocations.

I lost the car. I couldn't steer my own boat. From there on it was all hopeless. The first time I killed myself smoking in bed Dan saved me. I appreciated that because I knew he saved me out of love. I loved him for it, but it turned out it was inexorable, and within a few months I was compelled to reprise the act. I was sorry to hurt him, and it really hurt to watch him suffer the depression and delusion and grief that

pounded him after that, but he would have done the same stuff to himself. Another tragedy.

I can't remember all the details in order. I just crashed through those last few months like I finished the last set at the Village Tavern most every night, in a blackout. Sometimes people said that last set was the best. Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was a flashy way of refusing to die, until I died. Perhaps it set the pattern for a type of tragedy, Wagnerian sort of tragedy, sad and fiery and prolonged. Perhaps it was a bit like Eliot's most famous line (thanks, Tom) "Not with a bang but a whimper".

A MEETING IN HADES

It is quiet in this large room, folding chairs in a clumsy circle; on a central table there are no ashtrays; on a side table there is an empty coffee urn, empty mugs but no sugar or creamer, one plastic spoon, no napkins. Wraiths float in intermittently, sit silently, perhaps a dozen and a half. For several moments no one new comes in. The door closes. No one takes control.

Jack: Would any of you like to chair?

Erik: You started this whole thing, Jack. I ran out as soon as possible. I'd leave now if I knew where there's an exit.

Jack: You are such a chicken, Erik. We only hired you for your size, big enough to scare the drunks. You could leave now, but where would you go, back to the shoe store?

Serena: Yeah, a real man--not. Ran from a little woman. Maybe that Beretta wasn't loaded.

Jack: How about you, Dan? You're the one who really ran the place.

Dan: Not really, Boss.

Severel: Dan, do it. Come on, Dan. We've always been able to count on you.

Dan: Okay. But everyone has to pitch in. Jack may be the boss of the Tavern (but not of this new place here), and I may have been the manager (now retired), but every one of you is important to me and to all the others. We need to know how you really feel.

(Silence for several more moments)

Martha: Say something, Russ.

Russ: Whuddya want me to say?

Martha: Tell everyone we miss them.

Russ: *Do* we miss them?

Martha: Yes, Rustler-Boy, these are the best friends we've ever had.

Russ: Better than our bowling league?

Martha: How many nights did we spend bowling?

Russ: Every Wednesday.

Martha: And how many nights at the Village Tavern?

Russ: Seven.

Martha: And now do you know why we're not professional bowlers?

Russ: Professional drinkers?

Dan: You two never change. It's good to see you. Uncle Bulgie, you look better here in Hades than I ever saw you look up top. What do you think that's all about?

Bulgie: It's a clearer view from down here. I can see my whole life much clearer. You know, I made a lot of mistakes, a lot of bad judgments. I missed out on a lot because I just wanted something to put in my mouth--food, drink, a cigar. From here I look like a little baby, a fat little baby.

Jack: You weren't so bad, Bulgie. You had a job; you had a wife; you had some kids. You sorta had some friends. At least some of us liked you a little bit, the ones on the soft ball team. And we all felt sorry for you when you lost your job at the bank and when Madeline went back to Nebraska, and when you lost your house, then lost your room, then lost your mind, and then when you had absolutely no value whatsoever to anyone in the world I decided to fire you, but you were already dead under the dumpster.

Bulgie: Thanks a lot, Jack. You make me sound a lot more glamorous than I ever felt. I always envied you because you were a hot-shot entrepreneur and you wore a suit and tie. And you and Terri seemed happy with each other. And you never drank, but you sold an awful lot of the stuff.

Jack: You never did see me drink, did you? Well, I've had a chance to think about it, and I agree with you. You get a clearer image of it from down here--down here humble--a sort of telescopic view. I thought I could take it or leave it until I saw I was going to lose it all, especially Terri. From here I can see it wasn't just me, my thirst, my silver tongue, my business-like mind. From here I can see my angry loser alcoholic father, my poor doomed kid brother, my miserable mother addicted to drama. You're right. I was lucky. An awful lot of things went my way despite a low and rough upbringing. But I wasn't able to ride the rough waves, just the gentle weather when things were going well. I wasn't very brave or very strong, Bulgie. Even though I didn't have a drink those last couple years I was a drunken loser, a dead man like my father, like my little brother, and like you, Bulgie. I didn't die under a dumpster but I did die under a bridge.

Carl: We all drank together, but were we all alcoholics? Perhaps I was just an old widower trying to take the edge off his grief. I was lonely. Candace and I had been very close for forty years. We went through the young lean times and we didn't forget it. Sure, the last twenty-five years were pretty easy with little bits of oil money coming in from a thousand different wells; it adds up. Our one daughter was grown and on her own; she didn't need her old father to support her. I'm not sure she really liked me anyhow. Yeah, I wasn't hungry but I was lonely. I didn't do anything in my penthouse but watch TV and fall asleep, then I went to the office for meetings. They paid me for my experience and common sense, so I didn't say much and they thought I was brilliant. I learned to be old and wise and silent, drunk or sober. Dina saved my life, gave me something to live for, so I was free to die. Before I knew she was pregnant I had already put everything I had into trusts for her and the child. I wasn't going to live much longer, so once I knew things were in order I was ready to put me out of my misery--well, not so miserable once she loved

me, but certainly I was ready to put me out of my pain. My heart was really giving way and that hurt a lot. I made my exit with an easy mind.

Dina: I have come to understand all that now, Carl. I don't like having given you up, but I can't argue about it any more. I think you're right, you were not an alcoholic, just drank more and more.

Carl: Then why was he ready to shoot himself? Is that a chicken's way out? Is that the madness of an alcoholic? I've thought a lot about it myself. I shot myself because I was dying of disease too, and it was going to get worse and worse and force my family and my young daughter to take care of me and watch me die slowly. My disease was cancer, not a bad heart; does that make a difference?

Carl: The cancer isn't different from heart disease as far as I can see, but I remember you from the Village Tavern, and you, my dear, are indeed an alcoholic. I saw you in there every night, and you drank a lot, and everybody knew how you neglected that child.

Carl: Hey, hang on there! How do you know I was in there every night unless you were in there every night? Just because you were quiet in the corner waiting for Dina doesn't mean you weren't a regular like everybody in this room.

Carl: "Regular" doesn't mean the same as "alcoholic".

Dan: Hold on. We are all in this together, so we don't need to fight or call names.

Serena: I shot myself, but I wasn't an alcoholic. I was depressed.

Carl: I was depressed. You weren't depressed; you were furious.

Serena: You were *grieving*.

Carl: Then later I was happy.

Serena: But you were still drinking.

Carl: Yes, I was still drinking.

Russ: We all were drinking, Carl. You know that.

Martha: I wasn't even there every night, was I, Rustler?

Russ: You were drinking, Martha, just like the rest of us. You had beer in the refrigerator at home, and every night when it evaporated somehow you went to the store again the next day for more "groceries".

Dan: Like I said, we're all in this together, we're all alcoholics, but not all of us drank. I didn't drink.

Jerry: Didn't you drink, Dan?

Johnny: He did not drink.

Bulgie: How would you know, Johnny? You may have known Dan but you went downhill so far you hardly knew anything.

Johnny: How would you know anything, Uncle Bulgie? Your brain was mush. And your liver had you blown up like a toad, worse than Jerry.

Bulgie: I'm sorry, Johnny. You played piano great, and your jokes slid through with precise timing, and your impromptu repartee contra hecklers was superb and fluid.

Johnny: Gosh, Bulgie, I never heard you speak coherently, with a sophisticated vocabulary.

Bulgie: We're cured now, Johnny. Didn't you notice?

Johnny: I can breathe!

Jerry: I can't believe Dan didn't drink.

Dan: I had some time in AA by then. Is there an AA meeting in Hades? Is *this* an AA meeting?

Corky: Is this Hades?

Jack: It isn't heaven.

Martha: And it sure ain't hell.

Serena: And it isn't purgatory because all those reward and punishment things are just superstitions to scare kids into behaving.

Carol: Myths.

Serena: Catholic superstitions.

Russ: Baptist superstitions.

Corky: "Hellish rewards, heavenly punishments".

Jerry: Where were you? I don't remember *you*. Who the hell are you? You didn't drink with us. You were not a regular.

Corky: I was sort of a regular; I was just quiet.

Jerry: You were no *regular* regular.

Corky: I had to be there, I drew the advertisements for the place. I was Nathan's partner.

Dina: I don't remember waiting on you. I don't remember you drinking beer.

Corky: I didn't drink much. My parents sure did when I was a kid. And I drank myself to death as much as any of you, just not alcohol.

Martha: It was inspiring the way you got along with Christine, Carol.

Carol: We loved each other, *really* loved each other.

Dina: I loved Carl. I really loved Carl and I still do.

Carl: And I love you, Sweetie.

Serena: What's "love"? I hated. Hated all men and most women. I thought I loved someone once. Not a *woman*, Carol. But I hated him and I should have killed him.

Jerry: Was it me?

Serena: No, Jerry, it wasn't you. You must have a really big ego to think that. I have *no* feeling for you, even after you insisted on feeling me.

Jerry: I guess I'm just used to women hating me, three wives. But not my mother.

Serena: They should have killed you. The first one should have killed you, saved the others some bother.

Jerry: She tried. By God she tried.

Serena: I should have killed *him* instead of myself. It was a mistake.

Jerry: You should have killed who?

Johnny: That should be "whom".

Serena: That should be Branson Pringle, the son of a bitch.

Carol: Men!

Dina: Not Carl.

Martha: Not Russ. Well, maybe not Russ. Or only a little bit Russ. Rustler, did you ever go out on me before I *helped* you go out on me?

Russ: Hardly at all, Lover.

Dan: Wherever we are, we're not here together by accident.

Jack: We're here together like we were at the Tavern together. I planned that Tavern but I didn't have much control over what happened next. Things just kept going their own way, by fate. I didn't know you would be so magic, John. I didn't know you would make me so much money, and I didn't know by making more and more I would lose it all.

Dan: This isn't an AA meeting, but it's a little like one. At an AA meeting everyone tries to be honest, and you don't interrupt another person, and you don't speak twice.

Bulgie: We're honest, Dan. We're telling each other things we never said before.

Jerry: We never *knew* before. All we said before was, "I'll bet the Giants lose," and "Get me another beer."

Dan: At an AA meeting you've got to *want* to stop drinking.

Johnny: We've all stopped drinking, Dan.

Bulgie: And eating.

Carol: And fucking.

Russ: And crapping and peeing.

Dan: We may not be orderly but we are pretty honest.

Carl: I think we've learned a lot more about each other than we knew before.

Dina: Maybe more than we ever wanted to know.

Carl: Dina and I know we love each other.

Martha: And even if he smells bad, Rustler and I love each other.

Carol: I love Christine more than anyone in the world has ever loved, and Diana.

Dan: I always loved you, Carol. Did you know that?

Jerry: Everyone loves Carol.

Erik: Even I had fantasies about you. And now I find out you're a lesbian!

Serena: Erik, go back to Duluth.

Dan: We found out we love a lot. Like you all didn't know that I love John.

Johnny: I certainly didn't know that, Dan.

Jack: The more you drank the less you knew, Johnny. We knew you guys were close. How many times did you die together, smoking?

Dan: So a lot of us loved each other.

Jack: I think we all loved each of us.

Dan: And we all drank.

Serena: Almost all.

Bulgie: All, Serena. We all drank, even Corky.

Dan: And a lot of us were shot in the head by our own selves, not shot by each other. Pretty sad, pretty angry, pretty scared.

Russ: But we were just okay human people, weren't we? Regular guys--and gals. Regulars.

Jerry: I'm afraid the vast majority of normal people wouldn't agree we're regular, normal. I never was. I thought I was the best but I was a silly egotistical little twerp, alienated from the conventions of normal people (if there is such a thing as normal people). I was a salesman; I manipulated and lied to people for money. I may as well have been a pimp or a lawyer or a politician. No wonder I had no real love with any of my wives. I idealized my mother and myself but I didn't act on any ideal level. Hell, even at the Tavern where my only friends were I wasn't honest or deep. Any bum off the street could have taken my stool at the bar and you all wouldn't have known the difference. Love, friendship, beyond me.

Jack: I think everyone here cared about you, Jerry. When you suffered we sympathized. When anyone suffered we sympathized. Every time you wrecked your Alfa Romeo we sympathized.

Jerry: Not so I could hear it.

Dan: Not with the sufferer so much, Jack, but with ourselves because we were victims of the same sorts of deficits and deprivation, especially of love. We all loved each other some, the group of regulars and Village Tavern staff (who were regulars because they were always there); but true personal love between us as real persons, not much. Too much preoccupation with each of our own selves, too much oblivion, the precious death we called up in order to inflict it upon ourselves, to share with each other in some superficial fashion so we wouldn't have to admit that really we were alone. Even after I stopped

drinking and my brain slowly began to work I was isolated from normal human life and love by my alcoholic habits. “Dry drunk” we call it in AA.

Johnny: Now that I can think, Dan, I can see how much you loved me. You saved my life much more than once. You admired those things about me I had hoped to nourish so I could be a real man. I wanted to go beyond where my parents had struggled to, to stay in harmony with them and to support them, to have the distinction of really being “Doctor Brautigam”, to help people with their suffering, a real psychotherapist.

Corky: You did help people with their suffering, Johnny. You entertained them by the hundreds every night, gave them relief from whatever ailed them. You were a true artist. Don’t demean and destroy your artistic work like I did. If you get another life, don’t destroy it with unfocused poisoning of your soul and body. I watched you. I *drew* you. That’s a kind of deep perception. I know you in ways you cannot know. I know me more now thanks to all of you. I was quiet and isolated but I was one of you, caring about you all I could (not much perhaps), and just like each of you I was doing myself in.

Dina: I am alive. I care for me and for my growing son. I will always love Carl, and because he loves me and Junior I will always love myself some, more than anyone thought I had a chance to. I love Diana, Carol, and I will embrace her and support her right along with Carl Junior. Now I understand your love and your mortality. Your story is like Carl’s in that regard. Nothing could be more important to me. I am alive.

Erik: I was alive too. I had a good family, good friends, a good career, and I had my own gratifying athleticism even if I didn’t become famous. And I didn’t enjoy a minute of it, just followed the pattern of the play, the template of conventional success without the satisfaction. And I drank and smoked as much as I could fit in between performances, just like any of us. I belong here too, and I’m about to cry like I never have because now, with all of you, I don’t feel alone any more.

Martha: I did get a bit of the good stuff, the “normal” stuff. I grew up pretty stupid in a pretty stupid family in a pretty stupid town, but I really have loved this Rustler from a very early age, and I have tried to take care of him and help him grow, keep him out of prison. That love for my big kid Russ helped me raise Amanda and Randy with a real mother’s love. Yeah I drank. And I put a lot of energy into empty “doing”, running the office at the oil company just for the mechanical activity really, like playing the game of bowling. Vacuuming, washing dishes, I just *did* it because it was there. The part I loved was loving you, Russell McCulliss. What do you say to that?

Russ: Yup.

Dan: So what does it add up to, now that we have worked so hard at the accounting? Is Rustler right? Have we been just ordinary people? Do ordinary people get into the scrapes and crashes like we have perpetrated?

Carol: Dan, before last call at this subterranean meeting I just want to say I loved you too. I saw you were bright and helpful to everyone. You had a real comfortable sense of humor, not sarcastic. I saw you loved me, but I could not afford to do anything with that. Mostly I saw that you had managed to stop drinking. I had a good idea about how high you had been flying before I met you, how you had crashed from the big time. I think you showed us we had a right to live, that we didn’t have to self-destruct, at least not so early

as we did. You don't get a gold star for smoking yourself to death, but I guess you couldn't help the temptation to go like your lover Johnny.

Johnny: We weren't like that, Carol.

Dan: We slept *beside* each other, not in the same bed. We were real men.

Carol: You were real lovers. Sweet.

Dan: I won't try to tally up the scores, the number of us who smoked ourselves to death quicker or more slowly, the ones who drove off highways or into bridges, the several who were so desperate we shot ourselves or came real close to it (Jack, Carl, Erik who was so afraid of that). And each of us took the chicken's way, drinking to ease the pain of failing at real life, even if we denied it. We failed, we lost out, we hurt and disappointed those about us. Especially we puzzled them and hurt their feelings; we nullified their love.

Russ: We loved each other, Dan, in ways we had not done on purpose. Isn't it good enough to know it now, now that our lives are over?

Jack: Good enough? It's more than we have earned. It is a blessing.

Dan: Let's hug each other and pray for the poor fools who are still sitting up there stupid at the bar.

AFTERWARD

I thank you, reader, my Virgil, for giving me occasion to go back to my own Hades from where I slowly crawled up into the blinding light, to struggle a lumpy life on the surface of this scrawny Earth. I don't know what is supposed to be hell in this metaphor, for myths of good places and bad are likely just as false as any myth, any metaphor.

All is timeless, yet everything is real. And "good", and "bad"? I doubt those contrivances help at all to comprehend what happens, they just let us see how we have thought we feel about it at one time or another--and as I said, there is no real phenomenon Time, so are our feelings real? Our feelings do not tell us what we need to know in the world around us, just a muddled impression of something rattling within us. So whatever emotions are good for, they are very poor navigating instruments.

These ghosts you have met are brighter for me today because you asked me to polish them for you. They carry no good nor bad perhaps, but they have tried here to bring us gifts. For me these who are dead have blossomed, bodied up to glow again. For you I imagine they have been a chorus who sing, "Don't drown your pain--that will kill you, fool."

Why have I lived so long myself? I constructed my own demise a million times, just as you have. I wonder if I haven't clunked along farther than I was able because I meant to help the helpless, the drunks, the addicts, the schizophrenics, the elderly, the dying, the children, the prisoners--those are the ones who saved my life even when I accomplished puny little for their sakes.

And you? Thank you for asking me about the Tavern. It is not a place where our misery is generated, just where we bring together our separate sufferings, to lay them out on the bar and to compare them one against the other--to see how similar they are, if not identical at least parallel. Perhaps now we can see them for what they really are, human experience in its raw undecorated state, not ugly, just neutral--just how it is.

Though this Tavern was long ago shut down, its timeless door is never locked. You have been welcomed in, and you are welcome to let yourself out again in any direction, free to go your very own way now. My spectral friends will yammer at you no longer. If what you want is to feel good, go ahead and try it; but it is sheer appearance, you see. If what you fear is pain, forget it; as they say, there must be pain but suffering is optional. If what you fantasize is wealth or power, they don't exist, and to become obsessed with them is to make all your efforts blast away freedom and comfort and even the very lives of others around you--then eventually you will possess only misery and guilt.

Don't just do something, stand there. If chasing after or running away from feelings is fatuous, don't waste your energy that way. You fear you will be empty, or that you will accomplish nothing? The fullness you seek comes not from building or grabbing or ardently praying, but simply by accepting what is in you and about you, for that is what is real. There it is. Embrace what is. That is all there is.

TABER

Dear Reader,

You don't know how difficult this book has been for me to write; I think I know how difficult it is for you to read. Despite my age and waning cognition my difficulty has not been to remember how life was fifty years ago. Nor has it been difficult for me to write because the matter of this book is too painful for me to contemplate, for I have accepted the realities of human suffering for well over fifty years and I continue to do what I can to minimize suffering for the persons I encounter. My burden is not even because I type outrageously slowly from the time I started to study Plato in Greek, syllable by syllable. My own difficulty writing is like my difficulty doing anything, it seems to be personal or social. As a person I am not efficient; I have some idea of what to do but I set it on the back burner for decades, wait for it to ripen and for me to get a bit energetic about doing it. As to social challenges, I never learned the unwritten rules everyone else seemed to have learned by kindergarten, never learned to think or speak in a conventional fashion, never learned what is acceptable or desirable to the average person or to the reader in the marketplace. Even though I have spent my life with them I never learned how to converse coherently with addicts about addiction (those of alcohol and nicotine as well as others such as heroin and methamphetamine). My grandchildren are generally kind to me but I doubt I am much fun to them. So, to communicate to you even these straightforward and honest tales is difficult for me. I have done what I can do; now it is your burden to take all this and make it meaningful. After all, the writer can't be expected to do all the work.

The other tales that make up the body of this book fall together in one anonymized story of characters like my own friends; those posthumous first-person tales are bleak because they are of persons who are addicted, especially to the use of alcohol; most of them live here through crescendos of bleakness, and they die that way. This other item is not anonymous, my biased account of my own son (my step-son if you require the conventional description). He manifested and exercised his addictive disease for the first thirty or so years of his life, was graced by what appeared to me an exemplary program of recovery for most of a decade thereafter at the end of which he died of an overdose. It is not another story at all, just a few words of my own; if someone comes to need a more thorough biographic sketch of Taber I will try to render it. All that is important here is that his recovery thrives still today and supports increasingly many others even after the weight of overwhelming disease has crushed his body. I intend to convince you his program of recovery continues after his cremation and interment. I personally count on him to serve as a strength to me each day.

Thanks.

NMP

JAMES TABER OLSON

May 5, 1978 to June 15, 2015

Without honesty there is no freedom. Without freedom there is no love, no joy, no growth, no strength. Usually we are slow in these, sometimes criticize or even condemn ourselves because we know we are quite imperfect. Isn't that one of the major obstacles to all the healthy aspects of our living, our own refusal honestly to accept ourselves as we really are?

Through the many decades of my own struggles to live in peace with the conventions of the "normal" world I really have learned more every day, but I have never mastered it. I have not forgotten to look carefully even though I know my vision suffers rather severe limitations. I don't pretend to know the Truth (with a capital T) but I am willing to peer closely at the path in front of me to see it. I am not without some measure of courage in my imperfect honesty.

I want you to know my child died in the midst of his journey within freedom. I met Taber when he was in juvenile detention, and I rejoice to remember we *really* met that day. He said to me from prison, "I am free." That did not make our lives immediately full and joyful, and what we share today is not big and impressive like a colorful billboard; but billboards are shallow, two-dimensional, and our real lives are deep. We do not seem heroic because we do not have imaginary strength and beauty.

We'll have to be satisfied to be humble, honest with each other as we can be, here on ground level one day at a time, not flying above everyone else in a delusional future of seeming glory. And if we are honest about our limitations, groping here half blind, we will easily support and help each other. That is not dependence but freedom, freedom to live in real community rather than in delusions of "independence". We are always *interdependent*, thank God, for without honestly embracing each other how could we have warmth in our lives?

We can say of him and of all of us that we are dependent on substances. Molecules have no moral value good or bad. Our addictions are part of ourselves, not imported from somewhere far away as drugs are. Freedom from molecules does not free our souls to live and love. Taber taught me strength and love and freedom again, the same sanity I had as a very small child before the cruel distortions of an imperfect confusing society threw me way off the path.

Even though I do not know for sure they exist, I mistrusted and even hated "normal" people. They didn't understand me. I watched that man Taber grow slowly. As a parent I shared with my team of four co-parents our fruitless efforts to corral or mold him into health and happiness. We did not possess a wealth of health and happiness enough to give away. We were imperfect. So is he.

Someone might say he failed in his recovery; it is foolish to say such a thing, for his has been great success in recovering life and sanity. I watched him help dozens, hundreds, thousands to make some steps toward honesty and freedom; that is impressive success. And what he gives continues to give. He died as part of a real life marked by pain and struggle, but that is not what stands out in the total picture. Our disease is always lurking, and overwhelms us when it gets loose from its containment, but we do not live in terror of it; we honestly remember it is there, a part of our selves.

Our suffering does not make us free, but our honesty does. Through his own pain and struggle Taber taught me that repeatedly, and he taught me again to cherish my own honesty. Our real world is fluid not solid, more like quicksand than rock. Taber loves me on that same real ground as I love him, where we live together imperfect in our uncertainty. The warmth we need for ourselves is to help the next lost child, or the angry exile who wanders into our world. Taber taught me that and shared it with me. I admire and thank him.

