

Reconciled A Book of Short Stories

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Book 1.

Reconciled

Frank took several sips of his Coke before he began his story, primarily for Janice. She was the youngest, only sixty-eight years young. At ninety-five, I was the oldest in the group. Frank was seventy. The other five ranged in age from eight-five to ninety-three. The other residents in the retirement home referred to us as the “Addies”, a nickname for the Advocates.”

We had originally banded together to present a strong advocacy to the management for correcting the weaknesses in the services being provided by staff. In the course of our observations, we soon found ourselves noticing special needs by some of the residents. When possible we found ways to meet those needs, if not by management then by taking the initiative to do what was needed.

Even in a well-managed retirement facility, the staff is limited to what it can do for some of the most fragile of the residents.

Frank, of all of us, was the most adored by the older or more fragile residents. He helped some of the women to rise from their seats to a firm grip of their walkers. He looked for the least likely to be asked to be his dance partner. During the parties, he sought out the lonelier ones to dance or sit with them for a few minutes. He got the rest of us Addies to make sure that everyone felt welcome at any gathering.

The hours between meals or especially planned activities can be lonely for many. Some whose vision is limited cannot occupy themselves with reading. Television is worthless, the content all pap or covering subjects of little value to the elderly.

Frank encouraged us to spend a few hours each week dropping in for visits with those who had few if any outside visitors.

Perhaps his concern for others was rooted in the fact that he never had a visitor.

As a group of advocates, we surprised ourselves, discovering that we had developed a strong bond among the eight of us. We had become a cohesive and life sharing band of “brothers” under the leadership of Janice.

On the agenda of each gathering was a “sharing time” that might include good or bad news for one of us since our last meeting. Often one of us would be willing to talk about some long standing personal concern or some happy circumstance in their past lives.

Yesterday, four of us “Addies” were having a second cup of coffee at the end of lunch. Our other table companions had departed

Janice, with a smile in her voice said “Frank, I can see that something has put you on edge. There is some change in your demeanor, maybe only a different look on your face. Care to share?”

Frank scowled. “You, Janice, are too dammed observant. I want to share. In fact, I can hardly stand waiting but I think it should wait for the whole group. We do meet tomorrow. Right?”

I popped up with “This sounds too important to wait. Why don’t we gather the rest and have a special session in the conference room, if it is not reserved.”

Mary said “I know for a fact that the room is available. Where do we find the others?”

I said “Those four take a slow stroll around the block after lunch each day. They should be arriving within the next ten minutes.”

It was arranged. Sue agreed that her nap could wait while Jim said “My new mystery novel can certainly wait.”

Anyone could see the anxiety in Frank’s demeanor as he began. “I don’t think I ever mentioned having a son. You have heard me often on the subject of a great love affair with my wife, Julie.”

Jim interrupted. “That has the markings of a mystery and you know I love mysteries.”

The group indulged him with smiles but was looking at Frank who continued “Bill was our only child but not very spoiled. Because of my travels, across the globe, he and Julie, my dear wife established a strong bond. I thought I had a decent relationship despite my long absences.

Julie and I had worked out our life plan even before we were married. Our plan was similar to that of any couple in which one partner is gone for long periods at a time.

I was not military but worked for the government on hush-hush projects. We lived in McLean, Virginia, in a neighborhood where most families were tied to the Federal government in one way or another. We had some intimate friends and many close acquaintances in the neighborhood.

In that neighborhood, friends took care of families whose breadwinner spent serious time away from home. That is great but families still must have a strong base to endure the hardships that rise during those long absences.

Ours was a good marriage, one that worked well in all aspects. I was deeply in love with Julie and had been through all four years at Georgetown University.

The early years with Bill seemed to be just fine. When home, I tried to be present in meaningful ways teaching him various sports skill, taking time to help him practice, driving him to soccer and baseball practice and games.

Of course, I could be and was often called away before a season ended and never saw him in championship play. Never the less, we enjoyed a great relationship. At least, I thought so.

During his fifteenth year there came a dramatic change in our relationship. I could not get close to him at all after arriving home from one of my long sojourns overseas.

Julie was as mystified as I. There was one thing that I noticed. He seemed even more attentive to Julie than ever, maybe even resenting my interfering. I can’t swear to it but there were times that I felt he would take a stance between Julie and me.as though he was shielding her from some threat that I projected.

On one of my stays at home in the summer before his senior year, I had been out with some of the guys from the neighborhood that I had known for many years. I came home quite tipsy; in fact I was drunk and needed help. Bill turned around, running to his room, when my friends literally dropped me inside the front door. I know that had happened on rare occasions over the years, but not frequently.

I am sure that in the course of getting me to the bedroom and undressed Julie was giving me hell. The only times I can remember her raising her voice were those few times I did come home drunk.

You should know that I was a happy drunk, not one of those morose or angry drunks.

From that day forward, Bill hardly spoke a word to me. Whatever we did for him, he responded with gratitude vocally to his mother but not directly to me.

Frustration was building in me over the many months getting a cold shoulder from my son. Julie said that she was unable to get him to give her any reason. "Frank, he will not discuss anything related to you. I do not understand what triggered this attitude or why it continues."

On the day Billie left for the university I cornered him in the den and pleaded with him to tell me why I was an anathema to him. He stood before me like he was deaf and dumb.

I started to shouting and cussing and accusing him of being thankless after I plunked out thousands of dollars for his tuition and incidental expenses. He said nothing and continued to look down at the floor. I was furious, foiled by his behavior and went into a total downer.

I was so aggrieved that in fury I slapped him across the face and cursed him. Then, realizing what I had done, I wrapped my arms around him and through tears asked him for forgiveness. He stood there like a stone statue until I rushed out of the room."

Frank seemed to pale and gasp for a bit of breath. I could see Janice move to the edge of her chair, ready to move in if necessary but Frank quickly recovered.

He picked up the thread of his story. "During a forty year stint there was no communication between us. I sent birthday cards and seasonal cards while Julie was alive, never getting an answer from him.

He was home for the funeral but I could not resurrect any communication. He took no part in planning the memorial even though I asked him to do so.

After the funeral I never saw him or heard from him. The mail I sent was now being returned as undeliverable.

I carried that burden on my heart for over forty years and wished I had the skills to circumvent the barrier or at least find some new way to connect our lives."

Frank suddenly stopped again, unable to continue. Janice crossed to his chair, knelt down and took his hand in hers. The rest of us followed her example, placing our hands on his shoulders or his head. It reminded me of an experience many years ago in a sensitive training class I was attending.

Once Frank regained his composure he indicated that he was ready to continue. "Like all the unpleasant things in life, God used time to bury the memories so deep that my life seemed to be unburdened except for those moments when that sneaky memory escaped the cellar where this one had been lying dormant.

How Bill found me I have no idea but last week I opened the mail, which contained a brief note from Bill. His note was with a brief apology for his behavior and asking for a phone number. I dashed off a note. The evening before last I had a call.

The call was brief. Bill's voice was strained as was mine. He must have been uncomfortable as I, compelled to do something for which he was unprepared.

The essence of that call was his asking for a date to meet and talk if I was amenable. Wow, was I ready.

Last evening we met at his hotel. I'm not strong enough to tell you all the details but this is the core of our meeting.

When he opened the door in response to my knock, I stood frozen. Although he was now in his sixties, I could have picked him out in a crowded room.

I could see that although he had planned this meeting, he did not know what step to take. We stood facing each other for what seemed like an eternity.

I lifted my arms and opened them inviting him to come to me. He broke into tears, moving swiftly into an embrace. The scene would have appeared as a tableau to any audience as we found ourselves unable to separate.

We both let out nervous laughs as we separated, reaching for our handkerchiefs to wipe away the tears. He took my hand and led me to a small corner table on which sat a bottle of Haig and Haig scotch, a coffee pot, several glasses, along with cups and saucers. He looked questioningly. I pointed to the coffee.

I had a feeling that the choice may have raised a question in his mind so I said. "I haven't had more than a glass of wine on some special occasion since the night that mother injured herself helping me to bed while I was in a drunken stupor."

Bill nodded as he began pouring the coffee. "Dad, first an explanation. I finally had the nerve to read mom's journal which was in a box of things that I picked up at the house the day of her funeral. I found out how badly I had misinterpreted the situation at home. "

I said "Bill, you don't have to explain. I am just so pleased and moved that you chose to find me. That must have taken some detective work."

"That was the easy part. Finding the courage to initiate the contact was the major obstacle. Bridging a gap of forty years was the real challenge

Looking back, I was able to see that I had become possessive of mom and resented your absence as a way of not caring for this wonderful woman who loved and nurtured me. The longer it went on during my teen years, the angrier I had become.

The morning after you arrived drunk the last time, I saw a bruise on her cheek, which caused me to think that you had hit her the night before. I had heard her raised voice and deduced that you were arguing and fighting. Add to that an adolescent cynical mind that thought you must have been leading a double life being gone as much as you were home. I had seen a movie that summer which portrayed the villain having two families."

I asked Bill to tell me how her journal helped him

"She wrote voluminous notes almost every day. There were nine books or volumes covering the years of your courtship and marriage. She wrote about that night, that while getting you into bed she slipped and hit her head on the slipper chair.

She wrote that she couldn't help being frustrated the way you smiled while she was lecturing in her loudest voice about the dangers of drinking too much. She wouldn't have minded if you got drunk at home but the risk to your life driving or being driven by a drunken friend was too risky."

"Of course, from my misunderstanding and being convinced that you were abusing the loveliest woman in the world. I hated you. I began spouting off to my friends who were very sympathetic. For some dumb fool reason I was telling them that I hated you because you were unfaithful to mom, not that I had any proof of that." That cost you at least one friendship; in the neighborhood that I know of.

When I dug into some of the earlier volumes and read her notes of gratitude for your love and the many ways you had supported her in times of trouble. I was deeply moved.

I guess I was too young to recall her miscarrying when I was a toddler. She wrote notes of your understanding and giving her support, helping to bring her out of depression. I read of

the way you took responsibility for caring for me, even taking a leave of absence during her longest down period.

I began to understand the depth of hurt that I had caused the two of you. Dad, I went for two days before I began to research your whereabouts. Call it fate or a gift from God, but that very Sunday our young pastor preached on the subject of forgiveness. That moved me to action.”

I told my Addies. “He apologized for treating me like an enemy, never giving me a chance to talk, having to read his mother’s words before opening up to me”

“That, Janice, is the short hand of it. We both have had a heavy burden lifted from our psyches. Bill is bringing the whole family for a long weekend, his wife, two daughters and husbands, three granddaughters and one great grandson.”

Jim broke the brief silence that followed. “Frank, what a beautiful moment for a gentle soul like you.”

Book 2.

Incident on a Train.

His thoughts were meandering as he sat on the hard bench in the Diridon train station in San Jose, California.

He caught the sound of freight cars slowly moving past the station. His ears translated the sound enough to tell him that the train was moving south. From the some of the echoing sounds he knew that some cars were empty while others were already loaded with freight

“I wonder if the empties will be loading strawberries or vegetables from Salinas Valley. What made me think of that?”

The high ceiling of the waiting room reverberated with the announcement that the San Francisco local would be departing at seven thirteen.

Mike checked the time on his wrist watch. Seven ten. The Amtrak passenger train to Sacramento wasn't due until seven thirty. He looked around the large room, not looking for anything or anyone in particular.

The sound and whine of jet engines reached his ears as an incoming plane was approaching touchdown at Mineta airport.

A woman's voice to his left was saying “I can't believe I did it, that I slept with Phil on our first date.”

“You didn't?”

Mike turned his head, seeing a young woman, actually a girl, suddenly dropping her voice when she noticed Mike glancing at her.

He turned away. The line at the ticket window was relatively short, only three potential passengers. The sound of the clerk's voice was a soft and feminine.

She had given Mike a smile when he had purchased his passage. Her voice had been solicitous, willing to be helpful. Mike was impressed. His experience was finding those Amtrak clerks civil but mostly bored.

Hearing the swish of a bus door opening at the entrance of the station, he looked up to see a solitary figure debarring. The bus driver was holding her hand, assisting her as she took the last step down. He retreated into the bus and soon exited to place her suit case on the sidewalk. He took time to pull out the handle that converted the bag so that she could pull the bag easily.

Mike focused his eyes on the woman, a tall, slender brunette whose slightly distended waist line indicated that she was carrying a potential newborn. He couldn't help noticing that her face was half

hidden behind a veil that fell from a rather chic hat, reminiscent of the Jackie Kennedy pillbox style. Her dark blue suit was beautifully tailored to minimize the look of her pregnancy. At least, Mike thought so.

As she moved toward the ticket booth, he observed her taut facial features, her lips tightly drawn, the stiffness of her body and a posture that was almost military. He thought to himself “*This is not natural. She should be gliding like a ballerina in Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake.*”

His attention was diverted with the arrival at the curb of a red convertible. A teenage boy jumped out of the auto as it screeched to a halt. He dashed through the doorway and ran for the ticket booth, getting into line just ahead of the lady, in fact, jostling her just a bit. Mike didn’t think the kid was aware of the bump, believing he might be too late to get to a departing train.

The young lady made no indication of annoyance as Mike was sure he would have been in the same situation. She stood a few paces behind the youth, opening her purse then pulling out her wallet.

Checking his watch again, Mike decided to stroll toward Track 10. Since he was getting an early start, he planned to amble through the tunnel to the farthest platform from the station.

Others were rising behind him as he crossed the waiting room. Soon, the passengers began hustling, striding past him as if the train had already arrived. “*So much for a calm stroll.*” He was forced to keep up with the crowd, much to his disgust.

Just after he arrived at a spot to await the arrival he noticed the young man dashing down the platform toward his position. The youngster stopped, then began pacing back as though wondering which the best location for him to wait was.

A few minutes later the coaches arrived. Mike took a step forward to enter through the door closest to his position, wondering if the young woman was boarding this train that would terminate in Sacramento.

He took a seat toward the middle of the car on the left side, which would be the west and north side during this morning trip to the state capital. He always preferred the shady side of the ride for the trip.

Since he had been among the first to board, the wait for the departure, no more than ten minutes, seemed like ages. He was fidgeting, still wondering about the young lady when he heard the toot from the engineer, alerting passengers that they were about to depart.

Five seconds later, a body was moving toward the seat beside Mike. The train jerked and the young lady was thrown off her feet, dumped unceremoniously into the seat with a thump. Mike gasped, hoping that the incident had caused her no harm.

Mike looked toward her face and saw through the veil, a grin developing as a blush was rising from her throat. That was followed by a chuckle and a hand moving to cover her face that was revealing pleasure as a reaction to the incident.

Mike asked “Are you all right, not injured?”

“Thank you. I’m fine, just a bit embarrassed.”

“Thank goodness. That was a good thump?”

Smiling, she said “Thank you for asking.” At that point, she began removing her hat.

Mike didn’t mean to stare but he was unable to move his eyes from her face. She had the most beautiful facial features he had ever seen, even more beautiful than his wife in the early days of their life together.

Finally he got a grip on himself, turned his face to scan the freight cars that we were passing as they left the train yard. Within a few minutes one could sense the engineer moving the throttle to increase speed.

Mike opened the morning paper, the San Jose Mercury News, which he had purchased earlier. He scanned the headlines, read one story regarding a potential scandal in the mayor’s office. He moved through the entire newspaper quickly, bored with most stories

He tossed the paper aside and reached for the mystery soft cover that was in his brief case.

He happened to glance toward the aisle, noticing that the young woman had not attempted to place her suit case in the overhead rack He asked “Would you like to have me lift your bag into the overhead?”

“That would be very helpful. I had no trouble carrying the suitcase but I knew I could not lift it. Thank you.”

She stepped into the aisle to make room for Mike. He lifted the bag, turned toward her before reentering to his seat. Her face was somber and he sensed that she had been quietly crying. He took a quick but sharp glance, noticing her red eyes.

“Thank you, again, sir. I appreciate the help.”

About fifteen minutes later Mike lay down his book in order to rest his eyes. Ever since he had developed macular degeneration in his right eye, he found himself straining during lengthy reading exercises.

Glancing toward his seat partner, he was aware that she was wiping away tears with her hands, unable to find a tissue quickly enough. He offered his clean white handkerchief.

“Thanks. I promised myself not to cry until I got to Sacramento.”

As Mike folded the handkerchief, he asked, “Would it help to talk?” Taking a light tone he continued “My children and grandchildren say that I am a good listener.”

After a long hesitation she said, “I’m on my way to see an aunt, my only living relative, who lives in Sacramento. I’m taking a leave of absence from my position at Cisco.”

“A week ago I was visited by two officers announcing the death of my husband. He was killed in Afghanistan in one of those shootings by a terrorist at a hospital where my husband was staying after suffering a major injury in combat.”

At that point, her voice broke down. Mike could sense that she wanted to go on but had to regroup. Silence reigned for about two minutes. “His body will arrive in Dover, Delaware next week. I need to be present to receive an award on his behalf. I believe they said it was the Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Congressional Medal.

Giving her a gather herself, Mike interrupted. “That is true. I have granddaughter whose deceased husband was a recipient of that honor.”

“Oh. What a coincidence. I would like to meet her at some time in the future. Was the medal given posthumously?”

Mike nodded, and then asked “How long will you be in Sacramento?”

“We fly out next Monday on a military transport from a place called Mather Field.”

“That is plenty of time to make arrangement if you are serious about wanting to meet my granddaughter.”

“Oh, I am serious. I am sure that she can help answer some of the myriad of questions I have. When did she lose her husband?”

“About two years ago. Do you have a phone number where I can reach you?”

Without hesitation, she replied “1 408 569 9988. I do hope she has time for a visit.”

“When do you think will be a goodtime for you?”

“Anytime during the next three days. I have a commitment for Friday.” As soon as the words were out, her voice choked and tears gushed down her cheeks

He pulled out his handkerchief, moved closer to her, handed her the hankie and put his arms around her shoulders. She moved her head to his breast and sobbed.

It was at least five minutes later that she finally calmed, lifted her head, saying “I’m so sorry. Your hankie and your shirt are sopping wet.”

“Not to worry. They will dry in time. I am worried about you. Something lies heavy on your heart that brought about your tears.”

Mike felt certain that he knew the answer to her plight and he was right.

Again it took a long period before she responded “I don’t think it is a subject to discuss with anyone but family”

“I respect that, of course, although sometimes an outsider is a better listener than someone close to you. If you want to talk, I am ready to listen.”

“Thank you. By the way, my name is Susan Jansen.”

“I’m Mike Kalton, father, grandfather and great grandfather.” He handed her a personal card that included his email address and phone number.

She smiled, opened her purse to find her own hankie. Mike picked up his book and soon was last in the story. Twenty minutes later he lay down the book. “Mr. Kalton, what do you think about abortion?”

Mike was ready for the question, having presumed that had been the root of her tears. “I am a supporter of Planned Parenthood because I believe there are times when good counsel is necessary and some of those times call for the drastic measures.”

“What would you consider a time for such measures?”

“I am sorry but I am in no position to make a judgment. I once was in a position when I listened to a number of women making decisions about such situations. It was during the Vietnam War in a maternity hospital where desperate women were faced with the problem of another mouth to feed while the family already was on the verge of malnourishment because of limited finances. I listened to their stories, mystified when two women with a similar story made quite different decisions.”

She said “I realize that was an unfair question. I have had such a struggle since being notified that I was widowed. My only relative is the aunt who is dependent upon close friends to keep her medicated and fed. I need my job at Cisco to maintain myself. Trying to care for a newborn while under stress of limited finances or the stress of my highly demanding job seems impossible. That is just the beginning of the list of my concerns

I had a life time dream of raising a couple of children who would have the advantages of a mom with a supportive husband.”

Mike heard the catch in her voice and then silence. He wanted to rush in to console her but decided to wait for her to take the initiative.

“It’s even more complicated. Jim convinced me that we should have no children until his commitment to the military was complete. I had disagreed but finally gave in. The day he left for the embarkation station, I went of the pill. “

“We talked on the phone each evening. For some reason, unknown to Jim, there were delays.”

One evening he appeared on the door step. He rang the bell since he had given up his key to the house. “Whose there?”

“Your loving husband has a night off.”

It was a glorious overnight. I cooked a special dinner and served a cold bottle of champagne. We made love more than once and then shed tears at six in the morning when the cab arrived.”

She paused for a few seconds, and then continued. “You can figure out the next chapter. Having been off the pill and too passionate to consider the possible outcome, I conceived.”

Mike was thinking “That could be considered good news. A part of her loved one was still with her.

She said “For a bit, I thought about this as a gift .A part of my love would be with me for years to come. Then I remembered how adamant Jim ad been about my future being free to marry and have a new life with someone else if he happened to die in action. We had pledged ourselves to act out that promise.”

Having finally said that, she burst into tears that even two hankies could not absorb.

Much later Mike said “I’m sorry to hear that. Had you been married a long time?”

“Not really, two weeks before he was scheduled to leave for active duty. Another sad thing is that our very young child would never know daddy.”

Mike had to offer his soaked hankie again when the flood of tears burst. He looked at the pausing landscape while she tended to some facial repairs and regained her composure.

It must have been ten minutes later before she spoke. “While I still have this debate playing ping pong with my brain, I have decided to have the abortion. No one at work knows about my pregnancy, so I decided to come to Sacramento for the procedure. That way, it will be m secret.”

To Mike it sounded like a sales talk. He had a feeling that she leaned in the direction of yielding to her pledge but still had some reservations. “In light of your decision, do you still want to have a discussion with my granddaughter?”

“Oh, yes. I need to talk with someone who has been in my situation.”

He smiled inwardly, and then asked “Does your aunt know you are arriving today?”

“No. I thought I would call her when I arrive. She knows I was planning on arriving this week.”

“Perhaps you can meet my granddaughter today. If it meets with your approval, I can call her, She gets home from work at one. I’ll call her, outline the plan to bring take-out for lunch and tell her a bit about you. There will be ample opportunity for conversation. How does that sound?”

She paused before answering. “Isn’t that too much of a surprise for her, an imposition?”

“Knowing my granddaughter, I don’t think so, but she can say no when I call.”

“I guess that will be fine.”

Mike didn’t hesitate. He rose, pulled his cell phone out of his brief case and headed for some privacy. He returned ten minutes later, beaming. “She insisted on making lunch, saying that take-out is not the best diet for a woman who is carrying.”

Susan’s smile was rather weak but it was a smile.

Jenifer Carlton waked out of her front door to greet her guests who were stepping out of the cab. She walked slowly for a bit then dashed to wrap her arms around Mike. “Grampa. What a delight to see you.”

“You too, sweetheart. I wish you lived closer. Can’t you get Intel to promote you to Silicon Valley?”

She gave him a wide smile “Not very likely. Besides I would require two promotions.”

“Oh, oh. That sounds serious”. He reached for her left hand and whistled. “That is a gorgeous rock. When did that arrive?”

“I’ll fill you in but we are being rude to our guest.” She turned to Susan. “Pardon our poor manners, but Grampa and I have a great love affair going for 25 years.”

Susan gave Jenifer a warm smile. “I can see that. It comes so easily. I fell in love with him in a matter of hours. He is some grampa.”

“I know. Welcome. Lunch is on the table. Grampa has your bag.” She took Susan’s hand, leading her into the house.

Susan loved the homey feeling of the small cottage. The large kitchen/dining area were to her left, the hallway that must lead to the bedrooms was to her right. She could see that the small entry way

led directly to the living room. Jenifer led her through the cooking area to the far side of the room that seemed to serve as the dining and family room.

She took her seat and was joined by Grampa. Within three minutes Grampa was saying grace and Susan was being treated to a bowl of delicious vegetable soup, obviously prepared by Jenifer.

When they had finished lunch with some home baked apple pie, Mike left saying "I need a stroll to the park Maybe I can find a chess game with some of the regulars."

Jenifer poured another round of coffee and waited. Susan told her of the meeting on the train and that it hadn't taken long for Mike to get her talking.

Jenifer was as good a listener as her grampa with a box of tissues handy. When Susan had told her story and had been able to get composure, she asked "Are you able to tell me of your experience Mike says there are similarities."

Without hesitation, Jenifer said. "If you changed name, the story is almost identical, including the pledge. I struggled for two and half months, wanting to be faithful to the promise I had made to Fred, my husband, as opposed to the guidance of my parents who were so willing to help me raise the grandchild."

"I spent hours with two counselors at Planned Parenthood and with a private family counselor."

"Did any of the counselors suggest a course of action?"

"Not ever. They painted a full picture of my options. They explained options, risks and rewards of choices I might make. My experience with the private counselor was very much the same. I was fortunate that my family provided the funds for all the counseling. In the end, it was I who had to make the final decision."

Susan nodded her head. "That's the way it has been for me. I have no religious belief that influences my decision. In fact, my congregation has several members who have had abortions. I would not feel judged by any one in that group. I have no parents to please or displease."

Jenifer asked "What keeps bubbling to the top of your mind as you struggle with your decision?"

"The world is filled with kids who got a bum rap. Some are products of poverty and/or poor neighborhoods. Some have one or both parents who couldn't care less. Some come from "good homes" but had parents too busy to give their children the proper guidance."

Jenifer said "I have to say that our thinking has been very much the same. Which of those possibilities frightens you the most?"

“I’m on the fast track for a senior position at Cisco, despite my youth. I’ve been blessed with a great mind and feel I can make a major contribution through my vocational calling. That means that my job will be a high priority, making demands for long hours.”

“Meaning?”

“Little time for my son or daughter. That means a full time nanny who will be raising my child. Given that situation, I will have less to say about my child’s nurture which already creates feeling of guilt within me.”

Jenifer reached for Susan’s hands to communicate her empathy. “I am sorry. Your decision is much tougher than mine was.”

“Yet, you chose to give up your fetus.”

Jenifer gasped. “Oh, no. I gave birth to a little boy who will grow up the spitting image of his daddy, who, however, will never have the pleasure of knowing him.”

Susan turned beet red. She stammered. “I’m so sorry. I would have expected a toddler hanging on your knee, so I jumped to a wrong conclusion.

Jenifer said “I should have said something earlier. Little Jimmy is asleep in the nursery. I feed him as soon as I got home. My nanny comes at six thirty and leaves at one on most days. Some days, the three of us take a walk or go to the park but mostly it is just the two of us. I simply postponed the walk today.”

“How do you manage, working part time? Monthly payments either rent or mortgage on this home is significant. Nannies cost a bundle. I don’t mean to be nosy but does your family help support you?”

Jenifer chortled. “They would like to write a check to me monthly but I said no. I did borrow money, interest free, from Grampa for the down payment but that’s it.”

“You must live on the margin. “

“Some people would say that but I have a good paying job with Intel, but I did some horse trading to get what I wanted. I never thought I had the nerve to negotiate with the big boys at an international corporation but when I decided that having Little Jimmy was my highest priority, I pulled out all the stops. Like you, I had been on the fast track but I knew I had to give up something.”

“That would be difficult for me. I have had my heart set to advance on the path that I’ve taken.”

“I understand. That is why I am not giving you a sales pitch. I’ll be happy to answer any and all questions if you are needed more time. In fact, why don’t we plan dinner here tomorrow about six? You

can cancel if you wish. I won't start cooking until about five. You can meet Jimmy and my intended, Jeff. Grampa will be here. You may come earlier if you need some private time with me."

"I shouldn't put you out. Both of you have given me so much of your time."

"We both have loads of time at the moment. Grampa says you lack a support group. We're here if you choose but it is up to you."

"Thank you. I'll call by one thirty to let you know one way or the other but right now I need to call a cab."

Ten minutes later, Little Jimmy was calling. Grampa walked in the door at the same time, moving quickly toward the nursery. Jenifer could hear the two of them chattering, aware that Jimmy's diaper was being changed and soon would let her know that he was hungry.

The two of them took Little Jimmy to the park where Grampa helped him on the slide, pushed him on the slide before the three of them played roller ball on the empty basketball court.

Little Jimmy got plenty of attention and love from both until Jenifer read him to sleep.

Mike opened the subject, asking "Any idea what the decision will be?"

"It's hard to say, Grampa. Her career is a very high priority. While she worries that a child may be a partial distraction, she is more concerned that she will have little time to provide the nurture that her off-spring deserves. I think she has a clear picture of the choices she faces."

Mike laughed as he said "Of course, I have the ideal solution. She could move in with us, thus having two great nannies, namely your mom and Gramma."

Jenifer joined in the laughter. "They would love that and the idea is not that strange but Susan still has to forfeit or modify her dream if she chooses to have and nurture her own child."

Susan used her key to open the door to her aunt's home. "Aunt Tess, I'm here." No response. "Aunt Tess." Still no response. Susan began to panic "*Had something happened since their conversation last evening?*"

She heard a knock on the door, then the swish of the door opening. "Susan, it's Mary from next door. I saw the cab drop you off. Your aunt is in the hospital. She called me at seven this morning. Within minutes I was calling 911. I just had a call from the hospital. She has pneumonia. They didn't sound very positive. My John is getting the car to drive you to the hospital"

Twenty minutes later she was told that her aunt had passed away about ten minutes prior.

A flood of emotions washed over her. She had hoped to be able to say good bye. She needed to talk with her about her indecision. There were so many things to say to her one and only family member.

She had wanted to thank her for the love she gave since her folks had passed away, the holidays they had spent together and the European trip that Tess financed the year she graduated high school.

“I owe you so much and now no way to pay off that debt.”

With a saddened heart, she asked to see someone in administration so that she could settle financial obligations and authorize the Neptune Society to handle the body.

She arrived back just after six, in no mood for a meal. She gently turned down Mary’s invitation to dinner.

At Tess’ desk, she found the large envelope that she and Tess had filled with notes during the last year, details of her modest estate, and the key to the deposit box held in Susan’s name, a copy of the trust and a list of gifts that Tess wanted to make to a handful of charities.

She suddenly remembered to call the church office, leaving her number since it was after hours. Thirty minutes later she answered the phone she heard “This is James Kirk, pastor of Christ Church.”

Susan explained that Tess had died suddenly and asked “Can we have a memorial service while I am in town?”

“Please hold on while I check the church calendar and call the head of our deacons. Better yet, let me call you in a few minutes.” Fifteen minutes later, arrangements were made for a service at two on Saturday. She agreed to a visit from the Reverend Kirk the following morning at eleven.

She worked late into the evening, having a light bite about ten thirty before retiring. Sleep did not come quickly in spite of feeling tired. Her mind was awl with memories of Aunt Tess, their chat when Susan explained about the baby, Tess’ hope that she could find a way to bring the baby into the world as a continuation of their family.

She replayed her daily debate about wanting a child but also wanting the future that she had planned and scrambled to achieve.

While eating lunch after the visit with Rev. Kirk, she remembered to call Jenifer. She had decided to say no to the invitation but changed her mind, thinking she needed the company and perhaps talks about Aunt Tess.

After finishing her call to Jenifer, she called Planned Parenthood to arrange for a Monday date instead of the Friday appointment.

Jenifer met her at the door. Hanging onto her was a handsome blue eyed, blond, curly headed two year old, shyly half hiding behind his mother. He did smile in response to Susan’s greeting and

returned her handshake. He kept his distance during those first minutes, and then ran to Grand papa when Mike entered the room. He sat in Grad papa's lap while Jenifer went to the kitchen. The doorbell rang. Little Jimmy bounced off the lap and headed for the slowly opening door. He jumped into the arms of a tall blond young man. The man laughed and hugged Little Jimmy, still holding him, he came forward. He put out his right hand. "You must be Susan. It is so nice to meet you."

Susan returned the warm greeting. "You have to be Jeff. That was a warm welcome from Jimmy."

Jeff put Jimmy down, saying "We're buddies and soon, I hope, to be family."

"Was that a tinge of jealousy that I just felt?"

Susan said "I noticed the ring. Have you set a date?"

"Not yet. Jenifer is working on the calendar and arrangements with Intel." He turned. "Grampa, I am glad you're here. I need some advice, that is, if you have some time this evening."

His question was answered with a nod and a hug.

Susan, watching them said to her *"I am jealous."*

After dinner when Little Jimmy was tucked in and the men were gathered in the den, Jenifer made a pot of tea and was pouring when Susan said "Jenifer, I am in a state, struggling with Tess's death and my indecision. I postponed my date for the procedure until Monday."

Jenifer said "I guess that means you have made the decision."

"I guess so. I tried in every way to figure how I can handle a newborn and my job. I don't see how I can make the proper arrangement with Cisco. I still worry about the problem with a full time nanny and a part time mother. In addition to all that, the apartment house where I live is all singles with lots of parties and noise, especially on the weekends."

"I understand. I faced the same decision. It took a lot of courage to believe that I could negotiate with Intel after I was committed to having my son. I went through several nannies before I found the right one for us. I, of course did not have the same living conditions but that is a solvable problem."

At that moment the men were returning from their chat. Grampa asked "What needs to be solved. I love problems."

Susan said "In addition to my concern about career, I was telling Jenifer that my apartment house is no place to raise a child."

Mike laughed. "Problem solved. The apartment unit in our large house that we build for Alexander and Marie has been waiting for a tenant. The unit comes with two baby sitters, my Janis and our daughter, Marge, who lives next door."

Susan laughed. "That sounds ideal but I couldn't possible bring a newborn with the attendant problems into anyone else's house."

Mie said "Nonsense. Janis feels lost after raising five daughters and nine grandchildren. The great grandchildren live too far away to satisfy her. I'm serious, Susan. If I called Janis right now, she would rush up here to give you a pep talk."

"That's very kind of you. If I were to consider having the baby, I might consider your offer."

Mike said "The offer stands. I know you face a pivotal moment in your life."

Jenifer said. "I am sure I can speak for Gramma and my mother. We are here for you. As the old saying goes, just whistle."

Susan was overwhelmed with the kindness and the offer. She changed the subject "I think it's time to call a cab."

Jeff offered Susan a lift to Tess' place. On the way, Susan asked "How did you meet Jenifer?"

He chortled. "A mutual friend decided to play matchmaker."

"Weren't you put off when you found out she had a youngster?"

"Only for a moment. I fell hard for Jenifer. Nothing was going to keep me from pursuing her. In fact, getting to know Jimmy added to my desire to become a partner in that family."

Susan said "That's another problem. I haven't discussed this with anyone but I don't know about bringing another man into my life if I choose to have a child. It's hard to think I could fall in love with anyone else."

"You should discuss that with Jenny. I recall moments during our courtship when she momentarily seemed to go away and then return. It seems that after those moments that her love was even more spirited."

"That is something to add to the boiling pot" she mused as she turned out the lights that night.

She was cleaning out closets and clothing drawers on Wednesday morning when the phone rang. "Is this Susan Jansen?"

"Yes."

"This is Frances Gault at Planned Parenthood. Are you free to talk for a minute?"

“Yes, I am.”

“I am reviewing your file in preparation for your upcoming appointment. We need to move forward your appointment.”

“I can’t do that. Why the change?”

“According to the calendar, Friday is the last day of your first trimester. Just to be on the safe side, I would suggest that you come in tomorrow.”

“Oh. I can’t do that. I’m not ready.”

There was a long pause before Ms. Gault spoke. “Are you saying that you may change your mind?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ms. Jansen, if you need to see a counselor, I can arrange for one this afternoon. I did not mean to rush you but we must be careful about dates. As you know there are people who would love to catch us in violation of the rules.”

“Yes. I know. Thanks for the offer. Let me call you back later today.”

“That will be acceptable but we need to decide before eight this evening. That, I’m sorry to say, is my limit.”

“I understand.”

Susan plopped into an armchair. “*What to do? Should I call Jenifer? No. She’s at work. Dammit*”

She plunged into the cleaning chore, mad at the world that would not give her peace or time to think.

“*What can I do?*”

She decided to call Mike. When he answered she said “Mike, this is Susan, Can we talk?”

“Of course. Where are you? I have Jenny’s car?”

“I’m at Tess’ place, cleaning. If you come by, I will fix us some lunch.”

What’s the address?’

He knew she had been crying, probably for the entire time since she had called. Mike led her to the sofa and urged her to begin. In between tears, sob and long pauses she finally had told him the story of the phone call and her upset with the new challenge.

At one point in her recital, her voice grew hoarse. Mike went to get her a glass of water. She sipped a bit then finished the story.

Mike waited but she remained silent. He asked “What may I do to help?”

“I’m not sure. Although our friendship is only three days old, I felt a need to reach out to you. I have many acquaintances but no one I can call a friend. That was true until we met on the train. Now I feel like I have two friends, the only two I can turn to at this moment of crisis. I thought of you and thought of the grandfather I never knew.”

“That is a beautiful compliment. I would love to be your grandfather.”

“Thank you, Mike. After I called and knew you were on the way, I made a decision. How would you like to be a new great grandfather?”

Mike caught his breath and reached to put his arm around her shoulder. He pulled here gently to his chest “I would be delighted, Susan.” He wanted to say ecstatic.

After a bit of a pause, she said “The one thing that gave me the courage was a strong feeling that you would be in my corner. Thank you.”

“Because you have been in Jenifer’s prayers, asking for God’s support of whatever your decision, I think you should come with me now so you can tell her your decision.”

There was not a dry eye among the three of them as Susan shared her story with Jenifer while Mike listened in. When Jenifer finally gained her voice, she asked “What of your dream as a top executive?”

She smiled as she said “My career is now a second priority. I know that management will not let me go. I am important to them. That means they will negotiate. If not, I am sure two other firms in Silicon Valley will be delighted to use my services.”

Jenifer hugged her, whispering “That is an act of courage and confidence. I never doubted you could do it if you chose. I am so happy for you.”

Mike said “Not fair whispering. We need to celebrate. How about I call mother to take the late afternoon train so you can meet your new grandmother?”

He got the vote he wanted with two large smiles.

Book 3.

A Job

Steelton, W.Va.,

Six thirty, Monday morning.

I was the thirteenth in line, not sure whether that was a lucky or unlucky number. It was hot, already in the nineties with high humidity. The night had brought no significant relief.

It had taken forever to get to sleep I remembered hoping it would rain during the night but the amount of moisture in the air was just enough to produce misery.

Standing in line, holding my paper sack lunch, I could feel beads of sweat slowly moving down the back of my neck. My curly hair was damp. After the long walk from home and standing in line for fifteen minutes, my large blue working man's handkerchief was damp as I, once more, used it to wipe the sweat from my face and neck.

Almost everyone in line was wiping his brow or neck. There were red or blue handkerchiefs catching the eye all along the line.

I had no way of knowing whether it was the heat or the tension that was causing sweaty palms. I knew I was uptight. The outcome was crucial, at least in my gut.

My undershirt felt damp. Knowing it would be hot, I had planned to wear a short sleeve shirt and no undershirt. Dad, who had spent countless hours laboring in the hot sun, strongly recommended neither. "Long sleeves and an undershirt to absorb the sweat will be less uncomfortable and help you to withstand the heat. That is, if you are lucky enough to get hired."

I had been aware that at no time did he suggest I was going to be comfortable.

Today was my third day home for the summer break from the university. I had been scanning the local newspaper, talking with some high school buddies and asking several uncles who worked locally whether there were any summer jobs available. I *needed* a job in order to earn the funds for the next semester's living expenses. Fortunately my scholarship covered the tuition but I was short room and board expenses.

I had talked with my dad's friend who owned the neighborhood grocery store about clerking for the summer. His answer was "Sorry, Paul, but my business *has* tapered off with the big chain store coming to town. I can pay you a couple of bucks if you want to drive the old pickup to make a few deliveries on Saturday afternoon." I had agreed. That would give me some pocket change for the summer.

I had talked with owners or managers of the local creamery, the art and paper shop, J.C.Penny and the beer hall, all without success. I just missed getting the job as delivery driver for the most successful dry cleaners in town.

Some of my high school friends had moved to other cities while most of my neighborhood friends were married and working in one of the mills. Not a single one of the top ten students in my class *was* to be found in town.

At breakfast with mom yesterday, I said “Mom, unless I find a job in the next few days. I am going to head for Wheeling or Pittsburgh. I have to earn some money so I can stay in school.” She nodded her understanding.

I had come home because mom had been diagnosed with some stomach problems and asked if I could spend the summer with them. Dad was gone most of each week, share cropping on the farms of several of his cousins.

Late yesterday afternoon, my friend, Iggy Rossi, had invited me to have a cup of coffee and some of his mom’s fresh home baked bread. He had just poured the coffee when his older brother, Jim, walked in. “Iggy, pour me some coffee while I wash up.”

Joining us, he said “Paul, I see you’re home for the summer.” then asked “What’s with you guys?”

“I just asked Iggy if he knew of any summer jobs being offered at the steel mill. Since he works in the personnel office I figured he might have heard something.”

Jim laughed. “I’ll bet he said no, am I right?”

We agreed. Jim continued. “I stopped for a beer at the pool hall and overheard two big tough looking bruisers talking. They were strangers and I was curious. I got into a conversation with them, finding out they are with the contractor who is building the coke plant at the old ballpark location. Jack said he was the top man, the guy in charge of building the hundred foot smoke stack. Bill is the super for building the six story high coal storage unit. In the course of the conversation Jack mentioned that the rail cars loaded with the tiles for the stack were arriving tonight. He said that the word was spreading that they would need about eighteen laborers to start unloading the tiles tomorrow morning. Paul, I suggest you haul your ass to the ball park gate before six thirty, Try to be the first in line.”

He picked up his coffee mug and headed for another part of the house. I called out. “Thanks, Jim.”

He yelled back. “You would have a better chance if you had some muscle to go along with your brains.”

Behind me there must have been another twenty guys looking for work. Most of them were my age or younger. Thinking about Jim’s comments related to my muscles, I could see that I was the smallest and lightest of the men in line. I started to give myself a pep talk. *Paul, you can handle anything. Unloading some kind of bricks can’t be that tough.*” I needed something to overcome my pessimism.

The fellow behind me asked “Say. Aren’t you Paul Sobczak? I thought you were a student at Pitt?”

I turned to face him directly. I tried to recognize the face behind the heavy beard. Seeing the question mark, on my face, he said “I’m Gene Baker. I lived a couple of blocks closer to school. I walked with you once in a while if you happened to be passing when I started for classes.”

I laughed. “I remember. Your dad bought a car during our senior year. You gave me a few rides on cold days during the winter. How are you, Gene?”

“I’ve been better I was recently laid off at the Page’s Foundry.” The look on his face was sort of hang dog so I asked “Are you married?”

“Yes. Do you remember Alice Stark?”

“I do. “

“Our first baby is due next month I’ve been out of work for three months. We had to give up our apartment and move in with my folks who still live in the same home.”

My heart went out to him. His situation was much more desperate than mine. I noticed his broad shoulders and gnarled hands which set me to thinking. “*He has a better chance of getting a job this morning than I do.*”

The buzz and chatter along the line suddenly came to a halt. I heard someone removing the chain and bar that held the gate closed.

“Line up in two lines. You, the first, head the line on the left. The second start the line on the left. Hey, no rushing. Stay in the order in which you arrived this morning.”

I ended up seventh in the left line. Gene moved to the other line and soon was out of my mind. I noticed that the same fellow who had made the announcement had taken one of two rough benches; He invited the first guy to have a seat. I was sure he was questioning him but I was still too far away to get the gist of the conversation. The conversation lasted less than three minutes. Pete Smetana, the interviewee, a former tackle on our high school football team, was grinning as he rose and headed inside the gate.

The closer I got to the head of the line, the more nervous I became. “*I have to convince this big guy that I can do whatever it takes.*”

When I neared the benches I was able to hear the questions. “How much do you weigh? Let me see your hands. What kind, if any, work have you done? Do you think you can manage a wheel barrel full of tiles?” I didn’t hear the last two questions. My mind was awl. “*Paul, you are not going to get this job.*”

“My name is Jack. What’s yours?”

“Paul Sobczak.”

: He didn’t ask me about my weight but asked, instead “What the hell are you doing here? You will have blisters on those hands within twenty minutes. I am sure you’ll tumble the first wheel barrel of tiles.”

I could feel myself stiffening. With more bravado than I felt I said “Don’t bet on it. I’m tougher than you think. My hands are soft because my part time work has not required manual strength but I worked in construction last summer. Blisters I can handle.”

Jack guffawed then said “I like your spirit .I presume you’re a college kid and have to work the summer to go on next year. Right?”

“Right on. I really need this job. At least, give me a try. If I’m not pulling my weight, then kick my ass off the lot.”

What I didn’t realize was that I had to be a union member and getting rid of me would not be that easy. I know now that he must have been considering that problem. He was silent for a long moment, during which I was sure that I would be looking for another job.

“All right. Find Mike at the open rail car where you will help unload the tiles for the rest of the day. We’ll take a look again in the morning.

I found Mike and handed him a slip that Jack had given me. He said “Drinking water is in those three buckets. When you notice one is getting low, it is your job to fill it up from that red water hose. Be sure to take one of those salt pills before you start. Drink lots of water and use a tablet every few hours. I will be working the sweat out of your body.” He was smiling while he laid it out for me but I was ready.

The tile were twelve inches in length, with a smooth top and bottom and a slightly *curved smooth* face since when laid properly would form the exterior of the rounded smoke stack The inside of each tile was very coarse or should I say rough, with little blobs of dried concrete that would be snagging my fingers.

Within ten minutes, I had my first of many blisters to come. I gritted my teeth and began cussing; foolishly thinking that might divert my attention from the pain.

When the noon whistle sounded, I was one tired college boy, with blisters and bleeding cuts as my reward for plenty of hard work. I had been naïve, not thinking I might need gloves. I walked to the nearest convenience store, just a few steps from the gate. The only gloves they had for sale were made of canvas material with clothed palms. I was to find out that the fingers would be worn through within a half hour.

The afternoon was pure hell. My hands were killing me. My back was aching and every other muscle was screaming “*bloody hell, what are you doing to me?*”

It seemed I was sipping water every five minutes to replace the water exuding from every pore in my body. Mike had warned us. He made sure that the tiles were moving in a steady stream down the roller ramps, loaded and moved to a temporary storage area.

I kept trying to measure myself against the rest of the gang. “*Am I keeping up and doing my fair share?*” I wondered if Mike was grading me in any way. “*He must be if Jack needs an evaluation.*”

The most beautiful sound I had ever heard in my life was the four thirty whistle. I moved my weary body toward the gate and three blocks to the ‘Working Man’ store to buy a pair of asbestos palmed, canvas gloves.

My folks lived near the top of a hill. After a four block walk to the base of Hill Street, I began ascending the concrete stairs, one hundred and four steps to McKee Street. It was one more block to Nick's Creamery where I could rest and sip a Chocolate milk shake before I began a slow climb to our house.

After twenty minutes of rest and refreshment I pushed my restart button. Several neighbors greeted me as I neared the house. I am sure I responded but I have no real memory I was like an automaton, plodding one step at a time toward my goal. When I arrived at the house, dad, who had been on the lookout, met me at street level. He took my arm assisting me to climb the fourteen steps to the top and another thirty steps to the kitchen door.

I didn't have the strength to say hello to my mom. I walked right through the kitchen and dining room and sank to the living room floor. It was lights out.

Dad wakened me nine. "Your bath is ready. Mom has a plate of stew ready.

Thirty minutes later I was sound asleep in my bed only to be jolted awake within what I thought was five minutes. Actually it was six the next morning.

Every muscle in my body resisted movement toward the edge of the bed but the need for the job overcame all resistance. Dad had already left, starting his new day of job hunting.

Mom stoked my body with hot oatmeal, three soft boiled eggs and loads of toast. I could see the tears of empathy in her eyes as she hand me dad's lunch bucket. No words were necessary.

I hope I wasn't being overconfident. After all, Jack said he would review things the next morning. Just before I reached the gate, I heard the toot of an auto horn. I looked around, seeing a blue Ford pickup truck. I saw Jack grinning and giving me thumbs up.

Four of us were assigned to complete the unloading of the boxcars. We finished about twenty minutes before the noon hour. The boss said "Good job, guys. Take off. Lunch hour is twenty minutes away. You deserve he rest."

"After lunch, you will each take one of the remaining wheel barrels and join the others to wheel the tiles to the staging area next to the foundation. That job has to be completed today. Jack wants the bricklayers to start in the morning."

It seemed to me that this day was even more humid or hotter than yesterday. I had been soaked through by eight and must have sweated a gallon of sweat. At least, I felt that I had drunk that much water from the community bucket of cold water.

The end of that second day was a little better the muscles still were screaming but the mercurochrome cuts were not bleeding. Mom had covered my broken blisters with gauze and strips of adhesive tape. Inside the gloves, the pressure had been endurable.

The walk home was just a bit more brisk than yesterday. Climbing the steps, however, was just as slow and the rest at Nick's was just as long.

Dad met me at the bottom of our stairway but I walked the last fourteen steps unaided and sat down at the table after washing my hands. Dad brought me a shot glass of blended whiskey and a large glass of iced water.

Mom ran my bath, handed me a towel and wash cloth. I headed for a leisurely soak and scrub. Dinner was later than usual

No one asked me about my day and I didn't offer any comments. Dad lured me into a game of checks and the three of us closed the evening with a three handed cut throat game of pinochle.

Near the end of the second day I had noticed that some of the eighteen were no longer on our site. I didn't know if they had been let go or if they had been assigned to some other location of the work site. As I walked to work the next morning, I wondered what the day would bring for me.

The top rim of the smoke stacks foundation was about four or five feet higher than the ground level of the surrounding area. The entire group of laborers was called to stand at the bottom of the wooden ramp. Jack and the bricklayers were standing on the foundation. Jack was almost shouting to be heard.

Noise from the open hearth steel making plant was tough competition especially supplemented by the screeching of the freight train brakes less than sixty feet away.

"Each of you will load your barrels with tiles, roll them up the ramp and down the inside ramp. Someone will show you where to dump them. I need two loads from each of you."

"You stand by for the rotation after you finish your delivery. After everyone has delivered two loads, you wheel barrel will be loaded with cement by Joe. Up the ramp, down the inside to a spot indicated. Stand by until bricklayer signals that he is ready for next man's load. Got?"

A chorus of yeps and yeahs greeted his question.

I was third in line. I watched carefully the number of tiles the others had loaded. The second load was a brick more than the first. I assumed that each laborer decided on the minimum size of his load. Wary that I was facing the first major test, I loaded three less than the load ahead of me and took off, running as fast as I could. I was copying the stronger guys ahead of me. I knew and affirmed my thinking that the pace slowed for each as he neared the top of the ramp. Gravity challenged the human body's attempt to overcome it.

I was really straining as I neared the crest, but sheer will power and determination to keep the job aided my effort, bringing a silent sigh as I began to hold back the load as it started down the steeper inside ramp.

As I moved toward the ramp; with my empty wheel barrow, Jack walked to ward me saying. "That worked out nicely. Keep it up."

At first I took the comment as a compliment at face value but then I mulled it over. *“Why say anything to a laborer who was doing that for which he had been hired. It was the phrase ‘worked out nicely’ that got my attention. He must have noticed that I lightened the load just a bit.”*

Jack told us to take a ten minute break after everyone’s second load of tiles had been delivered.

I was chatting with Joe at the cement mixer when Jack’s voice boomed “Joe, load up the college boy with cement. We’re ready to start laying the tiles.”

I wheeled next to the mixer. Joe moved the chute over my wheel barrel, dumping the measured load and signaled me to go. The moment I began to lift the handles I knew I was in trouble. This load felt considerably heavier than the load of tiles.

If I hadn’t been so focused on job survival I would have noticed the set up. All the brick layers and Jack were standing at the top of the ramp. Every other laborer was a part of a standing audience. Halfway up the ramp, the weight of the load overcame the stout effort of the soft college boy. The load slowly started tipping the wheel barrel to the left. I began cussing and straining to straighten the wheelbarrow. Determination was not enough. I could see the cement slowly flowing from the barrel, and then dumping itself in a sudden outflow. The wheel barrel fell to the right of the fresh cement pile while I plopped face first into the cement.

Within a few seconds I was hearing the roar of laughter from the audience that beheld my solo performance. I looked up to see Jack roaring and leading the hand clapping of appreciation for my act. I slowly stood and then felt the spray of a cold water shower coming from the nozzle of Joe’s water hose. It wasn’t long before my embarrassment faded and I was able to join in the laughter.

Jack waved to me, beckoning me to join him on the ramp. I didn’t want to hear the next words out of his mouth, such as “pickup your pay, college boy.” Instead, as I approached, he said “You were the right patsy I couldn’t help myself. Are you okay, not hurt?”

“I’m fine but I began to wonder if this was your way of telling me that I didn’t make the grade?”

“OH, no, no. I’ve been around long enough to know almost from the moment I hired you that a moment like this would appear. By no means, I already had another job planned for you.”

Feeling a sense of relief, I asked “You have another job that I can handle?”

“Yep. I usually have evaluated my entire crew within the first twenty four hours. Joe, who is considerable older and part of our traveling crew but a great cement guy begins to tire about midafternoon. I can’t afford a slowdown in production. Bonuses for the permanent staff are riding on this job. I want you to be his assistant, alternating each task. That will give you a little hike in the paycheck and I believe a real boost in our afternoon production. You also can be our water boy and don’t forget the salt pills.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

He grunted and said “Now get your ass down there and don’t let me down.”

I gave him a causal hand salute and said “Yes, sir.”

Book 4.

Grampa

“Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”

The family and friends of my grandfather were singing the words of this might hymn as they exited the sanctuary where they had honored and celebrated the memory of Thomas Depp

My name is Janet Philips, the oldest granddaughter Gramma, the widow was leaning on my arm as we led more than 250 family members and guest to the reception area.

It was a joyous celebration of his life. The service had opened with a duet singing trio of love songs, namely People Will Say We're In Love, I'll Be Seeing You and the old standard I Love You Truly.

The eulogy highlighted Grampa's life that was focus on serving others, starting with his own family, the disenfranchised across the nation and even as far away as Southeast Asia.

A week before his death Grampa had asked me to come for a private conversation regarding his hopes for the execution of the Family Trust. At the end of the business discussion he handed me a copy of his wishes regarding the memorial service.

He had said “The pastor has the original of my wishes. I want you to confirm with her each of the specifics. I want my children and my friends to have a good time but I also want to challenge each and every one.

After the long reception, which sounded more like a party, the father gathered here at the house, the root from which we all had sprung.

The celebration had ended hours ago. I am alone. My husband and son left earlier this evening to meet their obligations. John, my husband is airborne on his way to London. Tom is headed for West Point, his four day emergency furlough expiring at 0800. Junior is headed for UCLA,

Although Gramma has a fulltime paid companion tending to her needs, she asked me to spend a few more days with her.

My parents also had commitments and would be leaving directly from the hotel early in the morning.

The house had been noisy, filled with the family members who had come together from across the nation to honor Grampa.

The room was dark now, except for the light shed by the desk lamp. Silence reigned. I heard the grandfather clock sound twelve muted gongs a few minutes earlier. The house was far enough away from the road to block out the sounds of passing vehicles.

Gramma and her companion had retired about ten after Gramma asked me to review the files and clear out unnecessary papers from Grampa's desk.

I had the radio softly playing a selection of classical works from the local station during the earlier part of my file sorting. I switched off the music as I concentrated on some of the financial notes and the terms of the Family Trust.

Grampa had chosen me to serve as his successor trustee of the trust. I was honored to serve, praying that I might perform according to his wishes. In recent years, I had visited for long periods during which we discussed the terms of the trust and his hopes that the trust would serve as his last witness to a world that was enduring outrageous pain and suffering.

Since most of his children and grandchildren were "well off" as the saying goes, He and Gramma tried to focus their gifts on agencies that were devoted educating the children of families who existed on the margin.

Although I had grown up in Texas, a long way from Silicon Valley, Grampa and I had developed a tight bond. Whether it was a visit to see our family or meeting at the annual family reunions, Grampa found a way to spend loads of time with me.

My mother was his oldest child which may have contributed to my closeness to him. It was, however, during my recent sessions during the last twelve months that I came to appreciate the role he played in my life.

While he rarely offered direct advice, he never let me down when I asked for help. I loved his forthrightness, sometimes only in retrospect, because his perceptions were too accurate.

I had opened the bottom drawer of his file cabinet. My heart jumped when I pulled out a special set of folders that contained personal correspondence, letters he had written to and received from family members through the decades.

I had an aha moment, sensing his spirit sitting beside me as I became aware of the contents. I started to sort the folders so that I could honor the privacy of his relationship with other family members. The task was easy because he had filed the letters according to recipient.

I pulled out the letters to James, my older brother, now deceased and the next packet, letters to and from me.

As I had related earlier, despite the miles that separated us, the bond between us was strong, mostly because of the communication in these letters and later in long telephone calls.

I began with the first letter written to me when I eight years old. The early letters contained funny stories, questions about my activities and bits of encouragement when my responding letters suggested disappointments.

I laughed out loud when I read a letter from me asking Grampa to help me with a math problem. His response was a typed analysis of the problem and suggestions for ways to solve the problem.

The letters grew more personal as the years passed. There were minutes when I had to stop reading because tears made reading impossible.

It must have been after an hour or more when I decided to give up for the night. I opted for one more letter. That was a mistake. I was caught up in a letter that reminded me of how close we were.

I received the letter on my twenty first birthdays

December 1997

Dar Janet

Happy twenty-first birthday.

It hardly seems possible that so many years have gone by since I held you in my arms, a sweet bundle in pink. It was for me the greatest Christmas gift of my life. I probably imagined it, but I thought you gave me a slight smile as I held my finger under your chin.

Even though it may not have been true at that moment, your smile always brought joy to the family and warmed my heart during the visits each year that you rushed into my arms.

You must have absorbed that joke book I gave you for your eighth birthday. The reunion that followed was filled with your jokes for three whole days. I thought your folks were going to ostracize me for giving you that book.

It has been a joy to see my oldest granddaughter lead her younger cousins dancing around our living room or leading them in lawn games. Often during this past summer, I sat in a lawn chair and let my mind drift back over the years.

Reminiscing about the reunion earlier in the year, I could see you teaching the others to play "Marco Polo" in the pool. Your best student, the one who adored you, was Anna. The scrappiest was April. I could see the adoration in their eyes, adoration for a college woman who would take time to play with them and then sit around telling stories of life at the university and answering a myriad of questions

You were definitely their hero as you have been to many others. Your brother, James, while considering that he will protect you no matter what, glories in your being, your jokes, your laughter and the display of love you seem to have for everyone.

I am glad that you chat with James frequently. Now that he is on active military service, probably preparing for overseas duty, it must be harder for both of you.

He and I have talked about you. I have reminded him that a loving person like you is vulnerable and will meet up with hurtful people. I presume he has provided some hints about dealing with bullies. Being a loving person makes one vulnerable. It goes with the territory.

I loved your news of another promotion to the newest marketing product department at Cisco, even if you are only part time during this senior year at the university in Houston.

I assume you will be applying for a full time position upon graduation. Have you considered applying for a position at their headquarters here in Silicon Valley? Your grandmother and I would exalt to know that you lived nearby.

Thanks for sending the photos with your latest email. You seem to have lost a few pounds, according to your Gramma's eye. I told her that if it is so, it must be the result of your deciding to spend a few hours a week in the gym.

I am sorry that I will miss seeing you at the celebration of your parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. As you know, I no longer fly since the fourth heart attack. My doctor thinks it is better to be near a medical facility, something within a fifteen minute drive.

As you know, I get plenty of exercise, with my daily biking and golf (driving a cart, of course). Most of the time, I forget that I am vulnerable to another attack.

I don't hear any conversation about dating. I can't believe that a whole host of fellows are not besieging you whether for a date or an invitation to some of the fraternity parties.

I know that you are studious and have your eye on a career but I hope you have some fun along the way.

Remember the old adage. "All work and no play make Jane(t) a dull girl.

If possible, Gramma and I would love a weekend visit. I will be happy to send a ticket. This large empty house and our hearts could use some of your blithe and warm spirit.

Enough of you grandpa's utterings for now

With love for a special lady Grampa

Here in this dark room I suddenly had a feeling that he was here, probably in the next room, waiting for me to call his name. I leaned back in the chair, dabbing at the tears of joy about the ties that bound us although we lived so far apart.

It was time for bed but I was torn with the idea of continuing reading and so I did until my eyes said “Enough.”

At breakfast with Gramma I told her about my discovery and my reading until the early hours of the morning. She was enthralled with some of the stories, having long forgotten them.

She made an interesting comment. “Although Thomas bent over backwards to show no partiality, it was clear to me that you had some special meaning to him. It is hard to explain but a wife and mother knows.”

I hadn’t ever given that idea any thought but I definitely sensed the love for me that came through his letters.

Gramma asked “If it is not too much to ask, I would love to hear you read one or two of the letters to me, later this morning. He always read those letters to me before mailing them but memory dims.”

“Of course, I would love to. I’ll choose a couple of special letters.

Later, while we enjoyed our late morning coffee, I opened two letters that I thought she would appreciate.

December 2003

Dear Janet,

Happy twenty seventh.

What a wonderful treat to have you and the two little boys for a Thanksgiving celebration. I loved having your brother James and his wife. You two couples seem to be joined at the hip. That is my interpretation of the things you told us about your weekends and trips during holidays.

Watching James’ wife, Jeanne, play with you children and seeing the way they relate to her was heartwarming. Gamma and I thought the idea of her being your nanny for a few months while she retires and plans for the birth of her own child was creative.

Did Gramma say anything to you about your losing weight? I do know that she expressed concern to me within five minutes after your departure She said “I always admire the svelte look of Janet but she looks gaunt to me. Did you talk with her about that?”

I told her that I hadn’t but I would write you. I never feel like I am pushing it to discuss intimate things with you. We have been so open with each other. Of all my grandchildren I have that kind of relationship only with you and Anna. Transparency enriches relationships but too few persons are open to the idea.

I wasn’t aware of the loss of weight, because, as usual, you were still the attractive woman I have known. However, I was aware of bit of tension between you and your young boys. They seemed to hover with their daddy or with their aunt, Jeanne.

They were not impolite or rebelling but seemed to seek companionship elsewhere. I loved my time with them, of course, because circumstances have certainly limited our times together. If I were to guess, they believed that there are times when you seem to be preoccupied and sought attention from someone who would respond quickly to their need.

Maybe this is all imagination on my part. I have no business to be commenting on how things go in your family but you know that your grandparents have this strong attachment to you.

My own experience probably has something to do with this nosiness. In the early years of my life, my mom was a working woman and could not help but bring her work home on occasion.

I still can recall the feelings, although not specific events when, if my dad wasn’t around, I chose to go to my room and play with my imaginary friends who always paid close attention to what I was doing or wanted to do.

Years ago I enjoyed reading Erma Bombeck. She became a newspaper columnist, later in life, after having raised children and performed at the routine and boring chores relegated to a mother and housewife. She was able to find and tell us of the humor as well as love in the midst of those dreadful chores.

In fact, Gramma and I read it together each evening before bedtime and had us laughing and crying within the span of minutes. Erma had the ability to see the humor and desperation of an overworked mother.

I happen to be in a discussion group of seniors recently discussing our past lives. One friend introduced a reference to a site on the Internet that contained comments by Ms. Bombeck.

The title was “If I had my life to live over.” It brought me up short because I had some of the same regrets.

I remember that Gramma and I, with tears flowing freely, embraced each other when I read “There would have been more I love you’s than I’m sorry’s and definitely more hugs

Gramma could hardly finish reading a short statement because of the catch in her voice when she read “Now when my kids kiss me impetuously I would never again say “Later. Now go get washed up for dinner.”

Gosh, I noticed that I am more into meddling now that I am on the last phase of my life here on earth. Oh, to hell with it. This is my Janet, with whom I could always be open,

I watch with admiration your move up the ladder at Cisco. James says you are headed for the top. I am concerned that with your eye on the distant star, you may miss the beauty that is on hand and nearby every day.

I like Erma. Would say “Given another shot at life I would seize every minute, look at it and really see it, live it and never give it back.

It would be a formidable task, given a two career life to navigate, but I ask you to consider Erma’s wisdom so that you make may wise choices.

We love you so and want to express our thanks for the role you played in James’ recovery from the Iraq experience.

Love, Grampa

Gramma and I were reaching for tissues in the middle of my reading, I unable to read through bleary eyes.

At the end of the reading, we sat silently each with images and memories evoked by the reading.

I broke the silence. “Gramma, I chose that letter because it was pivotal. The evening of the day that it came in the mail, I took it with me to bed so I could read it to my loving and patient husband.

Reading it opened up a long overdue conversation. My eyes and heart were opened, leading to a renewed relationship in our marriage and a new warmer developing love affair with the boys. I became my old self again according to what the male contingent in our family said. I called Gramps a few months later to tell him of the impact of his letter.”

Gramma said “It was one of the great joyous moments of his life, dear.”

It was time to change the subject. “Would you like to hear one more letter?” She nodded and I picked up the letter.

December 2006

Dear Janet,

Thirty years ago today while Gramma and I were flying across the nation to be with your mom and dad, the stork was flying along with us with a beautiful bundle of femininity. The stork was a bit faster, actually delivering you about ten minutes before our plane touched down.

It was the morning of day two that the nurse placed this crinkly faced beauty into my arms. You lay there so peacefully and I was sure that the corners of your lips turned up in a smile as if to say "This feels so good"

I had to compete with your daddy and gramma as well as your mom to hold you during your few waking hours. I did manage to rock you to sleep and even fed you a supplemental bottle twice in the early hours of the morning.

Something special happened during that visit, so special that it has remained etched in my mind. You and your mom was being released from the hospital.

I was at your home waiting by the Christmas tree when I heard the toot of the automobile horn announcing your arrival. I ran to the door to see your daddy carry this gorgeous bundle in pink into her home for the first time. I can still feel the sting of salt as the tears refused to stay behind my eye lids.

A second car pulled up just as you entered the decorated portal of the house. Emerging were your grandparents, your daddy's parents, and your two year old brother who was grinning from ear to ear and dashing toward my arms.

You slept through the whole noisy gathering and were soon tucked into your bassinet in the nursery.

James appeared to be lost in the midst of the gathering of family, all of whom were focused on the new arrival.

I recall that I bundled James into his warmest clothes and the two of us took a walk in the cold but sunny afternoon. We stopped by the neighborhood park where I pushed him on the swings and then was there at the bottom of the slide to make sure he was safe after each slide.

We stopped at an ice cream parlor where we enjoyed some hot chocolate and some conversation.

Up to that point, he had been a chatterbox, but suddenly went mute. I waited in silence, expecting that he was remembering something to ask me, but he surprised me with a statement.

"Grampa, she is so tiny and can't do anything for herself. Since I am her big brother, it will be my job to protect her. I want you to help me does that?"

I was so stunned that I agreed although I had no idea how that might happen since I would be three thousand miles away and reachable only by phone or airplane. It so happened that neither came much into play. It is apparent that you have helped each other in times of need.

If I contributed anything, it was through letters and the occasional times when the family gathered or we flew to visit with you and your parents. At the reunions James spent a lot of time with your uncles. You and I always had time for walks while the younger children played with each other or spent a lot of time with Gramma.

I was just reminded of the summer when James was home from the Point for a short summer break and you had just broken off a relationship with that Miles Jensen. If I recall, James was there for you to cry on his shoulder and in some way, unknown to me, you made a strong recovery.

When James wrote me about the incident I wanted to dash off a letter of sympathy but felt that you might resent my knowing since it was your secret with James.

I was even empathetic because I had the same experience with your mom, although she was a bit younger at the time, still in junior high school.

Gramma was out for the evening, the other siblings asleep when your mom came crashing into the house, dashing through the family room and heading for the bathroom.

She stayed in there for a long time, when it occurred to me that something was wrong. I walked to the bathroom door and tapped gently. She didn't respond but I could hear her sobbing. I pushed the door ajar and saw her sitting on the rim of the bathtub, wet tissues in her hand, tears still flowing onto her cheeks.

I took her in my arm and then led her back into the family room where I sat in my chair and pulled her onto my lap.

As the sobs finally ebbed she was able to tell me that her steady for the last year, Steven, had decided to quit going steady. When the words had gushed out, she began sobbing once more, head on my shoulder.

There was nothing I could do or say so I just held her until she was ready for bed. I am not sure what I contributed but I can tell you it was one of the tenderest moments of my life. It is usually a mother's arms that meet a daughter's need at moments such as that.

Changing the subject, I know few details about your relationship with James but I am sure that he was always there for you and would still if he hadn't suffered so much from the injury in Iraq. Now the tables are reversed. I understand from his recent phone call that you have been his rock, offering your home to serve as a sanctuary for the three of them while he recuperates from his combat wounds. Bless you.

He told me that you are also setting up an interview at Cisco because you believe that he is an excellent candidate to meet their requirement for helping returning veterans to find new vocations.

He also told me that he and Jeanne are planning a week end visit to see us during the Christmas season they are planning to fly up with your folks after their visit with you. By the way, do you think your parents were upset that he chose to live with you instead of going home? If so, do you think that I can help in any way? You know I will not stick my nose in, without being asked.

I am sorry you will not be with us at Christmas. I know your in-laws are eagerly awaiting your visit. There are so many things that we could talk about during those long walks. That will simply have to wait. Perhaps you can find a long week end after the holidays.

I will also miss your presence because it is you who ignites the sparkle at all our family gatherings.

Love, Grampa.

Gramma was teary but his voice was strong. "I am glad you stayed, Janet. Of all the family, it is you and I who will miss him most."

"I guess you are right. "

Gramma went on "You may or may not be aware that you're Grampa, while not overly religious, was a man of deep faith, what I would call, and a faithful disciple of Jesus. I do believe that almost every person at the memorial service had in some way benefitted from his willingness to serve others."

I thought about her comment. "You are so right. In my own family, I remember each of the boys telling us of some special time with Grampa. James shared with me some of the great times he had with Grampa, times that impacted his life."

"Most of his service was done quietly, out of the public view. You will discover a rich story as you read his diary and the files that are in the locked inner box of the safe."

She reached into her tote bag. "Speaking of the locked box, here is the combination to that part of the safe." She handed me the key and an envelope that appeared to hold a greeting card. "Thomas handed me this card, addressed to you, three days before he passed away. In the course of that long goodbye time together, he mentioned that he had written the note some days earlier."

The outside of the envelope read

To Janet. To be read the day after my memorial service at precisely 2:55 PM.

Dear Janet

Several months ago, while having a beer after special club match, two of whom were Cisco executives, something was said to me in private that affirmed a plan I had concocted some time ago.

I recently invited the two members of the club to have lunch here with me. The invite was sparked because I wanted to affirm the comment made that afternoon. At that luncheon we hatched a specific plan.

Two weeks ago I had a long phone conversation with your husband, one of my favorite in-laws. I told him of a plan that I was hatching after hearing me through, he said. "I would be delighted if she agrees. My job provides a great deal of flexibility."

For a myriad of reasons which you can figure out, I hope you will take the responsibility the continuation of the annual reunions on the grounds of our home and orchards. Your comments through the years make me feel that you will.

The papers simply require your signature as the new owner. All the details have been taken care of by our attorney. Just give Bill a call.

There is more to the plan. The ownership may make it easier for you to accept another offer.

To top officials of Cisco will ring the doorbell at precisely three o'clock to present an offer that requires a move to headquarters in San Jose.

Gramma and I love you so and cannot think of anyone we would rather see in a position to continue binding the clan together.

With love from both of us, Grampa.

Book 5.

A Marine on R&R

The waiting room at the Pittsburgh SkyPort was noisy. Children were running around in spite of mothers' shouting for them to "Come, sit down, right now." A mother, sitting next to him, opened her blouse and began breast feeding her baby who had been screaming momenta before.

Every few seconds a voice on the intercom was calling someone's name or another voice was making an informational announcement. The couple sitting behind him was having a spat, their voices loud and sharp.

He heard a high pitched female calling "Jimmy, don't leave."

From his position he could see the line formed that was leading to gate 49. Some passenger seemed to be staring into space, having learned to be patient. Others were trying to peer around their neighbor to see why the line was moving so slowly.

A very young looking sailor was embracing a young woman, both shedding tears because he may be headed for active duty. He could see that folks next to the couple were turning away, yielding a bit of privacy for this special moment.

In any other circumstance, Steve m might have been annoyed. Nosy waiting rooms are forgettable experiences, but he was relishing this. "*This was a helluva better than the sound of howitzers or machine gun fire in the rice paddies of Vietnam.*"

"Are you a general?"

The voice and the question started Steve. He turned to look into the smiling freckled face of a boy who was about six or seven years old.

He returned the smile. "Sorry to say I am not. These two bars say that I am a captain in the U.S. Marines."

"I didn't think so. You're not old enough but you sure have a lot of medals."

Steve laughed. "You're right. What's your name?"

"Billy. I want to be an admiral when I grow up. My daddy is in the navy."

Just as Steve was ready to comment, he heard a soft woman's voice saying "Billy, it's not polite to bother people while we're waiting for daddy."

"Oh, mom, I wasn't bothering him. He looked so lonely. I thought he could use some company."

“That was thoughtful, Billy, but we need to hurry to gate forty seven. Daddy’s flight is now on the ground.”

“Goodbye, Captain. I wish I could find out what all those ribbons meant. I thought only generals and admirals had that many medals. What is that purple one?”

His mom said gently “Billy, that means that he was injured while on duty. It is not polite to ask such questions. Now, let’s hurry. Dad will have one just like that.”

Steve said “Billy I’m sorry our meeting was so short. I bet you’ll get a big hug from y our dad in just a few minutes.” Billy was waving as his mom was taking his hand in hers, moving toward a joyful reunion.

Steve though *“How insightful of Billy It was like he was seeing into my soul.”*

The brief encounter triggered memories and regrets of what might have been. *“Anne, I miss you so. That demined drunken driver took you from me so early in our life together. I used to dream that we would have a boy like Billy.”*

His mind was suddenly flooded with images of that evening. He still could hear the screams from Anne followed by deadly silence. He switched his mind to a pleasant scene; a discipline had developed to avoid the pain of that dark evening.

The chaos around him dimmed as he let his mind ravel over the last days of his leave. He spent most of the days with his family but also many hours with Anne’s family.

His older sister, Mary lived with folks, thus being their primary caretaker. His twin sister and husband had driven in from Harrisburg to spend a day. He visited with two friends from his high school days and spent a few minutes on the phone chatting with college friends who were scattered across the country.

He spent as many hours as possible with Anne’s parents. Anne had been their only child. Her death left a big hole in their lives. He sensed their need and spent many hours and days with them in the months that followed the accident.

The accident had occurred just a week prior to their planned wedding date. From those first days her folks saw Steve as their own son.

The morning before he was to leave, he said his goodbyes to his own family. They understood his need to spend a day with Anne’s family.

The three of them spent a beautiful day together. Casual comments about Anne were exchanged, incidental to other subjects. Years ago they had agreed not to dwell on the past when they were together. Her dad had said “You are our son, too. Let’s face the future, recognizing our grief but not dwelling on it.”

Elsie had served his favorite, spaghetti with her own tomato meat sauce, hot French bread and a tossed salad. He and Frank had killed a bottle of Chianti, talked sports while the two of them did the dishes. The discussion eventually centered on whatever he was willing to say about his Vietnam experience.

After brunch this morning Frank drove him to the airport. Steve was flying TWA to Los Angeles later in the day. He had a snack and found a paper back to read on the flight.

The first leg of the flight was to Kansas City where he planned a short visit with his mom's brother, now a widower and in the later stages of dementia. Uncle Jack had been his baby sitter when mom had to work to supplement dad's earning. His uncle, before his marriage, took Steve to baseball and basketball games, taught him to throw a baseball and how to throw spirals with a football.

The visit to the assisted living facility was a disappointment. His uncle did not recognize him. Steve spent an hour with him letting his uncle lead the conversation, much of it very difficult to follow.

With a heavy heart, he moved to embrace his very special uncle. Jack rose and wrapped his arms around Steve as he had done so many times in the past. For just that moment Steve thought he saw recognition in those deep blue eyes.

While sitting in the waiting room at the Kansas City airport, Billy's comment at the Sky Port popped into mind. He was very much alone. The friendships of his university days were history. His buddies were married, their attention and devotion focused on family members as they should be.

He had had a good relationship with his strike team as their lieutenant, one of respect but never as friends. With each promotion the distance between his subordinates and himself widened. That was the standard, unfortunately. Each step up a rung brings a bit more loneliness.

The one saving grace was his ability to read between the lines, often sensing the inner turmoil of fellow marines. Over the last few years he had earned a nickname of "Padre." While the opportunities in his present life limited creating friendships, he still had an innate love for people.

Since he would be stationed at Camp Pendleton, south of Los Angeles, for four weeks before returning to Vietnam, he hoped he might meet a woman who was open to a brief relationship with a "warrior." A lot of women were turned off with our engagement in Vietnam. That usually translated to avoiding the men who fought there.

In the aisle seat near the tail of plane, he was pulled out of the story he was reading when a warm voice said "Compliments of the crew, Captain. Your choice of beverage." He loved the voice and the silhouette.

She was a striking brunette about 5' .5". Mike appreciated the legs he noticed when she had walked down the aisle earlier. The rest of that body was just as outstanding.

Someone had called her name. She flashed him a wide smile as she said “Right back
“He liked the rear view too. “Down Mike.” Looking around he decided that he was the only young officer
aboard.

“There is that smile again.” He was watching her return to his side. “I just bet Louise
that you’re a scotch drinker.”

He laughed “You’re very perceptive but not right now. Whatever beer you have will be
fine. “

She opened and poured a Miller’s, placed a bag of nuts and two small bottles of Johnny
Walker, Black Label on the tray. “As I said earlier, compliments of the crew.”

She stopped by to see if he wanted a refill, stooped, touched his arm lightly. Whenever their eyes
locked, she gave him that very warm and wide smile. His male ego was being fed. “*I can’t believe this is
happening to me*

It was hard not to watch her. She was pleasant with the other passengers but that warm wide smile
seemed to be reserved for him. “*At least she is not turned off by the marine uniform.*”

Then his sharp eyes picked up something strange. Whenever she was not facing a passenger directly,
he noticed sadness around her eyes. Her expression though subtly different was at odds with the woman
who served him.

While he was having coffee, she stopped by and said “I notice that your ticket destination is
Albuquerque. I know there is no marine base if you need a ticket to another destination, I can do that while
we are in flight.”

“Yes, I do need a ticket to Los Angeles, but that flight is sold out. I will be in your debt if you
can arrange something. This flight goes to San Francisco where I can catch a flight to LA.”

“Oh my. That will add hours and a long layover until the first morning flight out of SFO. I’d
like to try, if you will allow me.”

There was that smile again, warm and inviting. Steve wondered if she were really coming on
to him or maybe inviting him to ask her for her phone number.

Twenty minutes later she approached, a wide grin on her face, “I bought you a ticket and have
you first in line on standby. You, sir, I guarantee, will be on that flight. Since our crew transfers to that
flight, I will be at the gate assisting with loading passengers, putting me in position to be your personal
escort aboard the flight.”

Her hand was light on his shoulder as she gave him the news that was putting an extra touch
to the communication between them.

It was getting dark. The crew had dimmed the cabin lights. She was slowly making her way down the aisle, asking passengers if she could serve them in any way.

When she came to Steve he reached up to take her hand. He looked at her ID “Marie, don’t think I am too forward. I am not trying for a date although that must happen to you often.”

She smiled. Mike went on. “When you are not talking to a passenger, I see a sadness that belies your ‘customer posture’. I don’t like that look, but I see it often in these difficult days. On you it is the eyes.”

She removed her hand and put it on his cheek. “What sharp eyes you have. Why have you been watching me that closely?”

“Marie, you are striking and sexy looking. I’d bet on what the other 20 guys aboard are hoping for although they all are married. You cannot be unaware of the effect you have on men.”

She kept her hand on his cheek. “I don’t want you to think I am a brazen hussy looking for a date, although you could be tempting. Of course, I could guess about what’s on their minds. By the way, what is your name?”

“Steve.”

“That is what TWA expects of us; inspire desires within the men to lust and fly TWA. They also teach us how to say no.” Suddenly there were tears in her eyes and one drop on her cheek. “My special smile for you was not nor for any reason you could guess. You are almost a spitting image of my fiancée, who is in the Pacific on a carrier someplace. I miss him and worry so much. There is more but I can’t talk about it right now”. The tears were flowing. She patted his arm lightly and headed forward.

She came by again when she was free. “I am flying through to LAX and I need somebody to talk to I just cannot see you making a pass at me whatever is your reason. You are not emitting signals like that. Am I right?” Mike nodded.

“If we can get to LA together, would you be willing to have breakfast and let me cry on your shoulder? May be you can give me some advice.”

Steve took her hand. “I don’t know what help I can offer but I can provide a good ear and, as you can see, wide shoulders. He smiled “Besides, It sounds like you have a plan that may get me directly to LA.

“She smiled again, saying “Steve, it will work. Trust me.”.”

The layover in Albuquerque took approximately two hours. Steve was amazed to see so many people in the terminal at this hour. He figured that some convention was just ending, everyone eager to get home.

He was surprised to feel that light touch on his arm. Marie was saying “Be the last person in line, acting as a passenger with a seat assignment. I will be there to take your ticket just before they begin announcing the names off the stand-by list .Stay cool. I’m looking forward to breakfast with you.”

Less than an hour into the flight, the snack service was complete. “If I am right, you’re ready for that scotch.”

He laughed. “You are sharp. How did you manage that slick maneuver back there?”

She flashed that warm smile “I have friends who like my smile and maybe my legs.” She actually giggled, then turned serious. “Steve, I meant what I said. I am not coming on to you but I sure could use your shoulder. .

Steve waited in the terminal for Marie to finish up her duties. It was late but one on the restaurant in the terminal stayed open all night. They took a booth, the only two patrons at that hour.

She began “Steve, it is amazing how much you look like my Jim. He wears wings. He is on a carrier which I presume is off the coast of Vietnam. I wake up every morning expecting a call from his parents that he is dead. “

“We got engaged the day before he sailed. We were in San Francisco and took a room at the Mark. We were celebrating, first class, and had a deliciously sexy night, our first ever. We both had been virgins.”

She blushed. “Not too many 24 year olds like that today, at least from what I hear from my co-workers.”

“I was soaring in seventh heaven even though I was frightened for his life. I gave no thought to my possible loneliness.”

“The night was followed by reality I drove us to Alameda and the waiting carrier. Through the tears we continued to remember the previous twelve hours.”

“Then the news arrived several weeks later. I found out I was pregnant.”

The tears started down her cheeks. “I should be happy but I am so afraid that our child will grow up without a father who I believe would be the greatest in the world.”

She began to sob. Steve moved around the table and took her in his arms. It was quite a few minutes before the sobs slowed down, then stopped.

He gave her his large handkerchief. It came back very wet and smeared with mascara. “Marie, I am sorry. You are welcome to cry on my shoulder but I am at a loss for words.”

“I have started five letters to Jim but I have torn up each one. I am afraid to give him that news in the midst of his battles, whatever they may be.”

“The real reason I wanted you to be with me is that I figured looking at you while I said the words might give me a clue. It would feel like he was just across the table. Do you have any ideas? What do you think would please you in a similar situation?”

“I can’t speak for Jim but if you were my love, I would want to know no matter where I was or what I was doing. I would have something more to look forward to now I would have two reasons to be extra careful.”

“In battle, whether in the air or on the ground, staying alive and protecting your buddy, are the two basic rules of behavior. Anything that helps you remember is a big plus.”

Marie’s eyes filled with tears again. She put her arms around him and said “Thank you, Steve. I knew I made a good guess about you even if it was risky Let me buy you breakfast.”

He said “You prepaid in Albuquerque.”

“That was just a down payment. I will owe you the rest of my life even though we may never see each other again.

Marie insisted and paid the check. Steve gave her his mailing address. She took the note, and then took him by the hand, leading him across the central waiting area. “I have a nice surprise for you. A friend of mine, who rooms with me on the road, is waiting for us in the TWA offices. Her flight landed about a half hour after ours. She is the pilot for the next leg of your journey.”

Steve frowned. “I don’t understand. There are no flights to Pendleton, only bus rides.

He saw that wide smile again. In a mock tone she said “TWA offers service unequalled by any other carrier. In certain circumstances they offered special taxi services directly to the door of your choice.”

At that moment the door to the TWA office opened. A brunette, about the size of Marie, stepped out. In a glance, Steve guessed she was a carbon copy of Marie but with a dimple where Marie had none. Her smile wasn’t as wide but just as warm

Marie introduced them. “Jean, this is Steve. He is one of the great guys. Steve, this is Jean Murphy, my closest friend and roommate except here. She lives in Del Mar and will deliver you as promised.”

“Steve gasped. “That’s wonderful but when did you arrange this?”

Jean laughed a hearty laugh, one that warmed his heart.

She radioed me in Kansas City. We stayed tuned into each other’s schedules on those few times we are not flying together. There is no favor I would refuse Marie.

Take good care of Jim, I mean Steve.” She giggled, “He is one of the good guys.” She gave Steve a light hug and walked away.

Steve carried their bags to her very smart Chrysler convertible. On the way, Jean asked “Are you Jim’s twin brother?”

“A pure coincidence, I assure you.”

At this time of the morning, very few cars were travelling south but the commuter traffic became evident before they got as far as Capistrano

They made light conversation as strangers do during their first meeting. Steve liked what he saw and heard from Jean. Nothing in the conversation hinted at a man in her life.

They stopped at a Denny’s for coffee. Jean was enjoying the company of this accidental travelling guest. Just before they pulled into the parking lot, she said “I’m still in the dark, Steve. There must be some real reason that you are not sporting a wedding ring Divorced?”

He hesitated as she pulled into a parking spot. She seemed the kind of person with whom he might share his story. It was fifteen minutes later when he finished. She was holding his hands, her glistening eyes looking into his tears.

He broke the silence with “Let me buy you that coffee while I pry out your story. I say story because there is a reason that I see no ring on your finger.”

She was laughing as he led her into the restaurant. When they were taking their first sip, she said “My story is short and sweet.”

“I hadn’t realized that Russ was on the rebound. We had a great relationship, as serious as it gets. I was certain he was getting ready to propose. We were out to dinner in Philadelphia, his home town. He was not quite his winsome self but I was patient. There had been a few similar moments in our months together but usually reverted to his light hearted and smiling self.”

He had picked at his steak, his favorite, a filet. I finally asked “What is it, honey?”

“It is so hard to say the words that I have rehearsed. Sandra and I have reconciled. I told her that I owed you this last date.”

Steve could see that she was steeling herself against tears. “I have no idea what else he planned to say. I left the restaurant and never looked back.”

Steve was expecting tears but they never arrived. She said “After being rudely dumped, I’ve had a few dates since but Mr. Right is staying out of view. Tonight was Marie’s way of hoping I would find your company interesting. She is the eternal matchmaker.”

They both laughed, the silence was deafening. Steve had no idea what you say to a woman who has just been dumped.

When she pulled up at the gate, she parked on the parking strip a few yards away from the sentry box, turned off the ignition.

Steve took that as a clue that there might be some unfinished business. As she turned to face him, he said “I have a few more days leaved and will be on duty here for about a month. If you have some time, I would like to take you to dinner”

She flashed her warm smile. “I was afraid you might not ask and I couldn’t blame you. She reached for her purse and took out a TWA business card, wrote a phone number and address on the back.

“Come to dinner tomorrow at six. In fact, come earlier for a swim and a drink. Dad is retired marine and will be pleased that I have a date with a marine, finally.”

The two of them spent some part of almost every day of the next five weeks together. After the first week, Jean applied for vacation time in order to spend more time with Steve. Two lonely persons were finding joy during the interlude that would be brief

Suddenly he was gone with no chance for a final diner and a formal goodbye.

Seven weeks later, at a base twenty miles north of Saigon, Steve grinned as he was opening another letter from Jean. He burst into a huge smile when he read. “I have never known what it is to be loved. I hope you haven’t changed your mind. As we planned on that quick trip to Vegas, I am thrilled to give you the news that you are going to be a daddy.”

His ‘whoop’ brought smiles to his fellow officers.

Book 6.

Chapter 1.

2015

Wearily lifting his almost six foot frame out of the car, Mike rounded the vehicle and pushed the button to close the garage door. As he entered the den, he threw his cap onto the table, sitting down to take off his shoes. Slumping back into the easy chair, he closed his eyes against the sting of tears welling up.

The memorial service for Helen, who had been taken from him by a stroke two weeks ago, had been everything he had wanted for himself and the family. His tears had flowed freely during the service because there Memories was no reason to hide his feelings of loss.

He had turned down the offers of the kids to come home with him after the reception. He wanted to be alone, needing one bigger cry right now without anyone nearby. It was important for him to have privacy while he said aloud one more personal goodbye to Helen, his loving wife of 69 years.

Mike rose from the table, walked to the refrigerator, took out a chilled bottle of Chardonnay. After pouring a glass, he raised the glass "To Helen, my beauty and my life."

Carrying his glass, Mike walked into the den to sit in his favorite recliner, next to the matching light blue one Helen had always occupied as they sat together. The room was small, with mahogany paneling, a soft blue rug and floor-to-ceiling windows facing out to the pool.

The two of them had spent so many cozy hours here. It was also a place where they discussed and made major decisions in reference to their own lives and their children.

He picked up two photographs of Helen, the young woman he had married during WWII and the other that was taken just last month. Holding the photos close, looking into her eyes, he said, "Dear Helen,

I miss you so! These many years we had together were a love song we sang together along with the dances we danced! As you used to say, 'It takes two to tango! And tango we did,' In the photo it seemed to him that her smile widened just a wee bit.

It seemed impossible that she was gone. They both had been in pretty good health. Mike's mind went back a couple of days before she died. As they had many times during the spring months, he and Helen had taken a ride to the countryside to see new delicate blossoms on the almond trees that set a tone of beauty to the fields with a background of light green undergrowth to set them off.

One residential yard had budding forsythia bursting in bright yellow, growing up in front of an old gray fence. The hills were still lush from the good spring rains, and wild flowers dotted the landscape with a variety of bright colors.

As they had driven along, Helen had kept moving her hand over his thigh, teasing him as she had done for all those years. She loved to tease her lover who freed her of her emotional bindings. She had told Mike that he had liberated her of her sexual inhibitions during their honeymoon. He could almost feel her hand on his thigh at this moment.

He replayed in his mind the scene when they had arrived home.

When he pulled into the driveway, Helen had taken his hands into hers. "Mike, before we go in let's neck like we did in our old Dodge coupe in our early days before the children arrived. She snuggled into his arms with her lips close to his ears. After a bit he heard her whisper, "Thank you, dear, for all that you have been in my life. You *are* truly my love and my redeemer in so many ways. You encouraged and made me a true partner in our marriage, one of the few among all our acquaintances. I owe you so much for urging and supporting me in my chosen profession as an artist. You were the key to opening up my cocoon, surprising both of us with what escaped and blossomed into a whole woman. On a par with everything else or even more importantly, thank you for all the intimate and loving experiences that you brought to my life. As much as I loved you almost from the beginning, one of the big gifts was

discovering this beautiful sensitive and caring human being. Thank you for all that and for being a loving and caring father to our children.” It had been a deeply tender and tearful moment.

Mike remembered opening a bottle of Chardonnay while Helen put out some crackers and cheese, an evening custom for years. In the den, they had sipped and nibbled while the newscaster went on about some unimportant event of the day. Helen said, "Why do we watch this? None of it is worthwhile."

Mike reached over and took her hand in his, agreeing, but they continued tuning in to what Helen called “The Bad News Hour.”

After a latish dinner they had prepared to retire. They helped each other to undress, teasing each other with pats and nips, as had been their practice since their honeymoon days. They *lay* on Helen’s bed while she read a chapter aloud from her current biography.

When Helen finished "I want to read some poetry to you," Mike whispered. "I can’t remember where I picked this up, so I thank some anonymous poet. I thought it was befitting for a couple of old lovers.”

In a soft, modulated voice he read.

“I love looking back to where we started

Seeing us as we were in days lighthearted

Then slowly living through the memories

We’ve created to bring

Us to this very day

I look forward to the days ahead of us

Wondering what we’ll find

On the path we travel

Before more time has slipped away

But best of all I love who we are

And where we are today

Together writing the journal

That we'll remember along the years."

"Thank you. That was lovely, Mike. You are such a love." She had pointed to her lips. He obliged with a wet kiss, which she returned with gusto. Mike tucked her in, leaned over for a gentle good night kiss and started for his bedroom. Years ago they agreed on separate bedrooms, but a couple of mornings each week Mike would sneak into her bed before she was awake, so that she could awaken to the warmth of his body snuggled to hers.

That evening, for some reason, Helen had said, "Mike, come back to bed with me tonight. I need to feel you here with me before I sleep. I'm not very sleepy."

"Umm, that is nice, Mike. If I nod off before you, then you can take that nice warm body of yours back to your own room and come back in the morning."

Starting a few years prior, all the medications he was taking had made it impossible for Mike to make love with Helen like he had done for so many years. Helen, however, could still be stimulated to the fullest. She always, laughingly, insisted that it was Mike's fault for being a great coach and lover for all those years.

Mike still loved seducing his lover because her response was always enthusiastic. It had been so after the first twenty four hours of their honeymoon, that time in their life when they had discovered that they would never be able to keep their hands off each other, surprising both of them.

Five minutes later they were snuggled close together, Mike moving his hand to her breast. She said, “I wasn’t asking for that, but I love it, sailor boy. I have so many memories of the nights I fell asleep with your hand cupping my breast. Tonight I just need your company.”

But she hadn’t discouraged his hands She sighed with pleasure, moving her body closer in order to nuzzle his neck. She giggled as she sensed him shiver.

He whispered “Honey, I need to thank you for all those years of desire and fulfillment. I often shiver even now as I remember the way you could bring my desire to the surface. Even more I thank you for all the tenderness and warmth that supported me in times of stress and worry. I have been so lucky to have your love for all these years.”

Mike just kept his arms around her and his lips snuggled into the curve of her throat feeling her body melting into his. He kept her warm until she was ready to sleep. She gave him another long, deep kiss that drove his memory to their first date.

After Helen fell asleep, Mike’s thoughts had turned to their years together, his mind rambling through the past. He thought about the multi-talented person that she had been. He appreciated that she chose to dress mostly in tailored styles, although his friends often referred to her as sexy or foxy.

After the kids had gone their separate ways, Helen had gone to work part time and then full time. Her associates, who found her quick, efficient, light hearted and very capable, loved her.

All this was interspersed with hours of working with her oils and canvases. She had become a truly professional artist. She was well known for her portraits and artistic seascapes scattered throughout the homes of family, friends and clients.

She had been a loving, transparent lover who reveled in the intimacy of their times alone which they treated as a special gift to both of them. It was their secret in the midst of a bustling life of business and children nurturing that had enhanced the joy of their marriage, bringing a glow to their relationship.

He decided to stay that whole night with her.

Chapter 2.

Mike awoke to the aroma of Columbian coffee wafting from the kitchen. He had not been aware of her leaving the bed. He lay back, knowing that within minutes he would be treated to orange juice and coffee before they showered.

Breakfast was served on the balcony instead of in bed. The garden was in full bloom, two lilies stood out behind the Star Jasmine. The iris was a riot of color, carefully selected by Helen who tended the flowers with her green thumb.

The fountain played its welcoming melody, inviting the birds to come for a bath. The sparrows and the wax wings were competing for the seed in the bird feeder. It was a glorious morning

Mike was pouring more coffee. Helen had thanked him for the peaceful night after a loving evening. He had shared with *her* some of his memories. Then he asked “Just thinking about last night has given me a feeling of nostalgia. Honey how about sharing some of our special romantic memories?”

Helen laughed, saying “My loving husband, you are the romantic and I love it and I’ll try. There are so many, our wedding, especially the honeymoon, a moon lit evening in Singapore, three evenings on the balcony at Waikiki. If I had to choose the most romantic, I choose our dinner date on March 21st, 1944, three days after our St. Patrick’s date, an evening that is also one of my favorites.”

Mike laughed. “That is also one of my favorites. Why was it for you?”

Helen rose without answering, left the table. She came back a few minutes later, holding a copy of one of her diaries, actually a journal. “I want to be accurate and I have the story of that evening in detail in my treasured book.”

“My memory of the last part of that evening is complete beyond the detailed notes in the journal. It is etched in my mind.

Near the end of dinner I had asked you to tell me about growing up in a steel town and some of the tough experiences you had. At the end I remember taking your hand and softly kissing it. To myself I said “He is a real contradiction, strong male who can read me as though he sees into my mind. He is sure that I am falling for him and I believe he is right on.”

“After dinner we stepped outside and agreed that it was not too cold for a walk. We strolled hand in hand, talked and window shopped. I noticed that you were not looking at the merchandise but focusing on my reflection in the window. The look was so loving that I blushed, feeling your love reaching out to me, seeking a similar response from me”.

“You had been very honest during dinner, telling me that you were falling in love with me even if this was only our second date. “

“I was awed with a set of earrings in a jewelry store window. You wanted to go right in and buy them so that I would have something to remember you but I said absolutely no. I already had so many memories of you that would never go away.”

“I began trying to sort out my feelings, *impossible* with you massaging my knuckles I was responsive to your warmth, at the same time, fearful of moving too quickly.”

“A moment before it happened I sensed a tension in your body. You spun me around , took me in your arms and I realized I was wrapping my arms around your neck I felt your mouth warm , soft and hard at the same time, your tongue sliding along the inner surface of my lips. It was so erotic that I could feel my body softening and trembling.”

I had never had this deep an experience before, being surprised to find that my emotion was pure desire. It seems we could not pull apart, each of us wanting to go on and on. I was thinking “Not even with Randy did I feel his way.” I wanted to pull you closer so that I could feel you heart beating against my breast.”

Helen referred to her diary. After a moment she continued “While I was fearful about the emotional direction I was traveling, I was also beginning to feel like I was at sea. Despite the turmoil inside I kept telling myself. “I don’t want this to end. This is exquisite and agonizing at the same time.” I wanted to go on wrapped in your body and your presence.”

“I remember that the kiss went on and on and on. I recall opening my lips wide to receive you, knowing full well that I was inviting intimacy, wanting more of what was happening. My body was totally melting and my knees so weak that I felt I would buckle if you released *me*.”

“Mike, I didn’t know what to say or how to act, feeling as though I had betrayed myself. Nice girls didn’t act this way in those or any other days. I was aware of being in alien territory, yet I wanted your strong body and maybe more.”

Mike interrupted. “I was on the verge of asking if you would like to go back to my room.”

“I knew but I had to avoid the possibility so I said something like “Mike It’s getting cold. I don’t dare go back to the hotel with you so we had better head for my home.” Mike laughed. “I remember, reluctantly agreeing because I certainly did not want this to end. I was hoping that the desire you were transmitting would make you even more receptive to my love for you.”

Helen said “During the bus ride my thoughts centered on what was happening to me. Everything about you appealed to me. I thought “There must be flaws someplace.” I was thinking that although you were somewhat reserved, you responded fully to all my questions. Then, “Why am I analyzing him? Is it because I am getting seriously attracted to him or even something more?”

“You met my folks. I never understood why it was important enough to get them out of bed but I did. That must have been your clue. I remember that we agreed to write but I would continue to date others and that you were to do the same, secretly hoping that you would not.”

Helen closed he diary. “As many other wonderful memories *as* I have, none can compare with what happened to me in those few hours. Thinking of my family and religious training, I would not have believed that I came so close to unadulterated desire. Mike, I look at you today, wanting to live again those few hours with you.”

Mike recalled “She rose, crossed to me, took my hand, pulling me tight and locked her lips to mine for a breathtaking reliving of those minutes.”

Chapter 3.

Helen’s face burst into a wide grin as they pulled apart. “You are still a great kisser, sailor boy. I think I’ll keep you handy for a while.” She began to set dirty dishes on a large tray. “I’ll make a new pot of coffee while we do the dishes. I’ll be ready to hear about what you considered the most romantic time in our life.”

A little later, he carried the coffee pot while she took the mugs back to the patio. When they were seated, Mike began his tale. “My special memory is about the first days returning to our apartment after the honeymoon. I had four days left before returning to duty. Our passions were running at full speed. We could not keep our hands off each other. Aside from our intimate times in the bedroom, I had this need to sneak a kiss when we did the dishes or took a stroll in the park. I loved the way you would approach me from the back, put your arms around my waist and lay your head on my shoulder and at least once each day kiss the lobe of my left ear, a prelude and an invitation to undress each other.”

“We developed a ritual during those first days. After regaining our breath, we would read from a book of short love stories. I have forgotten the name of the book but it was not romance stories but actual love stories.”

Helen laughed. “It is still on our book shelf and is called “Nine Stories of Real Love.” Let’s read one of those stories this afternoon.”

“Agreed. Now, back to my tale. I remember that I made breakfast the first morning, went out to lunch and then disaster and frustration. You *had* never mentioned the fact that you had practically no experience cooking. I had to come to your rescue while your tears flowed and the sobs racked your body. You were so distraught that you could not eat anything. After just a few bites, I rose, lifted you into my arms and carried you to the sofa. With your body enveloped into mine, we lay for a very long period until there were no more tears and your body was calm.”

“You finally were able to tell me that your mom insisted that you keep your head in the text books. She told you that there would be plenty of time to learn to cook. You begged my pardon for having kept this information from me not realizing that eventually the truth would be told.”

“It was in that moment that we pledged to hold no secrets from each other. It was like rising to a new level in our relationship, a pledge that has served us well for all these years.”

Helen reached to take his hand, saying “I remember those days well. With loving care, you offered to teach me to cook dull dinners along with the rudiments of the culinary arts. In exchange, I offered to teach you the basics of Contract Bridge. Oh, Mike, that is memory of real love and romance. I recall learning of your love for classical music during those first evenings while you discovered my interest in painting portraits.”

“Thank you, Mike, for suggesting the idea of our sharing memories. The last twenty four hours has turned out to be another of the many days of our romantic life together. Spending the night together, bringing juice and coffee to you, showering together and sharing loving moments of our history has found a special place in my heart. I will spend some time later in the day adding to my diaries. By the way, I want the children to read whatever parts of those diaries would interest them. Each is precisely dated with major events highlighted.”

Chapter 4.

Two mornings after that beautiful evening, Mike found her dead in her bed, a stroke having taken her during the night. He had held her cold hand for half an hour, not feeling able to let her go. As he sat there, stunned and reeling from his loss, he saw her Christmas card to him from last Christmas. He had recently put it on her bedside table because she wanted to read it to him on those special mornings.

Opening it lovingly, as he had many times, he read:

So I want to thank you for life's greatest gift

Our deep, enduring love

A love that is rooted in things that last

Yet still able to reach up

And play among the stars with joy.

To my Romeo

Love, Helen

Christmas, 2009

Sitting up in the recliner, Mike cried aloud, "Helen, I miss you so.

You once write a note to me when we were 2500 miles apart after our first meeting. Today my feelings reflect *the* same as yours at that time. "The ghost of you clings to me and will not desert me."

You kept your promises to me and I tried for you. I do love you deeply. Ours has been a long romance of two innocents who loved their way to maturity. A true love story."

He wept for a long time before he poured himself another glass of wine and called his son for a ride to the family's post memorial celebration of Helen's life

That evening, alone with his thoughts, aware that the rest of his life would be spent with evenings like this, he decided that he would relive parts of his *life* with Helen by reading from her diaries.

He chose the diary from the year 1944, the year that they had first met. He turned the pages to March, the month in which they met.

March 1

Earlier this evening, tired of reading, I put my head back to rest my eyes. I got to thinking about what it would be like when I had a permanent man in my life.

He should be handsome so that I would bear beautiful children. He had better want children and he better be sexy, and all that implied because I want more than one baby. He ought to be my equal or my better in the department of brains. Life would be a bore otherwise. If he were brainy like I am, then he like I would love to read.

If he has those talents, it follows that he will be a good provider. He ought to be religious enough to nurture the children with Christian morals and living. If he has all those traits, I could live with some minor faults.

For a moment I fell into a reverie that saw me lying on a bed, fully clothed with a handsome blond male figure. I guess I dozed for a while and woke up momentarily thinking there was a man in my room.

Mike read through a few pages until he came to December 8th, the day they first met.

March

My friend Jenny introduced me to this handsome Air Force officer this evening. They invited me to have a drink with them. I was on my way home from a movie. Knowing Jenny as a friendly woman, I figured she was being polite. Why would a woman with a handsome officer on her arm invite another woman to have a drink?

Right now, as I write these notes, I think I made a mistake. I need to press Jenny for more information on Monday at work.

He quickly turned the page to March 10th .

March 10th

Wow. What great luck. Jenny's friend Michael called her today, He asked her to see if I were available for a date on St. Patrick's Day. I jumped at the chance. Earlier, at lunch, I pumped Jenny for information about her friend, a college friend. They were having dinner Saturday while she was waiting the arrival of her fiancé who was due to arrive at midnight. She explained that he knew no one in the city but liked what he saw on Saturday evening. Wow and double wow"

His heart was glowing when he put the book down and headed for bed.

Book 7.

Family Stories

Youngest Son

My brother Bill once told me that children do not form the capacity for logical reasoning before the age of seven. If that is true then I must have been five or six when the events unfolded that night.

I do remember it was nighttime. Shortly before these events were to unfold I may have been outside in our walnut tree. It seems like I spent a lot of my free time in the walnut tree. At the top of the walnut tree, maybe 25 feet up, it was easy to imagine you were a pirate manning the crow's nest or an army scout protecting the radar station visible on Mt. Uhmunum. Mostly though, being the last of six children sharing 800 square feet of living area and one bathroom, it was a place all to me.

Upon coming inside, Bill and I began to play. We found our way into Mom and Dad's bedroom where we began bouncing on the bed and having a pillow fight. I remember the bed seemed huge and almost as much fun as the trampoline at the Beamers. With a pillow roundhouse, I knocked Bill off his feet and he fell to the bed. I saw my chance to conquer him and went for the big shot. I raised the pillow over my head. CRACK! We heard a frightful sound. CRACK! Glass breaking. Lights flickering. We both looked up.

My parents had a light over their bed. Maybe there were two of them, but being the other one wasn't broken, I don't remember the other one. The light fixture had the bulb hanging in a frosted glass cylinder. The cylinder was surrounded by a spherical yellow glass decoration, like a fish bowl with both ends open. This was considered modern in the 1960's. Now, though, it wasn't really spherical, what with the missing shards laying on the carpet and all.

It was about this time that two things occurred in unison. One, Bill and I heard Dad's "mad voice" coming from the living room next door. He was probably in there listening to the new stereo we had just installed. Two, I was having sudden recall of a very stern lecture on never, ever jumping on the bed again.

Though my reasoning skills were low, being as I was less than seven, it was coming back to me that the stern lecture may have happened only minutes earlier. In fact, I am pretty sure Bill and I had been jumping on the bed and Dad had come in and told us to "knock it off" among other things. I don't believe it was the reading lamp that he had wanted me to knock off.

Now Bill being older than seven should have had a plan, but he just looked at me and froze. So I did the only logical thing and ran for the door. Cleverly, I raced across the hall to our little galley kitchen. There was a recess in the cabinets where the trashcan slid in. I quickly pulled out the trashcan, scrunched into the cubby and pulled the trash can back in front of me. Perfect. Or so I thought.

It was only moments before my security was shattered. First there was the pant leg, framed between the top of the trashcan and the bottom of the counter. Then the huge hand came into view and yanked away the trashcan. As he bent down, I saw Dad's glasses. "Uh, oh", I muttered. And in that deep booming voice, the "loud voice", I heard it. "*Uh, oh is right Buster*". Yanked by the arm I was escorted (shall we say dragged) back to the scene of the crime.

There was Bill. I remember the frightened look on his face. Then Dad positioned me for a spanking, He pushed me face down on to the bed. For some reason, the irony of his *bouncing* me on the bed was lost on me at that particular moment. Then we got our punishment and, as I remembered it, more was meted out to me than Bill because I had run.

Though I was not yet seven, I learned several very important lessons that night. Bill, who did not run away, but stayed to face up to his responsibility, received less of a spanking than I. From this we must conclude that it is vital to run much farther than the kitchen. If your father is forty something and smokes three packs a day, run as far and as fast as you can. Clearly, he will tire before you.

Second, it makes no sense, especially when music is bought as singles (45's), to place the phonograph and amplifier (family room) half way across the house from the speakers (living room). What was up with that?

Third, whoever nicknamed my father "Mr. Cool" clearly had not been jumping on his bed.

Bill

Circa 1969

I'm sure it was a Sunday afternoon, post church. I had just listened to Alice's Restaurant, Arlo Guthrie (1969), which I'm sure one of the liberal boys from the pastor's family introduced into our clean cut, conservative home.

As a pre-adolescent, precocious youth I was attracted to the quick turn of phrase and regular linguistic/artistic license that Mr. Guthrie applied to his musical repertoire. Also, I loved to impress my parents with any new found knowledge that I gained in my day-to-day activities.

I was often encouraged by my parents, when learning new vocabulary, to "use it in a sentence."

So, taking my newly acquired vocabulary from Alice's Restaurant and applying the ever present rule of "use it in a sentence", I bee-lined it for the living room, where my father was in deep discussion with John White, a good family friend.

If I may sidetrack for a moment, as an adult I now realize that I knew very little about Mr. White but I did know that my parents trusted and liked him and therefore he liked me.

So, feeling at ease and confident in my ability to engage and impress adults, I sauntered into the living room and used my new word in a sentence, “Dad, you’re a faggot.”

Stunned silence ensued.

My father, as we all know, was very even tempered, never tense. But I must say that he seemed to tense up a little that quiet Sunday afternoon. Being a man of presence, he paused and asked me if I knew what that meant.

I sidetrack again to explain that honesty is a virtue and my parents taught me that mostly by being honest with me. To this day I deeply appreciate that great characteristic.

In all honesty, I answered, “No.”

He then instructed me to get the dictionary, look up the word and report back once I had found it. I sensed that things weren’t quite going the way I had intended, but at this point I had nowhere to run.

I found the dictionary, found the word and returned to the scene of the apparent crime.

My father instructed me to read aloud the definition. I did, “A bundle of twigs, sticks, or branches bound together.” Now, as an adult and with an understanding of the circumstance, I can only guess that Mr. White was trying his best to stifle a hardy laugh. I was completely focused on Dad and he didn’t seem to be stifling any light heartedness. He then instructed me to read the next definition.

At this point things go a little fuzzy for me. I don’t remember if I read out loud or to myself but I realized what I had done and to this day can still feel the embarrassment. No further discussion needed. I had learned the lesson: “Think before you speak and know what you’re saying.”

It has served me well

Bill

Eldest Son

An **adage** (pronounced (ād’ij) or **adagium** (Latin), is a short but memorable saying that holds some important fact of experience that is considered true by many people, or that has gained some credibility through its long use.

A **proverb** (from the *Latin* proverbium), also called a **byword** or **nayword**, is a simple and concrete *saying* popularly known and repeated, which expresses a truth, based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity.

“Practice Makes Perfect” and other driving and life lessons learned on Gardendale Drive.

On my 16th birthday I went to the DMV and took both the written test and the driving test. It is the only time in my entire academic “career” that I remember getting 100% on a test. Actually both tests!

It was validated that I was an Excellent Driver.

A couple of weeks later I got to take the 1965 Buick Station Wagon with the Skyline Roof over to Caroline’s house. She wasn’t home so as I pull away from the curb when a BRAND NEW car comes hauling ass down Cherry Avenue and the driver decides to “kiss” my left bumper edge.

It ripped off the entire right side of his car.

Driving Lesson #1: “Look Before You Leap”

Some weeks later, Dad is sitting on the back brick patio at home when I approach and say, “Dad, I left my books at Pioneer High School. Can I take the 1965 Buick Station Wagon with Skyline Roof to pick up my books?”

Now we all know I was not a great academic in High School, and Dad knew the chances of me wanting to go get my school books was slim to none, but he said OK anyway. ERGO the speeding ticket I got on the way home was Dad’s fault.

Driving Lesson #2: “No good deed goes unpunished”

Unbeknownst to me, Dad must have known a judge in the traffic division and a few weeks later I was summoned (with Dad) to downtown San Jose to a hearing with a judge, who lectured me on the value of “good driving.” I listened intently. I agreed to change my errant driving ways. After all I had been tested and found to be an “Excellent Driver.”

Driving Lesson #3: “Hope springs eternal in the human breast”

So, about a month later I am out with a few of my friends driving into Los Gatos in the 1965 Buick Station Wagon with Skyline Roof. This beautiful girl was standing on the corner of Blossom Hill and Winchester. I turn to look, the car in front of me slams on his breaks and BAM!! I crash into the back of his car.

So an hour later, after the cops have left, I call home to tell Dad that I got in another wreck. I can’t quite remember his response over the phone, but we all know it was short. I am instructed to come home right away.

I arrive at the house and go to the living room to talk to Dad. He gets up to go look at the damage. That’s when I get to tell him that the car wasn’t drivable and was towed away and I forgot to get the number of the towing company.

Until that moment I had never seen Dad cry.

Driving Lesson #4: “When it rains it pours”

There was one other fender bender (In the 1965 Buick Station Wagon with the Skyline Roof) THAT WAS NOT MY FAULT and thank the heavens Mom was in the car as a witness!

However, **“Every Cloud has a Silver Lining”** since I have not been in an automobile accident in the past 40 years so **“Experience is the Best Teacher”**. And by the way I’m now 56 and Dad just told me I was an Excellent Driver.

- James

P.S. Other memorable sayings from Dad include:

- Chop Chop
- Pass it to the right
- Where the Hell are my tools!

Dad. Messenger without Alternatives.

As a lapsed Roman Catholic I had little interest in uniting with any other church community. My wife, on the other hand, made it known that she wanted a church home for our family and an opportunity for our children to be exposed to solid Christian teachings.

It was never a major issue but lay dormant for the first thirteen years of our marriage. Her patience was rewarded when we moved into town from a suburban community

In the neighborhood where my offices were located I became friends with pastor of the Community Church. Over a four year period he had been trying to interest me in the church. But hardly gave him a tumble.

One afternoon as we were leaving our weekly meeting, he said “I understand you have just moved within a few blocks of my home and the church I serve. Why don’t you bring the Missus and the children by on Sunday?”

I gave him an uncommitted nod, waved good-by e and headed for the office. On the drive home, I began thinking about his offer, knowing that my patient wife would be delighted.

Needless to say, we found a church community in which we were welcomed and quickly absorbed into the community.

Within a year I had been selected to serve on the session that is the governing body of the church and had been assigned to serve on the Education Committee I found the concerns of the committee to be challenging and interesting. The committee was divided into three subcommittees, namely, senior highs, junior highs and the elementary grades.

On three consecutive meeting agenda, the main subject on the agenda was the noise emanating from the junior high boys' classroom. Complaints from the Sunday school teachers of the younger children were very vocal with two of the teachers threatening to quit unless some corrective measure was taken.

I was the only male member of the Junior High subcommittee and felt all the ladies' eyes focused on me. I was feeling uncomfortable, just as they intended, of course. Dead silence was expansive and there was no escaping my fate. I may have even been blushing with guilt as I finally suggested that perhaps I should take a look on the next Sunday morning.

The story is funny only in retrospect.

Doing a little research, I found out that the teacher was a young man, a little younger than I, who was a public school teacher in the neighborhood high school. That Saturday evening prior, I kept fussing about the errand and wondered why Bill, a youth teacher, was having trouble keeping down the noise level.

Sunday morning, I waited until the class was in full gear. Ten minutes after the beginning hour, I stood outside the classroom door and listened to the din of high pitched voices and the sound of a chalk eraser hitting the blackboard. I opened the door and started down the aisle for the front of the room.

The noise came to a sudden halt, fifteen or more boys staring at me. Bill, the teacher, gave me a big smile, picked up his material and said "Am I glad to see you. I thought the church school superintendent would never find my replacement."

He strode toward the door and in twenty seconds, he was history and I was in charge of this rowdy gang. Meanwhile, the boys were not uttering one sound, as though they were frozen in place.

Gathering my wits, realizing that these kids were my responsibility, I said in a firm but not unfriendly tone. "I want the floor cleared of the erasers and pencils and each of you in your seats. I'm your new teacher and I want to get to know each of you personally."

I have a strong voice, so in a stern tone I said "My orders from your parents and the elders are to have this class room less noisy so that other teachers can do their jobs. Did you know that some other teachers were threatening to quit because of the noise that was coming from this room?"

It was obvious that they had no idea about the level of noise they had been making for all these weeks.

A high pitched voice piped up with "You don't sound like fun. We want Mr. Bill."

A small group of voices yelled "We want Mr. Bill."

I recognized the solo voice. “The preacher’s kid,” I should have known. He had been the subject of some discussion at the last committee meeting. I gave him a scowl but chose not to confront him on this first day.

One of the boys started to ask me a question but was interrupted by the paring of the large movable wall that separated this room from the next classroom.

I recognized Jenifer, a college student, who, as it turned out, was the Junior High girl’s teacher. She continued widening the door way until we were one large classroom.

“It’s the boys’ turn to lead the combined worship.” I looked aghast and she laughed. “I see that you are the new teacher. I wondered why the noise level was almost down to zero for these last few minutes. I’ll take pity on you and work out a worship service and let you have the next minutes with your boys.”

“Whew. I had no idea what I would have done if Jenifer had not let me off the hook.”

She closed the curtain and I turned to my class. “Who would like to introduce himself and tell me a bit about yourself?”

“What’s your name, Mister?”

Another voice piped up “Do you mean we aren’t going to hear about Ezra and Nehemiah?”

I laughed. “Not today and probably not next Sunday. We need to get know each other first and then decide where we go from there.”

A couple of voice shouted “: Hooray” but a scowl from me immediately had the intended affect.

Shortly, the curtain was reopened and the girls led us through a worship exercise. After the kids were gone, Heather said to me. “By the way. This is my last Sunday. I just got a weekend job with the city recreation department and will be working Sundays.”

She strode off, leaving me to be a Junior High Church School My only thought was “What the hell just happened to me?”

Book 8.

Is It Destiny

December 1943

Susan, a Wave in the United States Navy was serving as a Communications Officer in training for her first permanent assignment. That part of her life was going beautifully but her social life needed a boost.

Corpus Christi was a large Naval Air Station that brought together thousands of male candidates Surely a few or at least one great guy would find his way to her.

In the first months since she arrived, she was disappointed on a number of occasions with the less than gentle approaches from fellow male officers. She was totally embarrassed last Saturday evening trying to avoid the grabby hands of a very handsome flight instructor. She left the club as soon as she had a chance to escape.

She hoped that she would be luckier at her next duty station. Her appointment with the Commander tomorrow afternoon might give her a clue

When she arrived at her quarters in the BOQ, her friend Sally was seated in the common area, sipping a Coke. "What brings you home early? I'm just coming off duty and planning to head for the club."

"If you go, watch out for Maxie. He's loaded and horny. I was lucky to escape."

"In that case, I'll stay right here. Get yourself a drink and pull up a seat."

"Better yet, Sally, why don't you come up to my room and help me kills a bottle of Italian Red while we commiserate."

They headed for Susan's room and over several glasses of wine they covered their favorite and non-favorite subject, men.

Well into their second water glass Sally said "Susan, describe for me your ideal. What would he look like and what would he be like."

Susan nodded but took her time. “Three inches taller than I am blond curly or wavy hair, which will be hard to determine with the crew cuts they have to wear now. Size forty-four or forty five.

Those characteristics would contribute beautifully towards that babies we make together. He needs to have a warm smile, a forgiving heart and a self confidence that will allow me to be his partner not only his support. Oh, and I want him to be sexy, I think.”

“Wow. That one doesn’t exist. If he did and he was mine, I would be jealous of his being the center of all predator females that are out hunting every day.”

Susan burst out laughing. “You’re probably right. He can’t possibly exist. I wonder what compromise I will have to make.”

Sally giggled, “You might have to settle for a size forty-four.”

Susan poured the rest of the wine into their glasses and said “Cheers. Here’s to men. You can’t live with them or without them.”

Susan was seated in the conference room feeling a little edgy, waiting for the Commander. She hoped that the subject of the meeting was about her next assignment rather than a complaint from one of her instructors. She discarded that thought quickly.

“Where will I be sent? I hope not someplace in Washington state. California would be nice, especially San Francisco, which is my primary choice.”

Hearing the sound of heels approaching the door, she bounced out of her chair, snapping to attention when the door opened.

The Commander took her seat, smiled and said “Please sit, Susan, and relax. We’re here to talk about your next assignment. Usually there isn’t much to say because Bupers has already made a decision based on your specified choice matched against their need. But this is an exception.

Your fitness report from basic training at Hunter College in New York was exemplary. Your work here is outstanding. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Bupers had planned to assign you to San Francisco but a special situation has developed elsewhere and I am going to offer you a choice. Both are busy centers and can use your skills and diligence. The other location is Pearl Harbor. It’s your choice.”

Susan could not help smiling. Either location would be welcome. The idea of serving in Paradise had never entered her mind.

“Both sound so right. If I may ask, which location has the greater need at the present? I believe I could be pleased to serve at either.”

“I like your spirit, Susan. I believe Pearl has the greater need and offers you more responsibility. The number three spot will be vacated soon and you would be a perfect choice to fill it. The commander is a personal friend and in my opinion a great person to work with.” Then with a half giggle “There are more bachelors on Pearl.”

Susan could not hold back her laugh. “That does it.” So it was decided.

Walking back to her quarters she noticed a cadet across the street walking with some friends. That young cadet left the group and started walking in her direction.

He had dazzled her with his smile and salutes the two times they had crossed paths previously. The second time that happened she felt warmth creeping up from her breast to her neck. She was reminded of her conversation with Sally.

Her mind kept drifting back to his smile as she daydreamed during the boring part of her class that morning. She was thinking. “Maybe he will stop me with a question as an excuse next time. Nah, he won’t dare. I would have to take the initiative as an officer.

Oh, well, Navy Regs restrict officers fraternizing with non-commissioned personnel.” It was easy to dismiss the idea rationally than it was emotionally. At some of the strangest moments in the next forty eight hours, that smile would blot out any other mental picture.

Now, here she was two days later aware that she was blushing with some of the thoughts she had entertained. As she saw him approaching, she found herself smiling even before he saluted her. “*Shall I?*”

The moment passed, leaving her with regrets and more fantasies that afternoon and evening. She said to herself *He fits my fantasy, especially if his hair is blond.*

That evening, she closed the novel she was reading. She had lost her place twice when memories of those brief encounters replaced the images created by the author.

“It’s time to rid myself of this foolishness. I am not about to risk my career. I’m glad I didn’t do something foolish. Too bad. Maybe something nice will happen at my next assignment.”

She was trying to fool herself. “*I’m going nuts. His smile seemed even more inviting each time he saluted. He is like a magnet, drawing me closer.*”

She could not hold this to herself and told the story to Sally, who said it wasn't possible "but if it is, Susan, grab the brass wing and invite him for a drink off base." Susan could not bring herself to do that and risk her naval career.

The next few days were filled with tasks that demanded her full attention. Friday, she was asked to take an extra shift because of illness of another trainee.

Susan was spending Saturday morning with two classmates who had entered the service with her at Hunter College. They did a lot of window shopping, also buying some items they believed might not be available at their next stations.

They were seated on a park bench saying good-bye with teary eyes when two shadows fell across their bodies. Her friends' dates had arrived.

As she watched them walking away hand in hand she feeling a bit down. The minute they vanished from sight, she started dealing with her own immediate future.

"I am ready for some refreshment, particularly something chocolate."

Recalling the ice cream parlor she had patronized on other occasions was nearby, Susan moved with dispatch.

She stood in the doorway of the ice cream parlor, disappointed to find a crowded shop. Every table seemed to be filled and no receptionist in sight. She spied a table with only one person. A closer look brought forth a recollection. This was the cadet who always smiled when he saluted. She thought, *"Do I dare? I wouldn't do this at home. I've been fantasizing but I also remember handsome men that have disappointed me before."*

Looking around once more she realized that most of the patrons were women. She noticed three officers but not anyone she knew.

She decided to take the chance, rationalizing that the restrictions about fraternization would not be enforced off base.

Peter, tired and bored with walking alone around town was sitting in the ice cream parlor having lunch when a soft feminine voice interrupted his thoughts. "Mind if we join you? The place is overcrowded and you do have a familiar face."

Peter stood saying "Please. I would be honored." He received a flashing smile as they each took a seat.

"I've seen you on base a few times. My name is Wanko."

"Hi, my name is Peter Cornak. We must be a couple of Slavs." She laughed and gave him a warm smile again.

He couldn't believe his luck. She was that Ensign that he passed, who responded warmly as she returned his salute. He wondered if she was aware of his flirting with her. *"Except for that one smile, she had returned his salutes just as other officers did."*

He moved quickly to pull out a chair for Susan. She thanked him then said "I'm famished. Have you had your lunch?"

He nodded "The first part of it. I was about to have coffee and then some dessert later."

"That's good. I will have some company as I eat. I dislike eating alone."

Peter was pleased with that comment. He was trying to figure out a way for an extended time with Susan now that this girl of his dreams was actually sitting beside him.

"Where are you assigned, Miss Wanko?"

"Please call me Susan. We're not on the base now. I am a communications officer in the training headquarters. This is a temporary assignment. I expect to be shipped out sometime soon."

"You've already guessed that I'm in flight training."

He could hear the smile in her voice when she said "Yes, I had noticed. We have passed each other on base a few times recently"

Peter, remembering her warm smile when he had saluted her, said "I loved your smile the last time you returned my salute"

To herself she said, *"He noticed. I was sure he had."*

"I'm curious, Susan. Earlier this morning I noticed you with two little girls who looked like refugees. At least, their clothing looked European. Can you tell me about you and those delightful girls?"

Peter could see a slight blush rising from her lovely neck to her cheeks as she replied. "I love children and hope I have houseful in my future. A friend introduced me to this tutoring program at the YWCA where fortune delivered these two beauties to me. Both are fast studies and sweet but in need of love, bringing all my innate instincts of caring and concern to the surface. It has been a marvelous experience for me to offer some help in the midst of misery in wartime."

He was moved with her response and had that typical male thought flicker across his mind about making babies with this lovely woman.

He suddenly recalled a short period during his senior year. He said to Susan "That reminds me of an experience I had. A girl I was dating worked in a YWCA with

underprivileged kids. She soon had me playing Santa Claus and then distributing food baskets to their homes. It was a very rewarding time for me.”

She gave a smile of approval. Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the waitress. When she had taken their orders, Peter asked “Did you work with the Y programs while you were in college?”

Susan gave him a rundown of her extracurricular life as an undergrad. When she finished, he said “I’m impressed, varsity debate and intramural basketball.” He loved the light flush that rose from her throat to her cheeks.

That was the beginning of some serious give and take. Like any two persons get acquainted each asked some general questions of each other. She didn’t hesitate to respond to his questions, particularly those about her family name and ethnic origin,

Susan came to realize that Peter was truly interested, not just making conversation. She answered fully and openly, being taken completely with his warmth and his gentle ways of seeking information, as well as his openness in answering her questions. She found him to be significantly different from most of the officers who sought her out during the last few months on base.

Susan kept trying to identify that special something about him. What was the word she was looking for? “*That’s it – invigorating.*” An excitement was beginning to build within.

He was a delightful surprise and it had not escaped her notice that he was blond. She was also sure that he was size forty-five.

They were soon laughing about similar backgrounds, with families that came from the Carpathian mountain regions of Eastern Europe. They exchanged stories of days in parochial schools, she smiling when he talked about the time when he let a nice blond fourth grade girl win the arithmetic competition which put her in the honor seat in front of him in class. He wanted to sit behind her so he could look at her all day. Susan busted out laughing “I did the same thing once in the third grade, so I could look at Eddie Benyak, an eight year old dream boat.”

When their laughter had quieted Peter asked “Susan, tell me about growing up, your relationship with your folks.”

Her response was exuberant, especially when talking about her dad. She had been looking at her food but turned to face him for a moment. Her heart almost melted when she saw tears glistening in his eyes.

“What is it, Peter? Have I offended you?”

He stammered, then said “It’s not your fault. I was envying your relationship with you dad. I lost my dad when I was five. That thought made me realize that there must have been much that I missed during my growing up.”

She reached to put her hand on his arm in a gesture of sympathy “I’m so sorry, Peter.”

He hurriedly changed the subject and within a minute had her laughing at a slightly off color story.

In the silence that followed, she concentrated on her lunch while Peter stared at her profile. Peter hoped she didn’t take offense at the way he kept focused on her. He found himself not wanting to miss a moment by looking away. She was not absolutely beautiful, but there was intelligence and strength added to her beauty that transformed her into what he thought was riveting. Susan had noticed and felt flattered with the way his eyes kept moving about her face and upper body, lingering more on her lips and eyes than on her breast.

It was an hour later after they had traded histories and some personal stories that Peter said. “If you have no plans, would you like to take a walk in the park? It’s rather pleasant outside, today.” Susan acquiesced, tickled that she would have more time with this intriguing man. They strolled slowly, both free of duty for the afternoon.

As they started down the walkway, Susan held out her hand. His larger hand touched hers and then intertwined his finger with hers. His touch was hot and their fingers meshed like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. She had the feeling that this man exuded raw power and sent a shiver down her spine. It was a feeling she had never experienced, moving her at a sensual level, sending her into a brief moment of fantasy.

Susan came to and asked, “Do you leave a sweetheart aching for you, Peter. A guy like you must have.”

“I’m happy to say no to that, Susan. I had been going steady with a girl who wanted to get married before I left for the navy, but I did not want to risk leaving a potential widow. In fact, I wasn’t sure we were ideally suited or whether I was really in love. It would have been so unfair to her, at least in my opinion. I heard from a mutual friend that she did marry a friend of mine before he was inducted.”

“How about you? There is a guy somewhere out there who must be aching for you.”

Peter noticed a bit of pink color her cheeks. “Nope, I never let anyone get close enough.”

By the time they were returning to the park entrance they were holding hands, which felt so natural to Peter, who couldn’t remember when that had started. Susan said “Since we seem to be getting along so nicely, I wouldn’t mind if you asked me to dinner, Peter.”

Peter grinned. “I was trying to figure out how to ask you that, with your being an officer. I’d be delighted. I would like to learn more about you and get to know you. We seem so easy with each other.”

“I feel the same. You are so different from most of the men I have been meeting. All right, we’re on, but this is Dutch treat and no arguments. After all, I outrank you and make more money than you do,” She giggled.

They were enjoying a cocktail while waiting for a table. Peter asked “Susan were you by any chance on a train from Philadelphia to Chicago last February?”

“Why, yes I was.”

“A moment ago I had this view of your profile and my mind flashed back. So it was you. I tried to catch your eye on the platform but no luck.”

“Wow. I don’t remember you”. Blushing a bit, she said, “Believe it or not, I did notice a small group of good looking guys, one very tall sandy blond. Later on the train I walked through two cars hoping to catch sight of him, but no luck. I did see some younger kids, looking like high school grads.”

“You didn’t come through the last car on the train or I would have seen you. No sailor would miss an eyeful like you.”

Susan’s blush deepened but she said “The maître’s is coming.”

During dinner they sat next to each other in a booth in a quiet corner, selected discreetly by a romantic maître d. Peter was on her right side per her request since she was a southpaw. By the time they got to coffee time, they had exchanged a lot more very personal information. He was pleased to find she was from the Pittsburgh area, in fact from New Kensington, and that her dad was a first generation American who was a rather successful drapery merchant, now that the depression years were past.

Peter, sensing her desire to know more of his background, was enticed into talking about his growing up in a small town north of Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. She teased him about all the girl friends he must have had while at Pitt. His grin said it all. She knew that there was no way a hunk like Peter would not be hounded by those coeds “Were you ever in love, Peter?”

“I’m sure I wasn’t. The closest was Millie about whom we talked earlier. I was strongly attracted to a senior when I was a junior but other than a few movie dates, I got no further. She had been promised to her high school sweetheart. How about you?”

“Not even close as an adult. I had the typically young teenage infatuations about older boys who never even paid me any attention. Like most teens I had romantic dreams but the right man had never made an appearance for me.”

As they were drinking coffee, she reached for Peter’s hand with a very soft grasp. Then he reversed the hold and she was enjoying his fingers moving ever so gently over knuckles. She smiled as she looked at him, suddenly aware of the depth and tenderness or was it a hunger emanating from his captivating blue eyes. She felt herself melting with desire for a close relationship.

Their waiter left them undisturbed for quite a long time after they had finished dinner. At one point she said, “Peter, I think this is a lovely date. One reason I like you is that you are gentle and not pushy like some of the officers I’ve had dinner with.

Turning her head with a wide smile on her lips, she glanced into his eyes and saw something so warm shining from within. She felt as though he was caressing her face as his eyes wandered from her eyes to her chin, to her throat and back to her lips. She sensed a blush starting to rise to her face. She was startled and blurted out “Peter, I think you would like to kiss Me.” at the same time turning red as a summer rose.

Peter blushed a little and he smiled when he asked “Are you psychic or am I so obvious? I’d like that if that would please you. I don’t know the protocol in this situation.”

“I think we ought not to worry about the navy. This is simply man and woman stuff. I think I will enjoy being kissed by you.”

At first their interaction was rather stiff and reticent. Then Peter put his arm around her, pulling them into a soft embrace, his lips moving gently over hers then with increasing pressure the tip of his tongue opening her lips and the tip circling on the inside off her lips. Susan loved this sweet meeting with his lips, feeling as though her blood was humming.

Peter chose not to push for more passion on this first of what he hoped, of many kisses. He may not have meant to be so passionate but he stirred Susan’s senses, creating within her a desire for more. She let out a sigh, shuddering with pleasure.

Not wanting Peter to become aware of the desire he had stirred, she decided for a lighter tone. “Wow” she said. “You are some kisser. You almost knocked my socks off. That is if I were wearing socks.” She giggled.

Peter laughed. “It’s been so long that my hunger for feminine soft lips got away from me.”

She smiled, changing the subject. “I go on duty at 2300 hours. I need or leave. If you are returning to base and we leave now, we can catch the next liberty bus back to the base, but I

wouldn't mind another kiss now. We won't be able to do that on the bus. This can be our good night kiss".

Peter hadn't planned on returning to base but his not wanting to miss more time with her won the day, so she found him to be very accommodating, beginning with his lip hardly touching hers, teasing, titillating like a caress. She sensed his warm lips whispering over hers, and then suddenly his tongue was searching deeply for her response and finding it. She became totally alive, her mouth responding, almost demanding, her body straining to become one with Peter.

She was aware of the frantic pounding of her heart and feeling his heart pulsing on her breast as she pulled his body almost inside hers. Both were breathless as they slowly let go of each other, wanting to continue although not able to do so.

The bus was almost full but they found a seat together at the back of the bus in the dark they held hands and whispered to each other. Peter said "I'd love to see you again. I have flight duty all day tomorrow but I will be free next Saturday, Susan."

"I'd like that, Peter. Let's meet at that park near the ice cream parlor at 1300. My stop is coming up." She squeezed his hand as he stood to let her go by.

He had a hard time getting to sleep "She is a real stunner, someone I would like to get close to. Too bad she's an officer." He could see that lovely body with pert breasts filling out her uniform, probably a thirty-six. He thought he would dream about those gorgeous legs that he saw walking down the aisle on the bus.

There was so much more. Her teasing, her sense of humor, her ability to totally capture his attention and especially the way her voice invited him into her life.

Susan, too, was daydreaming through her communication watch that evening and then having a hard time getting to sleep later.

Even before her head hit the pillow she could see his deep blue eyes inviting her to join his lips. Her body again was speaking to her as it did through the whole experience of his mouth taking complete possession of her. She had loved what had been happening to her, swearing she could hear her blood humming as it had earlier. Never, never had any man reached so deeply inside of her as did Peter this evening.

"I loved the day with Peter but where did I get the courage, first to seek the seat at his table, then asking him to take me to dinner, taking his hand and then asking for a kiss. That is not who I thought I was or would ever be." She sighed deeply. "I am happy that I did. That bit of courage took me to a man whose love could fill my life for all of eternity. It is too soon to talk about love, but I think he has taken possession of me."

She had a passionate dream that night which triggered an idea that she had been nurturing since she left Peter. She wondered if Peter might be receptive. "Probably not so

soon. Besides he's hot and must have women chasing him all the time. The problem is that we have such a short time together."

They passed by each other twice during the next two days, giving each other warm smiles, Peter saluting her as befitting the relationship of cadet to an officer. His smiles kept rousing butterflies, bringing to mind the idea she was forming.

At 0745 on Wednesday morning, she saw Peter standing at the corner to the Communications building with no one in sight. He saluted her smartly. "I don't want to wait until next Saturday. Want to meet me outside the rec building after the movie? I know a spot where we can be alone for a bit."

She whispered. "I'll be there." She trusted Peter's judgment. She knew he would not risk their own futures.

The time since they parted after the bus ride had been so disconcerting. Peter had stirred her emotions even though he had made no overt move to seduce her.

"I can't believe that I keep coming back to this idea of sleeping with Peter. I've steered clear of guys wanting to take me to bed on a first date and all of a sudden I found someone that I want to make love to. I've been hoping for a good sexual experience not only in a general way but also with someone special. Now, I have met someone special but he is so nice and caring, probably too much a gentleman to put a move on me. Yet that very masculine body attached to such a nice guy is driving me crazy."

When she neared Peter outside the rec building he moved slowly toward a glade of trees. She remembered sitting on one of the benches in the glade some weeks ago. There was no sight of another body.

They moved together with no hesitation, unabashed attraction of two healthy young persons, their bodies melting into one. It seemed like Peter had sucked the breath out of her before he released her. Peter said "Let's sit across the table, just in case someone wanders in, which is highly unlikely."

He continued. "I was just notified that I leave for more training in Colorado. I fly out next Sunday afternoon. "

"How long will you be gone?"

"Six weeks or longer."

Susan felt her heart drop. "You know I am going to Pearl. The departure date, although not set, will certainly be before you return. Oh, Peter, I just found you. I can hardly bear to think this romance will be cut short. Dammit."

“That is exactly how I feel. You have been almost constantly on my mind since Saturday. I feel like I know so much about you but I want to know more.”

Susan could feel herself about to shed tears but held on long enough to say what was on the tip of her tongue.

“Peter, no man has ever met me at the deep level that you have or moved me so. I am on the verge of losing you before I really have discovered the whole you. . I want to have a thorough and everlasting memory. Peter, do you know me well enough to spend a day and night with me?” The blush in her cheeks blazed like a nova, she being sure he could see it in the dim moonlight.

Peter was stunned. Having spent hours thinking about this possibility with little hope of reality, he had decided to suggest something intimate, hoping she would understand his desire. “God, Susan. I dreamed about this but never figured this could happen with you. My answer is a definite yes, but are you absolutely sure? I am more than willing, in fact I am eager. One thing you need to know. I have no experience except for some heavy petting and some almosts.”

“We can discover the mystery of love making together. I need to know the whole you, Peter, to have this memory of fleeting love,”

She burst into tears at the thought that they had no long term future together.

Peter rose, walked around the table and sat next to her, enveloping her, his face nestled in her hair until the tears dried up.

They made plans to meet at the park and walk to the hotel after lunch. Hotel rooms were usually not available until two or later.

The embrace and lips warring with each other went on and on, both unashamedly displaying their passion as they looked forward to Saturday.

Susan could feel heat in her cheeks as Peter neared her on the compound the next morning. Her smile was broader than ever as they exchanged salutes.

Peter arrived at the park fifteen minutes early. A half hour later he was pacing. “*Where is Susan? Did she miss the bus? That means another hour. I wonder if there was a collision. Is Susan okay?*”

A thousand thoughts seemed to stream across his mind He was surprised to hear a woman’s voice behind him. He turned. Her face was familiar. He remembered “*A Wave. Friend of Susan.*”

Sally saw the panic on his face. She rushed to say “Susan is not injured. She had a sudden change of plans. This not will explain the situation. I am so sorry for both of you.”

He tore open the envelope, unfolded the single sheet and began to read. “Friday 2100, Dearest Peter. Out of the blue, I received orders fifteen minutes ago. I will be flying out to Los Angeles, leaving at 2300. I have to be on a ship headed for Pearl by 1400 tomorrow I have no way to reach you tonight.

My mind and my spirit ache for you, the love that walked into my life for a brief moment only to be lost forever.

If you can forgive me, I would like to have a note from you. My FPO is 74001. A snapshot would be a cherished way of helping to remembering you as the years go on.

Eternally, Susan.

Postlude.

Susan was opening the third letter from Peter. Two months had lapsed. She was disappointed to see only a half sheet of note paper but yelled with delight at the message “I am being assigned to Pearl. Details later. Love, Peter.

Book 9.

Getting It Right

Samantha was late but the first to arrive. She dropped her purse on the entry hall table, started unbuttoning her blouse the way to the bedroom. Her mind was still preoccupied with the events of her work day. *“Dammit. How could I have been so stupid? I looked like a fool to my new colleagues at City Hall.”*

She was so focused on her less than excellent performance at work that she was, momentarily Oblivious to the fact that Matt was not home. She glanced at her wrist watch. *“He is always home at five or earlier.”*

A moment later she heard the front door opening, then Matt dropping his brief case. She imagined him stripping off his tie and then his jacket.

She called out. “Matt, I’m in the bedroom. Listening for his footsteps, she thought she detected a slower pace than the usual spring he displayed each evening. *“Oh, oh. It’s time to forget about my day. I think Matt is going to need me to brighten up the evening.”*

A moment later, he joined her, hung his jacket in the closet, and then turned to walk into her waiting arms. “Welcome home, dear.”

“And right back to you, honey.”

After a long and welcoming kiss, Matt said “I’m voting for a shower first and then drinks. It’s been a tough day.”

Sam nodded and began unbuttoning his shirt front. That was often the beginning of their evening ritual, having started that on their honeymoon ten years prior. It didn’t occur every evening but it did at every opportunity that was presented.

The house was their private haven. Despite every attempt, Sam was unable to hold on to the fetus early in each pregnancy. After three miscarriages and trips to see specialists, they agreed that their love for each other would fill their home lives while they played uncle and aunt to the children of their close friends.

On some occasions when they arrived home about the same time, a simple glance between them led to teasing and laughter in the shower as the prelude to extended intimacy in the bedroom.

This evening, however, Sam knew that the ritual would be limited to gentle washing of each other’s back and heling towel down.

Changing into shorts and t-shirts, they moved to the kitchen where Sam turned on some light classical music by Debussy to lighten the mood. She prepared a snack while Matt poured the wine.

It worked. She noticed Matt’s relaxed body and smiling face which gave her pleasure. Both were benefitting by turning their minds away from whatever problems the day had produced.

Both were aware that it was only temporary but they had developed a method for putting the day’s concerns at bay until they wanted to review the work day. They called it “Touching Base.”

The protocol was that with the fist sip of wine, one would share some of the nice things experienced or observed during the day.

Sitting hip to hip on the sofa, Matt said “I was a minute late for the gathering in the coffee room, just in time to hear the news that Jenny is going to have a baby.

Michael brought the donuts to celebrate the fact that their youngest of five children is off to college. He said that his Mary is a little sad but looking forward to their being empty nesters. Both announcements were greeted with cheers and congratulations.”

Sam raised her glass. “A little late but here to Mary and Michael. They are about to find out that there is a life without children, even if it takes time to adjust.”

Matt says a tear slipping out of the corner of her eye. He started to apologize but stopped. They had agreed years before that she could and would bounce back because life continued on after bringing about major disappointments.

After a moment, Sam was telling her story. “On the way home, just before I turned into the driveway, I saw a couple of octogenarians, our neighbors, the Smythes, returning from their afternoon walk, holding hands. I slowed down as I approached. She seemed to be telling him a story that produced a huge smile on his face it made me think of Uncle Frank and Aunt Catherine who take a walk together every evening, weather permitting.”

She continued “I got out of the car, walked to meet them as they started up their walkway. I was smiling when I said “Margaret I noticed you had Henry n stitches a minute ago. I’ll bet you had a new story that I need to hear so I can perk up Matt.”

They both chuckled. Margaret said “We were talking about that TV show, Doctor Phil and I remembered an old joke. You probably remember the definition of a psychiatrist. A head doctor who charges a lot of money to tell you that you’re sick”

They started to laugh and I joined in.”

Matt chortled and asked “Sam, do you think we will be telling jokes and still have something to share with each other fifty years from now, something that will make us smile?”

She squeezed his hand. “You, dear, will always make me smile, even if it is an old joke that I heard a thousand times.”

She continued. “I can tell by the way you have been slightly moody that you have had a tough day.” She put down her glass and moved close, taking his right arm and pulling it around her shoulders.

“You go first. As usual, you can whisper, shout or curse, as long as it includes an accurate picture of your day. You know the rules.”

Matt pulled her head to rest on his breast and then began reciting the story of his folly.

“I already feel better because you want to hear my confession.”

“The whole day had gone swimmingly. Everyone, including the big boss, was feeling good about the content of the front page in particular.

We were within minutes of closing up the presses when one of the local reporters calls in with a hot story. I knew as soon as he started that it was a story that had to make this edition. The subject was a well-known member of the business community I waved to the city editor to hold the presses open for a few minutes.

I was aware that he began calling the press room while I was busy taking the notes from the reporter.

The story was about the shooting death of a well-known businessman in the community. A terminated employee had appeared at the administrative offices of the corporation and opened fire injuring five employees and killing one executive officer.

I was typing on my computer as quickly as the reporter gave me the story. I knew we only had room for two or three short paragraphs but the story must make the first edition.

I gasped when he gave me the name of the dead executive and asked him to spell the name again. This was the name of the president of the company. I double checked the details and sent off the story.

I had one of those moments in time when was excited about handling an important assignment with dispatch but saddened because the victim was someone that I knew well.

I was feeling good that our edition would be carrying this late breaking news almost simultaneously with the local television stations.

That good feeling, however, was a bit premature. Within a half hour after the papers hit the streets, the phone was ringing off the hook. Cell phone callers from a gathering at the Chamber of Commerce were calling to say that Sam Reator was alive and well. Some calls were informative and others were outraged that we could make such mistake.

I had my coat on, ready to leave for home when the city editor caught up with me and started giving me holy hell. "How could you pull such a boner," etc., with words I prefer not to repeat here.

I was mystified and ran over all the details in my mind, recalling in detail my conversation with the reporter. I called him as I shed my coat with the city editor staring daggers at me. Would you believe that I had heard a "t" for a "d" during that conversation? Moreover, what are the chances of two top administrators in the same firm with a first name of Sam and a last name so closely pronounced that I could have pulled the boner of the decade?

The boss' tone was cold as he insisted I make a call for an immediate date to visit the Reators at their home

We went in the boss' limo, driver and all, where I apologized to the family including their two teenage daughters.

Mr. Reator walked in just as we were preparing to leave. He laughed, saying "Sam, you made me famous and the subject of conversation all over the business community. It serves me well, a great unintended consequence."

The boss was mollified to some extent but gave me hell all the way back.

I won't be able to live down the mistake for weeks within the bounds of the office.

The boss dropped me off out front but made it clear that I was to have a major retraction prepared for the front page to clarify the error.

No matter what we do we will receive letters to the editor for weeks chastising us, probably naming me in the letters since it is hard to keep my name secret. Trying that would be unwise under these circumstances."

Sam's response was lifting her head and pointing to her lips. You need and deserve all the loving a wife can give. I agree it may take weeks but that too shall pass and you know you are too highly regarded to be at risk of losing your position. You will get a great deal of sympathy from the press community, each one admitting to himself or herself that "there, but for the grace of God, could have been me."

Sam rose, saying "Just lie there while I take a few minutes to start dinner. I figured on a light dinner, Salad and cold cuts okay with you?"

He nodded "I'll be back in about ten or so to tell you about my day."

She heard him chuckle when she started walking away. "I heard that. What was that laugh about?"

"It's just that the rear view always send me back to the first time I saw you. I couldn't wait to see if the front view was as good."

Sam burst into laughter. "It can't have been too big a disappointment. You've been hanging around for more than ten years, lover boy."

Fifteen minutes later, after each had refilled their glasses, Sam began her story.

“As you well know, yesterday was the mayor’s inaugural. There was very little that I didn’t know about that his Electronic operation. At City Hall I am an absolute greenhorn in the field of local politics and city management. The bad blood that erupted during the campaign between the incumbent’s campaign staff and ours continued into today.

Whereas it is customary for outgoing staff to brief the incoming personnel, my predecessor left town the day before yesterday and never showed her face again in the office. The one admin assistant left over had no knowledge of schedules or procedures. Furthermore, since she has a new position elsewhere, she had little interest other than to be there so she could collect her paycheck for the next three days.

I had my number two; Cathy searching high and low for notes written or in the computer files that would be helpful, but the going was slow. I needed to find the names and positions of key staff people to invite to the mayor’s first formal staff meeting, usually held on the first day of work. That was my today.

It was now eleven o’clock and we still hadn’t a clue. I sent Cathy to talk with my counterpart in the City Manager’s office, but she was out ill. Her assistant finally found a list and Cathy returned triumphant.

Between the two of us, we decided who on that list should be included and called each requesting their presence at two o’clock.

A few minutes before twelve I walked into the interior office and reported that everything was set.

All the invitees were assembled by five minutes of two. The mayor entered and began by introducing himself. When each person announced his or her name and title or position, I jotted the name, a brief description and the title.

At two twenty five the mayor sat ready to convene the meeting but looked around as though expecting someone else. I began to sweat and I mean sweat. Obviously, I had missed someone. People glanced to the door, expecting someone.

The head of planning said. Mr. Mayor, something must be wrong with Mr. Michaels. He is never late and would have notified you if he were unable to attend.”

I looked at my list and saw no such name. All of a sudden, I remembered his name from newspaper articles. The key person missing was the City Manager. I turned beet red and headed for my desk where I successfully reached his executive assistant.

Seven minutes later he appeared, apologizing for being tardy.

After the meeting I managed to find the mayor and the Manager chatting. I approached them and stammered an apology but was interrupted by Mr. Michaels. “I can guess how it happened, Mrs. Foster. The list we keep will be like your s except our list obviously does not include my name as yours will not include the mayor’s.

The two of them had a big laugh at my expense and I finally joined them in the laughter.”

Matt could see that Sam was blushing at being caught in a major booboo on her first day. He though a light shadow flickered across her usually sparkling eyes

He knew Sam was a perfectionist at her chosen vocation and preferred to be seen that way. She would be hard to convince that she should forgive herself

Matt had observed her at work a number of times. She was a forgiving boss, always ready to understand associates’ mistakes but not her own.

She brought sparkle to their home almost every evening but that sparkle was missing at the moment. Although he recognized the signs he wasn't sure how to describe the change in her mood. He wanted to call it Depression but knew that was a bit of an overstatement.

He changed the subject. "I'm hungry. Do you have some potato salad to go with the veggie salad and cold cuts?"

Sam smiled. "Have I ever missed?"

Matt chuckled, starting to say "I remember once, three years ago on a Saturday" when he caught a fist into his right bicep. "Ouch."

Sam was laughing but he noticed just an edge of brittleness. "I had hoped that you also forgot when you forgave me."

Matt said to himself. "*It's a beginning.*"

He had an idea that might help improve her spirit. While Sam put the finishing touches on the dinner table, he called their friend, Jack.

He poured an extra few ounces of wine for Sam, hoping that she might mellow a little. He cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the dishwasher while Sam sipped the last of the dinner wine. That was another rite they performed each evening.

He said "I talked with Jack today. He said Jen is under the weather. What say, we walk over, maybe take the kids out for ice cream while Jen and Jack have a few minutes of time to themselves."

Sam responded with enthusiasm. She rose, put her mug in the dishwasher. Heading for the entry way, she said "Let's go."

Jack and Jen were saying "Have fun" as the four of them were headed out. The plan was a trip to the bowling alley followed by a trip to Baskin Robbins for double header waffle cones.

Two hours later they dropped off two staffed and tired girls. Jen was asleep. They opted to not stop in. Jack should be free to tuck in his girls.

Sam was bubbly on the way home. "Little Sarah was cute at the ice cream parlor. She could hardly say "Chocolate Fudge but she knew what she wanted. She went right on eating even while I was wiping the extra chocolate from her cheeks."

As Matt turned toward Sam after locking the front door, she wrapped her arms around his neck and planted a long amorous kiss on his lips. It must have been almost a minute as he was returning the kiss that he felt her tears moving down his cheek.

He moved his head back very gently, being delighted to see a wide smile instead of a long face.

"Dear Matt, you always know the right thing to do. There was nothing wrong with Jen. You arranged that event just to pull me out of my downer. You are always so insightful, making me the luckiest woman in the world. Thank you is not enough."

She gave him that inviting glance, as she led him by that special place to show her gratitude

Book 10.

Getting an Education in the Cellar.

February 1, 1983

It had been forty years ago this day that I left home to answer Uncle Sam's call to arms. The day before I was to leave; I received my sheepskin from Carnegie Tech.

Uncle Jack was coming by to pick me up to drive me to Pittsburgh where I would report to the recruitment office to be sworn in and receive my orders as a naval officer, effective February 2, 1943.

Mom and Dad were glum but Dad had the brighter outlook. "Better to sleep in a bunk on a shipboard than to slosh around in the mud someplace in Europe or on some island called Guadalcanal"

We had finished lunch. Mom said "Have another cup of coffee with Dad while I clear the table." The truth was that she did not want me to see the tears again.

Dad said "Let's go to the cellar. I have a few bottles of blackberry wine from last summer. It ought to be right for a farewell toast."

I laughed on the way down the stairs. "I'll bet you never did fix the squeak on the third step from the bottom."

Dad joined in the laughter. "Why bother after fifteen years?"

We sat in the two wicker arm chairs that he had salvaged from somewhere years ago. We were facing the coal furnace door, which he had opened to give us more heat. Actually, it was for the view of the dancing flames.

Tranquility overtook us as we stared into the flames, blocking out the concerns of the day. It was better not to dwell on what the future held for a sailor at sea in the midst of war.

My senses were tuned in to the ambience of this place. Everything was the same as it had been forty years ago.

The shelves to my left held the same tools. The shelves to my right held the fruits and vegetables that Mom and Dad had canned late last summer. The washing machine stood in the same spot. The deep concrete wash tubs had not been replaced although they no longer served the purpose for which they had been installed.

The bouquet of ripening apples seeped from under the doors of the cold storage area, the scent of coal dust was present as it ever had been. The aroma of sawdust from the freshly cut pine wood drove my mind back to the years of my childhood.

The cellar was warm as it had always been in the winter, heat radiating from the thin walls of the inexpensive inefficient coal burning furnace.

I was brought back to the present when Dad handed me a glass of the dark liquid. I thanked him and complimented him although I would have preferred coffee to this potent and less than sweet berry wine. I sipped slowly to make sure I was not going to be offered a second glass.

We sat silently sipping our drinks. A thought came to mind. In all the years prior Dad had refused all my requests to talk about his military service in France.

I knew that he had volunteered to serve as part of the Czechoslovakian army serving with the French. He had also let it slip once that he was a sniper. My imagination worked overtime as I had read some of the stories of battles on the war front.

He had made fast work of drinking the first glass, pouring himself a second. Figuring he might be more receptive to talking about his experience, I asked him to tell me some of his experiences in WWI.

After some hesitation he agreed to tell me a bit of his experience. I guess it was the fact that I was heading off to war instead of a teenager with great imagination.

“I will tell you that sloshing around in the mud in the winter or sweating every ounce of water from your system in the summer heat was no fun.”

“I worked with a team of snipers, two French and two English. Our job was to pick off any German head that popped up over the rim of the enemy trench. It was horrible. It is one thing to shoot at a faceless enemy but quite another when you see the face of the one you are about to kill. I kept hoping for a change but unfortunately, I was a skilled marksman.”

“After more than a year, I managed a transfer. More important than shooting any soldier was picking off the enemy sniper”

“We used a specially made dummy head as a ploy to find the location of the sniper. A Paper Mache figure was painted to resemble soldiers’ heads.

These dummies drew enemy sniper fire. Some were equipped with rubber surgical tubing so the dummy could "smoke" a cigarette and thus appear realistic. Holes punched in the dummy by enemy sniper bullets then were used to determine the position of the enemy sniper

Our team leader relayed the location to the Artillery people. I was relieved to be assigned that duty after a year of picking off bobbing heads in their trenches.”

He quickly changed the subject, reminiscing some of our times together before I had gone to the university. “Do you remember picking blackberries on my cousin’s farm? I am sorry about my

impatience with your slow work. You were too young to understand that berry picking was part of our survival, not a family fun party.”

I replied. “You did the right thing, Dad. Your scolding reminded a young boy that there was more to life than play, although that is hard for ten year olds to grasp.”

Gently I led him back to his early days, his growing up years. I recalled that he spent his young years in the rural section of the eastern part of the Austrian Hungarian Empire. I am sure he limited history to that minimum amount of information. I was hoping that seeing me as an adult might free him to tell a few stories.

Judging that he would be responsive I asked “How come you had so little schooling.”

He thought about the question for a bit. “My mother was a widow. My older brothers and sister had gone to the United States. There were so many chores that I had no time for school. When I was eleven, I developed a routine that made it possible to go to school a few hours a day. I begged my mother to arrange a way for me, even if I was a lot older than other beginning students.”

“My mother took me by the hand and led me to see the teacher. The male teacher, although paid by the government, demanded extra payment. When my mother told him she had no funds to pay him, he told her “All the other families either pay or provide some service for me. Your son is big enough so that he can tend to and feed my pigs.”

My mother cursed him. “My boy gets enough of that at home. You are a cheat.” She took me by the hand and led me home” Back home she said “You are strong enough to do the work of boys three years older than you. You can find lots of work to earn a living” She had no idea that an education would be very helpful when I arrived in the new country.

I was fascinated. I had learned more about my step dad in twenty minutes than I had learned about him the prior sixty years. I continue to press for more information.

“When and how did you get to the States?”

He gave me a big smile “My mother made my brothers and sister promise to send enough funds for my passage which would occur upon her death. Within a year, we had received enough money to pay for passage to the States.

A few weeks before she died, she handed me a cloth sack containing the papers for the passage and what monies she had saved. I buried her and joined two neighbors who were on their way to the new world.”

“I was agog from the moment I boarded the train that would take us to the seaport. A lad, not yet twelve years of age, travelling thousands of miles can be thrilled with the imaginings of his mind. While people were complaining about the crowded conditions in steerage, I ignored my surroundings, dreaming of the adventures ahead of me.

My mother had never let me read the letters from my siblings. She had the parish priest read the letters to her. My picture of the new land was untainted by any descriptions from those already living there.

I loved the few hours each day that we were allowed to go on deck. While we were restricted to the steerage decks on stormy days, I managed to sneak to a small hiding place behind some cargo

I managed some conversation with one sailor who spoke the same language as I, but he had never set foot more than two hundred feet from the ship when it docked in New York.

I happened to be on deck when the skyline of New York emerged from beyond the horizon. It was a clear cool day, details of the buildings sharp against a cloudless sky. I stood at the rail in awe as the scene came nearer and nearer. I felt myself getting angry when the bell sounded, announcing our return below decks.

Ten minutes later I was back on deck in my secret space, experiencing a world of strange activity. I noticed a slowing of our ship and then a small boat coming alongside. I soon became aware that the small boat was pulling us toward the docks

I loved watching the hustle and bustle by the crew and the dock workers who were being rushed by loud voiced bosses yelling a language that was a mystery to me.

When I heard the bell that usually prepared us for going up to the deck, I scurried back down the stairs. Before I got to the lowest deck, people were starting to rush toward the deck. I had to fight my way through the eager crowds headed for their new homes.

I finally got to my space, picked up my few possessions and joined the streaming passengers.

I have forgotten the hours it took, standing in one line and then another, showing my papers to one man and then another. I had to fight to keep adults from pushing me aside in order to take my place in line.

I was strong enough to fight off every attempt, yelling at the people to be fair. .Of course, no one understood my words since the passengers were from different sections of our homeland.

I was to have similar experiences later when standing in a food line during the depression, men elbowing others to get a spot near the head of the line, because food supplies were limited causing those in the back of the lines to go away empty handed.

I emerged from the buildings on Ellis Island, holding tightly to my stamped papers and my rucksack of possessions. I saw some people kneeling on the ground and kissing the earth, and then realized that this was their way of rejoicing at the end of some long journey.

Walking down the gangplank from the ferry, I spied my brother George who was waving his arms and smiling. He was waiting in the same spot when three minutes later I had snaked my way through the myriad of passengers and waiting relatives to rush into his arms.”

There was so much more that I wanted to learn of this man who served as my surrogate father from the time I was two years old but I could see that he was tired and definitely sleepy after three glasses of his berry wine.

I helped him to his bedroom and assured him I would be there for dinner.

Chapter 2.

I decided to brave the cold day by taking a walk around the neighborhood. No other person was stupid enough to take a walk in twenty five degree blustery weather. I opted for the wicker seat in front of the furnace.

The moment I opened the door to the cellar, the memories flooded my brain again. I was almost overwhelmed. I stood at the top of the stairs, letting those scenes from my past sweep over my brain,

I had returned to get rid of the chill and put some warmth into my body but now I wanted to remember the days of long ago when I had learned so much in this cellar.

I moved to the wicker chairs and sat in the one that was always reserved for me. I remembered that Dad had found some electric wires and spliced a line off the one light fixture near the stairs that had come with the house. He ran the line to a spot just above and to the left of my chair.

Dad, who had no formal schooling, was determined that I would have every advantage that he could give me.

He scrounged the neighborhood to find a reflector that would increase and spread the light for my reading. It was there that I did most of my reading for school and pleasure.

That thought triggered another. I walk over to look under the staircase. *“There it is that small trunk that must be more than sixty years old.”*

I lift the lid and see neatly folded linens that mom had been storing for decades. The picture of the open trunk flashed back to the year 1932.

I was ten years old and loved helping my folks. Since the cellar was the hub of activity I had some great experiences there. I recall helping can tomatoes in the late summer. My job was to place the rubber seal on the Mason jars and screw on the lid lightly handing the jar to Dad who completed the process, creating a tight seal “so that the tomatoes won’t foment and blow tomato sauce over the whole cellar.”

I was thrilled when all the jars were sealed and Dad said. “Great job, Tommy.”

Earlier that month I had failed to earn that compliment. The very thought had me suddenly rubbing my left wrist lightly. I was remembering the morning Mom was washing clothes. I pleaded with her to let me run the wet clothes through the wringer on our electric Maytag washing machine.

Up to that day, she had been doing the wash in a large tub and wringing out the water in a hand operated wringer. I had the responsibility of turning the handles to drive the wringer while mother fed in the wet clothes. That was a chore.

With advent of the electric equipment, I was sure I could handle the job of feeding the wringer but Mom was saying no. I pleaded and begged.

She finally yielded to my begging, warning me to be careful about getting my hand caught. Five minutes later I was screaming at the top of my lungs, my hand caught in the soft but tightly squeezed rollers.

A much more pleasant memory was of the scene during three consecutive winters. Dad’s cousin, Andrew Paulanta, boarded with us, while working in the steel mill. He left his teen age boys to tend to their orchards, a few miles from town.

Uncle Andy had a fold up cot for his bed and a light rocking chair in which to rest each evening. Shortly after dinner, I would follow him to the cellar where he would take out of its case, his violin. For most of an hour I sat in awe as the bow and his fingers softly played some Slavonic dances or flit across the strings playing barn dance melodies. I never left my place until he put away “his fiddle.”

I always was and still am a curious kid. Since Uncle Andy made himself available, I plied him with questions. He gave me early lessons in the art of steelmaking in an open hearth furnace.

I learned why he and his boys made piles of cow manure, then spread it around the orchard and used digging forks to fold it into the ground.

I talked him into taking me to the farm with him when he was off on a weekend. There I learned how to milk a cow. I watched him and his sons prune the fruit trees and learned the reason for doing so.

In the spring house, they cooled ten gallon containers of milk in preparation for bottling the milk for their home delivery routes. I studied carefully the process of separating some of the cream which would then be churned to make butter.

Back in the cellar the night we returned, Uncle Andy answered a myriad of questions until Mom called “Bed time, Tommy.”

I recalled how thrilled I was when I was six and Dad first asked me to fill the small coal bucket and bring it to the furnace so that he could build up the flames on a very cold evening. I watched carefully as he fed the coal. I also asked to be present when he stoked the furnace for a slow burn throughout the night. “Why do you do that, Dad?”

“So that we have little heat overnight and have some embers left to start a new flame early in the morning.” I was to remember that answer, for some reason, during the rest of my life.

I dreaded Mom’s call “Bed time, Tommy.” That meant leaving this cocoon of warmth for the bedroom on the second floor where cold sheets greeted my body. The inefficient furnace delivered the least heat to my bedroom.

One afternoon my cousin, Al, came to the door. He proudly announced that he had a gift for me. “Come; help me carry a trunk from our car.” It was heavy and I in my excitement kept trying to guess what was inside. For a moment I thought it might be filled with rocks and this was a big joke on me but I was wrong.

Since he was on his way to college, I guessed it might be some of his toys or board games. I knew that he and his sister had plenty of those. His folks lived very well all during the Depression years. *“No. That can’t be. This is too heavy.”*

I was sweating by the time we got to the top of the cellar stairs. Al took the lead and the brunt of the weight while I held on for dear life going down those steep stairs. “Where do you want them?”

I caught the phrase “them”. I suddenly realized what was in the trunk. I lifted the lid without answering and behold, I now owned a trunkful of books.

I reached for a book but his stern voice was saying. “We have to store this trunk before I leave. Where do you want it?”

I came to my senses and pointed to the nook under the staircase. A minute later he was on his way up the stairs. I hope you enjoy them as much as Sis and I did: Then he was gone and I was launched on a life time of reading.

I pulled out every book and started organizing them by subject. When I became aware that many were parts of series, I also organized according to date of publication. By this time I was in seventh heaven.

For a boy of ten I was thrilled to own a series of some of the most popular story books for young readers at the time. I had a stack of each of the following”

The Rover Boys, Tom Swift (Boy Genius)

Nancy Drew , Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts, Zama Grey (westerns) and a small assortment of other western writers.

My biggest problem was where to start. I read the blurbs on the back of a jacket of one book in each series, finally deciding on Nancy Drew.

I remember the infatuation of the ten year old boy who idolized a sixteen year old, even a girl, who was confident, competent, and totally independent; I liked her outspokenness and flip mannerism. I am sure I dreamed of being the male Nancy Drew as I grew

Of all those books, the ones that caught my imagination the sharpest were the Tom Swift Series.

I became frustrated trying to use scrap wood to build a toy airship without success. I knew that his racing plane was available as a model kit, but there was no money for such a frivolity

Never the less I read and reread the entire series, continually feeding my imagination. At that age I, of course, did not realize the valuable and broad education I was receiving from my pleasure reading.

My day dreaming was interrupted by the sounds of footsteps above me. “That has to be my sister, coming to prepare dinner for Dad and me. I was sure her husband would be joining us. I looked forward to his company. Fred was a veteran, thirty years as a non-com. Master sergeant in the army, a well-travelled veteran of Korea, Vietnam and a long assignment in Europe with NATO

As is the case when families reunite after long periods, the subjects of conversation ranged from health, to future plans. Fred laughed when I told him that Marie and I were planning on retiring on a small farm.

I responded with my own laughter. “Yes. It is the result of a long held dream that originated in the cellar of this house. I spent hours in conversation with Uncle Andy who owned a farm but boarded with us during several winters.”

My sister joined in. That is the fulfillment of one of several of your dreams that started here. Fred and I often talked about your ending up flying airships, a not so accidental choice of military service, in our opinion. Remember, both of us read all those Tom Swift books you gave me when you left for college. I was only nine but devoured them all as did Fred and then our two boys.”

Dad joined in the laughter and said to my sister and brother-in-law.

Tommy told me earlier that he hopes to take violin lessons, hoping to prove he is more capable than he was fifty years ago.”

Book 11.

A Blithe Spirit

I had arrived at our meeting place a few minutes early. We were meeting at the beginning of the country lane leading to her mountain home.

Housing was tight in the Santa Clara valley in the Bay Area of California. World War II had come to an end a little over a year ago. Veterans from across the nation had fallen in love with the area while serving temporary on military bases. Now young marrieds, they and their families were planning their future here in the “Valley of Heart’s Delight.”

I had found a good position but needed a home. A colleague from my days of military service had spoken to an elderly friend who wanted to help. She and I talked on the phone and made this date.

I was looking for a home in San Jose so I had no idea why we were meeting near Los Gatos but I was checking out every lead. I was becoming desperate. My wife and baby would be joining me in a few weeks

A phone call responding to a classified ad usually was met with “We just rented.” Those that were available were beyond my ability to pay.

So here I was, a few minutes before six in the evening of a warmish autumn day. She had asked me to wait in the parking lot at the bottom of the road. Since I was early, I thought I would save some time by starting up the road.

Within the distance of half a mile I realized that the road was a curving, steep, dirt one lane road with turnoffs located at intervals of about a quarter mile.

At the moment of my becoming aware I noticed a cloud of dust just ahead, heard the squeal of tires and was watching a dusty vehicle slithering to a stop less than twenty feet in front of me.

We both jumped out of our cars and rushed toward each other. She asked “James Taylor? I’m Liza Phillips.”

I nodded affirmatively. She continued “I should have told you why I wanted you to wait at the bottom. This is a one lane road and we residents use it as a speed way. Sorry to scare you.”

Before I could apologize, she headed for her car with “Follow me.”

I wanted to back up the fifty feet to the turnoff I had notice but she got into her car and starting backing up the mountain road. She moved quickly twisting and turning for almost a quarter mile, found an area where she could turn around and headed up the mountain road.

It seemed to take forever to arrive at our destination. I began to count the number of major curves, discovering that I counted almost to a hundred in the next two miles. She told me later the road was, 7 miles long, with 50 major curves to the mile, raising almost twelve hundred feet from the bottom.

When I got out, the view was spectacular. Looking to the west, I could see another mountain peak several hundred feet higher than we and two others a little lower.

I had my first good look at this lady who was about to become my savior. She was taller than I, slender as a bean stalk, a long nice face with a slender nose. Her eyes twinkled and her smile was warm.

She was wearing a tan suede skirt that reached to her ankles from below which appeared the sharp toes of western boots. A light leather vest covered a denim shirt. She was holding a flat, broad brimmed sombrero.

“Come, James. Welcome. My husband bought me this home many years ago, a place of peace and joy, even though all these years since he left this earth.”

She took my hand, leading me around the house to face southward and pointing out the communities of Morgan Hill, Gilroy and Monterey, about sixty miles distant. She told me about being here when storms hit the area. “Folks in San Jose have no idea of how storms affect this mountain top. I have been here in the midst of thunder and lightning storms a half dozen times a season while my sisters had no experience of the lightning and thunder.

I love those times. In fact, I try to be here most weekends when rain is predicted for the area.”

She led me to one of the five small cabins on the northern section of her land. I stopped by the window of one, asking “May I have a look?”

“Yes, but only through the window. I’m sorry but the key is at the main house.”

The walls that I could see were covered with paintings some framed and some not. Two canvasses on easels seemed to be works in progress.

We walked back to sit on the veranda, facing northwest. Within a minute we were drinking iced tea and chatting as the sunset. I could see the windows of buildings in San Francisco reflecting the light from the setting sun. It was awesome.

She noticed the expressing of delight on my face and said “It is breath taking, isn’t it. I spend as much of my days as possible here on the mountain. I was sure you would love it.”

Something happened that evening that sparked a special relationship. It all happened in that thirty minute period until the afterglow dissolved into night.

She asked me to talk about my wife. She laughed heartily as I told her, in very biased words, of the lovely and beautiful wife and the precious three month old little girl.

She oohed and aahed at the fistful of pictures I had of both my ladies. Within a minute of my describing my family she began delving into our plans, my vocation and our hopes for the future. She asked about my family and Lois’ family. I guessed that she was checking me out but over the years I learned that she had been thinking of how to help us.

She said “Mistakenly believing you were just a young couple, I had been thinking of offering you one of the larger cabins but that simply will not do. This is too remote, especially for city folks. I don’t know what I would do if baby Ruth were ill and Lois had no way of getting to a doctor.”

I nodded. "Lois doesn't drive and I am not in a position to buy a second vehicle on my current salary."

"Oh, dear. I understand. Come inside. Can you peel potatoes? I hope you never had that duty in the Navy. Have some more tea while I change clothes."

I loved watching her move. She seemed to float across the room, her long strides keeping her feet from touching the floor. If she wasn't floating, she was darting

We were still laughing about some of my Navy stories while we prepared dinner together. She laughed. "We aren't having any potatoes. Do you like spaghetti?"

I was as interested in her story as she had been in mine. I asked her to tell me whatever she was free to say about her life.

I thought I noted just a bit of a somber tone as she started a brief story. She told me of her parents moving from Iowa fifteen years after the end of the Civil War.

"I have two older sisters with whom I have always had a nice relationship. Daddy was rather stern. He often showed his disappointment in me. I'm afraid, being the youngest, I was a bit spoiled and acting "wild" in Daddy's eyes.

I loved drawing pictures from my imagination more than doing my lessons. He scolded me saying the three R's are more important than drawing pictures.

Now I reside on our family walnut ranch in San Jose but have my evening meal almost every evening with one of my sisters, both of whom are widows and live in large homes in the city.

Daddy built our home on the ranch in the 1889's. Cousin Fred manages the ranch but lives with his wife elsewhere."

In the midst of her story, she stopped to have some tea, seemingly forgetting that she was preparing a meal. Having watched her getting organized, I came to the decision that the culinary arts were not among her skills.

So while she continued with her story, I finished preparing the Marinara sauce and started the water heating for cooking the spaghetti. .

Becoming aware of the situation, she began to apologize but I said "I'm a specialist with spaghetti. Why don't you prepare the salad while I do this?"

She nodded and absently began shredding the lettuce while she continued her story.

"I find it interesting that all three daughters have outlived their spouses, although we all have happy marriages."

I asked casually "How about children and grandchildren?"

I happened to be looking directly at her when I asked. I noticed a shadow pass over her face, changing her smile into a scowl almost a minute lapsed as I watched a series of emotions change her facial features.

Her hands stopped working on the salad. She stared off into space, seemingly pondering my question. "Neither of my sisters ever produced a child. I have a daughter from my first and rather brief marriage."

I wanted to learn more but I had already crossed into a territory that she had wanted to stay private. She rose to set the table, leaving me to finish the salad. She seemed to have forgotten her part in the meal preparation. She continued setting the table, leaving me to complete the cooking.

Silence reigned for the first few minutes of the meal but she suddenly blurted out. "We need to do something about your housing those precious young ladies in your life, James. "

She carried the conversation throughout the dinner. She spoke of her work as an art teacher at San Jose High with high praise of one special student for whom she predicted great success She mentioned a young couple who she thought we should meet.

Looking at her wrist watch, she exclaimed. Look at the hour we must get you home."

She had just served the coffee but she was signaling the end of our meal. She dashed off to another room, returning with keys held aloft and heading for the door. I followed and protested that I could find my way down the mountain.”

“It is too dangerous for someone who does not know the territory. I will lead the way. You are too precious a package to risk. You must be able to care for those two ladies in your life.”

Down the mountain we went. There were times when she took curves at speeds that I thought to fast. I would have felt safer driving at my chosen pace. I kept her tail light in view and breathed easier once we came to the bottom.

Without leaving her car, she rolled down the window, saying “toddle do”, waved and left me in the dust, so to speak.

That late evening in my hotel room, I rehearsed the whole event, thrilled with this beautiful spirit whom I had met and began to appreciate. The more I thought about her the more I hoped for a stronger relationship;

I thought of Liza as a blithe spirit, not because she was carefree. Actually she was a dedicated, thoughtful and caring person who hid behind a persona that was lighthearted and sprightly.

I tried to visualize her in an art class of high school students, floating from easel to easer, delicately suggesting an idea to help. My guess was that her students loved her in spite of her sprightly mannerisms while other students judged as strange or something worse.

It was four o'clock on the following Monday afternoon when I answered the phone. I said “James Taylor speaking.”

“Hello, dear James. Are you free to leave your office about for thirty?”

“Yes, Mrs. Phillips. I can do that.”

“That’s good. I will pick you up in front of your office and remember that you are to call me Liza.”

She pulled up fifteen minutes, early, totted her horn. I looked up from my desk. That dusty vehicle had turned into a shiny green pre-war Nash sedan he was waving madly to be sure I recognized her.

The moment I was seated she peeled out, burning rubber. I am sure she had not looked for any approaching vehicle. We zoomed through the business district traffic, running two lights that were turning red. Interestingly, I wasn’t frightened. She handled the car like an Indy race driver.

Within ten minutes, we were turning down a country two lane road. Two minute later a left turn gave me a view of a two story, nineteenth century home, right off and the prairies of the Midwest. “Isn’t the style atrocious? James?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. This might be her home. She went on “I think it is. Daddy was a traditionalist. My sisters love it but I don’t hold with poor architecture, traditional or modern.”

She seemed to be leaping from the car before it stopped completely. As I stepped out she said. “If I had my choice, I would change I would make dramatic changes inside and out. “

She led me to the rear entrance which opened directly into a large farm-style kitchen. She led me through the kitchen and dining room to the hall and up the curving stair case she turned left into a spacious bedroom.” Do you think the three of you would find this a comfortable bedroom with a large bath to share and full run of the house for most of the day?”

She went on “I can see by your expression that the answer is yes. This can be your temporary home from the first of January until the third weekend in May.”

I finally managed to find my voice. “I am sure it will do fine.”

“Of course you must discuss with your wife. This is a standing offer. Take your time but I would love to have you. There ae but two proviso. One is a request for no

smoking indoors. That is in honor of Daddy's request. Secondly, we have another house guest whom you will rarely see she is nurse who works from three to eleven and rarely gets home before midnight. Her name is Sue Haines."

"How about the mornings and early afternoon?"

"I have spoken with her. She has one request. She would like to have the kitchen available from ten thirty to eleven thirty. She told me she would welcome baby noises once she was awake."

"How about your home life?"

"Oh, I am out until all hours. In the mornings, I breakfast at six and leave for school by seven. Fridays, I leave for the mountain immediately after school is out."

I said "Liza, you are going more than an extra mile to help us."

"Pooh. This house has been waiting for a new spirit to enliven it. You have to talk with your lovely wife I very much hope she agrees. This old house could use some young life. Now, I must flit to my dinner date."

That Nash raised a lot of dust before we got to the paved road.

Liza did not go to the mountain on the first weekend in January. She was waiting for us on that Saturday morning. She ran out of the house to greet us as we arrived. As Lois opened the car door, Liza was asking "May I help you? I can take the baby if you will permit me. It struck me that she seemed more thrilled with baby Ruth than either of the real grandmothers

Cousin Fred, the ranch manager and Mrs. Haines joined us, oohed and aahed little Ruth, and then help us move our few personal belongings into the house.

There was a change of furniture in our large bedroom. The corner table had been replaced with a cradle. Liza was cuddling Ruth just outside the door.

I walked to her. I started to say "The cradle" but she said "Pooh. Fred and I simply found it in the basement. You can see by the style that it is very old, last used in 1913"

I just yielded. My thinking was reaffirmed. She was a spirit sent to watch over us and I simply had to accept that.

Three family units would be living in that old house with never a moment of interference or tension. Liza was gone before Lois and I rose. After breakfast, Lois took the baby for a rise in the stroller. She bathed the baby while Mrs. Haines used the kitchen.

Two or three evenings a week Liza would stop before she went to dinner. "I simply have to spend some time with my precious Ruth."

She introduced us to two young couples, one of whom has been our friends for a life time. She encouraged us to invite friends. "This is your home. Please treat it that way.

During those four plus months, she did get home before we had gone to bed but after little Ruth was asleep. Liza asked permission to check on the baby.

I recall that on the first of such evening visits, she invited me to the basement where she challenged me to a game of pool. I thought I was pretty good with the cue stick but in Liza I had met my match. "Liza, you are a pool shark."

She laughed "My daddy taught me well. It was our one secret from Mother of the sisters."

We managed two or three games on each of those few evenings when she arrived early.

With the arrival of spring, I began evening walks around the house, the storage sheds and the enclosure for the windmill and water pumps. One walk will forever be in my memory.

It was after one of the late afternoon visits before Liza left to have dinner in town. I was on my evening stroll before our dinner. When I reached the rear of the pump house. I came upon a stunning scene. Liza was waltzing barefooted on a small patch of grass as though she was in the arms of a partner.

Realizing that I was intruding on a private moment I began to turn but she had spotted me. “James, you may join me, if you wish. That would please me.”

I detected in her voice a sense of need on her part. I nodded as I got rid of my slip ons. She floated across the patch of lawn and swept me into her arms.

Looking into her face, I was aware that she had been crying. She was aware that I notice but said nothing, leading me as she hummed a Strauss waltz.

When the dance ended, she asked me for a hankie to wipe her tears. “Edward, my first love, and I danced here many evenings during our brief marriage. It was so romantic.”

She returned my handkerchief. “Thank you, James.” I sensed that I was being offered a chance to leave her. I kissed her hand and walked back to have dinner with my own loved ones.

On or about the first of May, she reminded us “As much as it pains me, I must remind you that you must be moved before the twenty fifth of the month.” There was a catch in her voice.”

“Liza, our contractor says that the garage of our new home will be ready for occupancy.”

“You should know that I never told my sisters that you were living here. Sue, who is close to them promised not to say anything. Now, the Memorial Day weekend is the family’s official opening of the “country house”. They will come out each Sunday for lunch and a game of croquet on the lawn. I will be here every weekend in the summer but on the mountain the rest of the week.”

It did not escape me that I was talking with an unhappy lady entering another unhappy season.

She continued. "I have a hard time thinking of the three of you living for a few months in a garage."

I assured her we would be fine.

We were no longer housemates but the ties continued. One Monday morning I stepped out of our temporary home to find a small box just outside the door. Inside were a large package of fresh prunes and figs., some jars of baby food and a box of Pablum. The note read "Fred packed these freshly dried prunes and says hello to the both of you. I'm on my way from the mountain. Your new home is definitely on the route. Love, Liza."

That last statement was a bit of a stretch. One Friday afternoon she was trying to escape notice when she was leaving a box of walnuts from the ranch. I happened to arrive a moment after she pulled up.

I invited her to see our simple but comfortable garage home but mostly to give her a chance to hold and caress little Ruth.

Lois made some tea but Liza let it get cold as she fussed with Ruth. She was in tears of joy when she was leaving. As I walked her to the car I squeezed out a promise not to be secretly leaving those gifts. I convinced her that we wanted and enjoyed her visits. After that, she stopped by about every ten days. Each visit brief but obviously joyful.

She never shared with us any information about her relationship with her one daughter but what was apparent to us was that we were her adopted children and grandchild.

Just to point a point on this character that delighted our lives I want to describe an incident that highlights her spirit.

It turned out to be an unusually hot afternoon in August. Lois and I had been invited by Liza to attend a Sunday soiree.

She had an exhibit prepared for some students who had earlier missed her introductory class on the subject of the development of Modern Art.

It was a significant amount of work and as she said “Since I had the students come on Saturday, I thought my family and my friends might enjoy the fruits of my labor.”

Every room in the house contained pictures of famous artists’ works. The display started upstairs in three bedrooms, flowed down the walls of the spiral staircase, into the sitting room and dining room, Our bedroom had the earliest “modern art paintings” followed by the net phase consecutively until the most recent period was a surprise in the dining room.

We were served tea in the dining room and I am sure all of the guests were wondering what was behind the brown paper covering of a picture frame. When we had finished tea, Liza told us of Joan Defao, an outstanding modern artist with hangings in the New York and San Francisco Museums of Modern Art.

“Jay was my finest student and a favorite person. She considers her high school classes with me the inspiration for her continuing career. The painting I am about to unveil is her recent gift to me.”

Liza ripped the brown paper covering to reveal a stunning and dramatic deep dark black rectangle with a swath of orange curving from the top right down to the base of the I look to see real tears of joy on her cheeks.

After the buzz and congratulations, Liza said she had one more surprise “I saved it for last since it is the work of my favorite artist.”

The very traditional home had a parlor, a separate room that had two sliding doors made of dark mahogany that were closed sealing off the contents. She had us gathered in front of the doors and asked me to slide one door as she slid the other.

Behold, there in the center of parlor was a flocked and decorated Christmas tree from last December. Liza was saying “trees are so expensive that I thought I should get the use of the tree for two seasons.”

Everyone burst into laughter. The real focus was on the art on three walls she had accumulated a sample picture of every Picasso painting from his blue period and displayed them for a truly dramatic finish to the soiree.

For more than twenty years Liza and her spirit floated through our lives. The prune, apricots and walnuts kept arriving with her visits or simply dropped on our door step mysteriously during the night.

We received a special gift upon the arrival of each of our children, a rocking chair, a painting by Joan Defao, and a portrait of Liza with her baby daughter at the age of one. That portrait had been painted by her first husband, who in later years had become one of the twentieth century modern artists.

In the last year of her life, she and the sisters decided to sell the ranch. Among the many treasures she gave to us was the three quarter sixe pool table that had been in the basement of ;the house, the one on which she gave me a lesson Our oldest son and one of our foster sons were to get their first lessons from dad..

Book 12.

A Long Road to Travel

Chapter 1.

Ian was awakened from a stupor when two burly men were firmly removing him from the back seat of an automobile. It was dark and very quiet. No traffic noise. Nothing. The drone of a jet airliner in the distance emphasized the silence around him.

Once he was on the sidewalk, his eyes were struck by a sharp light some distance ahead. He felt his arms being raised around the shoulders of his captors. He was being carried toward the light.

Ian was confused. *“What am I doing here? Where is here? Am I being kidnapped?”*

He tried to ask the men but they did not understand him or chose not to respond. He felt the tips of his shoes dragging on the walkway. *“Those are my news shoes. The toes will be all scuffed.”*

He thought he heard one of the men say “This is the worse I have ever seen him.”

“Mrs. O will know what to do. His visits are getting more frequent. The last was just over three weeks ago.” Ian wondered whom they were discussing.

“Take it gently, boys. Put him there.” That soft voice was familiar. A warm feeling was overtaking him. That was the last thing he remembered until Ian awakened in a darkened room with a sliver of sunlight peeking in at the edge of the draped window.

He tried to center his mind. His memory was jumbled but he was determined. As the minutes dragged by, a picture was slowly coming clear *“its morning, I think. “Oh, my head! I must have fallen off the wagon.”*

Details eluded him, at least for the present. He recalled stopping by the Hilton Hotel bar to have a client reaffirm the program which we had outlined briefly earlier that day. He realized now that going there was a mistake.

His client, Felix, spent an hour every evening after work having drinks with some of his buddies. He and Ian had moved to the far side of the room to discuss the item of business. Afterwards, Felix insisted on buying Ian a drink, something Ian tried to refuse but Felix was not taking no for an answer.

Two drinks later, Felix and the gang were leaving but Ian wanted another drink. He was feeling happy. The day’s worries were behind him, non-existent.

Another client, Max Long, and his wife stopped in for a drink on their way to a late dinner and insisted on buying Ian a drink. From that point on details of the evening were hazy.

As Ian tried to reconstruct the evening he was thinking “What I did *during the rest of the evening is unclear. I think that I left the Hilton. My recollection is that I ended up with people I knew. It must have been another bar.*”

Flashes of memory gave him an inkling of a car, two men getting him out of a car and a bright light off in the distance.

His attempt to relive the evening was interrupted when Mrs. O. knocked and walked in with a tray on which he saw a large glass of tomato juice and couple of soda crackers.

He almost yelled “Take it away. I can’t drink or eat anything, let alone tomato juice.”

Mrs. O. laughed. “We’ve been here before. You know you will drink it now and get ready for a long shower in five minutes.” She walked out the door while he was shouting, actually cursing.

He wasn’t looking forward to the next four or five days, but he knew that he had to endure the program in order to get back on his feet. This was a must in order to get him back to work.

He recalled Mrs. O. on other visits, that this was the start of detoxification and managed withdrawal, the first stage of treatment for any alcoholic or drug addict. He wished she wouldn’t suggest that he was addicted.

What he wanted right now was a drink, not a process to clear his body. He was getting that feeling of desperation knowing that not a drop was to be found in this house.

He knew the program, having been here only a few weeks ago. Sally, the nurse and Joe, the male attendant would be his only contacts until the visit from Mrs. O. in the late afternoon. That would be the first two days. After that, Mrs. O. would be available for conversation at his request.

In the meantime he promised to read certain materials which would be needed for three discussion sessions.

He managed to eat a bit of his lunch after being sweet talked by Sally. Otherwise, he was left alone. None of the books on the shelves held an interest for him. He zipped through the crossword puzzles, hardly challenged at all. He managed a nap around three or a bit later.

When Mrs. O. arrived, she was her usual joyful presence, a warm smile and a couple of off-color stories told to her by other clients. In a minute she had diverted his mind to other than the pain of withdrawal.

That lasted only for a few minutes. Then her tone became serious as she said “Ian, we need to talk.”

He was flippant as he asked “Do we really? I like it better when you keep my thoughts diverted with stories or even a song. Where is your guitar?”

She ignored his question and the attempt to put off a sober conversation. “Ian, you are a great guy with some serious problems. Like any business woman, I like your money but I can’t help your fundamental problem.”

He protested “I don’t have a problem that a little time won’t fix.”

“You said those same words three weeks ago. The frequency of your visits tells me that you are not improving. You need to see a professional. It’s not my job to preach but I consider you a friend as well as a client.”

Ian went silent, displaying a pouting face. She continued “I want to remind you what I said during your first visit. Detoxification alone does not solve any psychological, social, or behavioral problem. Therefore nothing we do here will produce lasting behavioral change which, I believe, is obvious even to you.

Ian put his hands over his ears. “I didn’t come for a lesson or a sermon. If you are my friend, then help me get strong enough to go back to work.”

“Ian, I have two other clients with the same problem. All three of you are successful executives. It seems particularly difficult for someone advanced in his professional life to admit to a problem such as alcohol addiction. Successful in every other area of your lives, over time, the addiction makes you think you’re weak and have lost control.”

“From what I have seen over thirty years in this business is that in each case pride has taken over common sense. In your case, the pride is masking the pain.”

Mrs. O. saw that she had Ian’s attention. Something had gotten through. She said “That is when you believe that alcohol is the only way to move past it. Almost everyone, including you, is vulnerable to addiction. Alcohol is the legal, socially acceptable panacea in almost any situation.”

Mrs. O. noticed Ian’s eyes glazed over. “*Dammit, I didn’t know when to stop.*”

She rose. “Sorry, Ian. I see that you are not ready for such a conversation. I ask your foreignness for intruding.”

She rose and headed for the door. Ian asked “How did I get here?”

“You must have been really out to have forgotten. You had a card with the name and home phone of your friend, Johnny. A bartender found the card in your pocket and called him. This time he could not come personally. His wife is ill. He called me.”

Mrs. O. saw his face turn a beet red as he said “Damn. I promised myself that would not happen again.”

“You were damned lucky that you had his card. The bartender would have called the police because he had to close at the two o’clock curfew. You’re lucky to have Johnny as a friend. He would do anything to save you even though he has no idea what to do.”

“Dammit to hell. I’ll never be able to face Johnny again.”

“Of course, you will. He will seek you out if you don’t call him. Ian, you need help. If you can’t afford a professional, let me get you a sponsor from Alcoholics Anonymous.”

“You know that I tried that, but there was no one in any of those groups who was like me. I just didn’t belong.”

Mrs. O. could only shrug her shoulders. She was beginning to feel like a nag. She had already tried helping Ian in ways she never did with any others who came to the center.

Chapter 2.

On the fourth morning after his admittance, Joe, the attendant, was helping Ian into a cab. He gave the address of his office. He had plenty of work waiting for him and phone calls to straighten out the problems of five days of non-communication. The only call he had made was to his boss.

Up to this point, his boss had been understanding and forgiving but Ian knew that Max's patience was coming to the end. Not only would clients leave if they did not receive the service they were due but his behavior would blemish the fine reputation of the firm.

Despite his three absences during the last months, he was certain that Max was the only one in the firm who knew his problem. He found ways to excuse his absence, making sure no others even suspected.

When he called his newest client he was told that the man would not take his call. The message through his secretary was "We have taken our business elsewhere."

By noon he was in full swing. Everything else seemed to be back on track. At about two in the afternoon he had a call from his client, Felix. "Ian, I am sorry I insisted on your joining me for a drink. Sid explained that you are trying to stay away from the bottle. We need and appreciate your service, Ian. I'll be more careful in the future."

He was ready to wrap up the business day at six. He was faced with the same situation that he had faced weeks ago after returning from the detox place. *"What should I do? The apartment is too quiet and lonely. Dinner at the Greek Cafe will use up an hour. Dammit."*

He knew that he could call his close friend, Johnny, who would invite him to dinner. That would be a relief and a definite diversion. Tilde and Johnny were always an exciting challenge. He envied his friends whose faith was strong, something that was eluding Ian for so many years.

He enjoyed those challenges from his friends who were Progressive Christians, not bible thumping literalists who were always asking Ian if he was saved. Their focus never seemed to be on beliefs but always emphasized transformation.

He found himself edgy in those times when challenged but he was aware that it was he, who for some unknown reason had introduced the subject.

He let his mind drift over their last get together. Tilde had hit a sensitive spot in his psyche when she told of a recent sermon challenging everyone to drop the veils or masks we wear to keep the world or even friends from knowing the real self. He recognized the many ways and times he donned a mask.

Ian could not face Johnny just yet. He decided to postpone the call, saving that option for a night when he really needed some support and could promise Johnny that he would not ever interrupt his friend in the middle of the night...

In the end, he went to the “Dark Room”, a small jazz spot on North First Street. As he guessed, they were quite busy but he found a table at the rear, nursed several bottles of Perrier while enjoying a featured jazz pianist, spelled off by a local trio, who had a future but were no more than a fill in tonight.

Facing the weekend was difficult. Time on his hands and no one to talk to. After a late breakfast he decided to drive to Santa Cruz. He arrived about one thirty, in time to have lunch at the pier and watch the surfers from his window seat. He saw only couples, not a single male or female with whom he might have initiated a conversation.

After lunch, he walked through the arcade, listened to the laughter of the children as he watched the carousel.

He sat there for more than an hour. He felt that nothing he did would fill the hollow in his being; He needed to be in some personal relationship. He wanted someone close enough to share conversation.

He missed his wife, Gail, even though he knew she had lost all feelings of love for him. Despite her desire to be constantly at play, she stayed tuned to world news and was a sharp conversationalist.

During those last weeks before the divorce, she had insisted that he continue to live in the big house. They did not share a bedroom, of course. She was asleep when he left for work and was out on the town before he had finished his work day.

He no longer was aware of his surroundings, of the music of the carousel or the yelling of children. He was lost in thought, wondering when their marriage had become hollow.

He knew that their social friends were still unaware of this break. He had moved his belongings to a small apartment just ten days ago. He felt certain that the world saw them as a happily married couple.

He had been aware that both were becoming seriously drunk at the parties, requiring someone to drive them home. Both were drinking too much at home in the evenings, limiting opportunities for meaningful exchange.

Conversation during the few evenings they had dinner in was desultory. During dinner dates with friends there was hardly any contact between them, Gail animatedly involved with her woman friends.

The sharp break had come the evening that he suggested the possibility of family counseling. She gave him a definitive “No.” He tried one last time to discuss their seeking counseling. Her answer was “I don’t have a problem. I’ll be happy to pay for your counseling if you choose, since you do have a problem.”

He was aroused from his mental analysis when a young excited boy fell and scraped his knees in his excitement to get to the right pony on the carousel.

Looking around he realized that a long period had elapsed since he had taken a seat. *“It’s time to do something other than mope.”*

He walked to his car, got in and began driving south. *“I can’t go to Carmel. All my party friends will be on the town on a Saturday night. That is a temptation to booze. I just can’t go there.”*

He settled for a small motel in Pacific Grove, had dinner in the café next door, and settled in to watch TV. Later, lying in bed he was hoping for sleep to shut out this feeling of loneliness

Sunday was a beautiful sunny day. Ian spent most of the day lying and walking on the beach playing guessing games about the vocation of the other bathers nearby. The day was a nice respite from the sad remembrances of the last few weeks.

Ian was up early on Monday morning, was the first to arrive at the office and had closed a deal with a new client before the boss arrived. He was in good spirits and improving as the day progressed. His creative mind was at its best and still operating in high gear when his colleagues left for the day.

It was past seven when he finally decided to call it a day. He opted for dinner at a Taiwanese restaurant in nearby Milpitas, certain that he would not run into any of his friends. Being with friends, meant cocktails and he was determined to prove to Mrs. O that he could handle his “drinking problem.”

The rest of the work week passed quickly in his mind. Each day was planned and executed just as it was on Monday. He was able to land two more new accounts. His friend, Felix, was delighted with the three new videos to be aired on three Bay area television stations the following month.

He called his friend, Johnny, on Tuesday, to bring him up to date starting with an apology and then the story of his stay at the Detox center followed by highlights of the days since. Johnny insisted he come to dinner on Friday evening. Ian accepted, aware that this would be an evening of pleasure not one of avoiding unpleasant memories.

Mickey, age 4, and Susan, age 2, dashed out of the house, running headlong toward Ian as he emerged from the car in the driveway. He scooped both into his arms delighted when their kisses slobbered his face. Tilde stood in the doorway calling “Johnny, Ian is here.”

Ian was soon rolling on the floor with the young ones, wrestling with Mickey and giving Susan a ride on his legs as she shrieked with pleasure. Finally Tilde shooed them off to the TV room so “We need to talk to Uncle Ian for a bit before dinner.”

Each had a Perrier along with some cheese and crackers while the conversation covered a myriad of subjects. At one point, Ian said “Tilde, you are absolutely blooming, lovelier each time I visit.”

She blushed and after a moment of silence she said “Ian, you are only the second to know. We are expecting our third, some seven months from now.”

Ian’s face broke into a grin offering his congratulations. Their chat was interrupted when the kids came running “Cartoons are over.” They scrambled onto Ian’s lap, asking for a story. Tilde and Johnny headed for the kitchen to set out dinner while Ian entertained the youngsters.

Johnny accompanied Ian to his car. On the way he asked “Friend. Do you want to talk with me about the blackout?”

Ian responded with a short laugh. “I don’t think so. I was having too much fun. My friends were buying me more drinks than I could handle. Things simply got out of hand.”

Johnny was disappointed. Ian’s feeble attempt to make a joke of the incident sounded so hollow.

Back at his apartment, Ian’s mood turned dark. He was contrasting Johnny’s family life with his, two broken marriages and an estranged son whose location was a mystery as it had been since he married Gail. He had a hard time getting to sleep.

He spent the weekend just as he had done last week end. There was one difference. Sunday evening, on the drive back, he decided to stop by the “Dark Room” to listen to the jazz pianist.

He nursed a Perrier for an hour. Just as he was preparing to leave, the waiter arrived with a double scotch on the rocks. “Compliments of the lady in the last booth.” Ian looked in the direction of the booth, Sally Murphy; one of Gail’s divorced buddies was smiling an invitation to join her. He picked up the scotch and walked to the booth.

Sally said “I just heard the news yesterday. I’m sorry for both of you. None of us had any idea. What a surprise!”

Ian nodded, taking a sip of his drink. He thought “Sweet nectar. I needed that.”

He was aware that Sally’s voice was a bit thick and husky. She told him of Gail making the announcement to the “gang” at lunch on Saturday. Ian was enjoying the scotch. He hardly noticed the waiter placing a second glass of scotch in front of him. Thirty minutes later, Sally was driving him in her Cadillac to her apartment. Ian in his fuzzy mind was thinking “She’s too drunk to be driving but so am I.”

In the apartment, she poured a drink for each and tried opening the buttons of Ian’s shirt, doing a miserable job as she weaved from left to right and back. Eventually they were tumbling on her bed. Later he recalled her laughing crazily as she brought the bottle to the bedside and poured another drink for each.

He awoke with a splitting headache. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he was trying to understand where he was and how he got here. He noticed the bottle, almost full. “*Just what I need. The hair of the dog.*”

He took a swig right out of the bottle. He heard a moan, turned and suddenly realized “Sally.” She was starting to sit up on her side of the bed. “I need a drink.” She turned “Oh, Ian. What happened? What are you doing in my bed? Oh. Lordy. Have another drink and hand me the bottle.”

Ian did, handing her the bottle, and then looked at his wrist watch. “*Ten thirty. I need some solid excuse for not showing up at the office.*”

He picked up the bedside phone and dialed the office. Before he could give an excuse, the receptionist was saying “Hold on, Ian. The boss wants to talk with you.”

“Ian. You missed your nine o’clock appointment with Tech One. I handled it myself since they were about to dump us. Ian, am I right in guessing that you fell off the wagon again?”

Ian had no choice but to admit the fact. He then heard what he knew was coming and what he feared. “Ian, as I said the last time, I have to let you go. Tess will pack up your personal items and have them at her desk. Ian, please get some professional help. This is breaking my heart.”

Chapter 3.

He hung up the phone. He felt the need for another bracer and saw a beautiful naked woman handing him the bottle. “You look like you just received some bad news.” She handed him the bottle then sat down on the bed beside him.

He had a nip, trying to plan his next step. "I just got fired and it is no surprise. I haven't the slightest idea of what to do."

He felt her fingers playing with the hair on his chest. "I know what will clear your mind, Ian" She moved her arm around his neck, pulling him atop her.

They lost a day out of their lives, just as Ray Milland had lost a weekend.

The following afternoon when Ian arrived at his own apartment, there were five messages, all from Johnny. His voice was practically pleading with Ian to call.

"I can't do that. He knows that I have been on the bottle again. I have to get fully sober again before I talk to the only friend I have."

For three days he fought the demon and despite all desires for a drink, he avoided every temptation. He was in a quandary. He had no skills except in the field of advertising. His reputation as a boozier was too well known to land a job with another local agency. "I need to move to another metropolitan area and get a fresh start but this is my home. Dammit. I am a stupid ass. Maybe Mrs. O and my boss were right. Perhaps I should see a shrink, but I have a keen mind. I just have to learn to limit my drinks to avoid getting drunk."

For three weeks he scoured the want ads and even got a few interviews but he lacked the background for the positions that were open.

He finally decided to let Johnny know that he would be leaving the area. When he called, Johnny insisted that Ian have a sandwich at Johnny's desk in his private office. Ian agreed and volunteered to bring the sandwiches.

Although embarrassed to tell Johnny of the event leading to his being terminated at the advertising agency, he was completely forthright with his one and only friend.

As usual, he felt no sense of judgment from Johnny, only sympathy and compassion. He went on to say "I can't find work outside the advertising business, Johnny. My resume does not show a background that meets the jobs being advertised. I managed three interviews but came up short."

"So what are you saying, Ian?"

"I think I need to move to another metropolitan area. The whole of the local advertising community is aware of my reputation. I don't stand a chance. Yet, this is my home."

Johnny asked "Ian, are you planning on seeking some professional help?"

"Not at present. I was in great shape for two weeks until Sally seduced me. That would have been okay but she is an alcoholic and kept me boozed up just to stay with her."

Even Ian knew that was only an excuse but Johnny accepted the statement without comment. He said “Ian, I have been doing some reading about situations like yours, persons on the verge of being true alcoholics caused by certain conditions. It seems to me that you fit the pattern that I read about.”

Ian began to wave him off but Johnny said “Listen for one minute. This is not a judgment but an observation. You have had a stressful change in your life with Gail, ending with the breakup of the marriage.

You mentioned blacking out and difficulty getting oriented when awakened.”

“Yes, but I recovered quickly and was a sharp as ever when I returned to work. I can do this, Johnny. I prefer to stay here but the only skills I have will not help me here.”

“How about going back to school to find your way into another vocation?”

“I’m too old for that and besides I don’t have the assets. I need to earn a living to support myself.”

Johnny could see that he was getting no place with this approach but was still determined to find a way to help his friend. After a significant silence between them Ian rose to leave but Johnny said “How about trying your luck searching for a job locally for a few more e days? Come by on Friday for another sandwich. I will make a few calls and may have something for you to consider.”

Ian brightened immediately. “I’ll give it my darnedest; Johnny and I’ll bring some take-out.”

Ian did his best but struck out in his search. The hours not spent in pursuit were hard. He was kicking himself for losing his job. He was mad at Gail for letting him down. He wanted a drink but he had promised Johnny to make a go without help from the bottle.

Johnny was beaming when Ian arrived on Friday. He began to explain as they opened the three cartons of Chinese take-out.

I didn’t have any luck with my clients at three different high tech corporations. The lack of experience in people management is the big drawback. There is high demand for experienced middle managers.”

“That doesn’t sound like good news.”

“But it does lead to an idea. I have been planning to hire an office manager. We have just begun searching. I believe that you are a fast learner and under my tutelage can become a successful office manager for me.”

Ian started to interrupt but Johnny hushed him. “This would be for a short term, six months or less. You could enroll at San Jose State University for an evening management course.”

Johnny’s excitement was beginning to affect Ian. Johnny continued. “My friend, Chief Operating Manger at Three Industries, Inc, helped me shape the plan and is sure there will be a job for you at the end of the school semester.”

Johnny could see hope coming alive n Ian’s face and then the shadow of a scowl appeared. He said “You haven’t said anything about my drinking.”

“Of course, it won’t work if you fall into the pit again. You say you

can handle it with a source of income and work satisfaction. The job here will cease to be a challenge after a while but that will be taken care of because there is an ending date coupled with a new beginning.”

He continued “I am happy to advance a loan for you to engage a counselor to help if you agree to the plan. All I ask is your giving the plan a serious consideration. Take a few days to think about it.”

Ian decided to take a drive to Bramhall City Park, sit in the sun and consider the ramifications of the offer. He found a bench away from the few families who were present. With pen and pad in possession he dug in.

He acknowledged that Johnny had thrown a life line to a sinking sailor but he was uncomfortable. He knew that there was a big risk. He would never again be able to face Johnny if he failed to stay sober.

Two days later, he walked into Johnny’s office beaming and ready to go to work. His visit to the University was successful.

Johnny had been right. Ian was a fast study. He was a natural charmer and had the staff not only accepting him but helping him develop the knowledge of office procedures. They were better tutors than Johnny, himself.

Ian promised Johnny that he would find a psychologist.

Three weeks after his starting date, Johnny invited him to lunch to review their progress. Ian gave him a run down on the management class at State. Johnny gave him a glowing report based on feedback from the staff.

When Johnny asked him for any comments about his counselor, Ian blushed, admitting that he had not found a counselor. “I have been so busy days and evenings that I haven’t taken the time. I will get right on it. I can assure you that desire for a drink is quickly quenched when remembering all that is at stake. I won’t let you or myself down, Johnny.”

“That’s great, Ian.”

Ian became quite friendly with Olga Stak, the Hungarian refugee who had joined the staff a few months prior. Johnny saw them leaving together twice during the following week. Olga was a widow who was a lawyer in her home country but that did not qualify her for the bar here in the States. “*She is as sharp as Ian. I am sure they will enjoy each other’s company.*”

On a Thursday, two weeks after the first review, Johnny took Ian out to lunch for an informal review of his progress. Everything was on track and Johnny wanted to let Ian know. He also needed an update on Ian’s evening class at State. Ian was excited as he reported the news that he was tops in the class.

Johnny saw Olga and Ian leaving for a late lunch on Friday. He smiled saying “*They make a great pair. I forgot to ask Ian about his counselor.*”

Olga and Ian went to lunch together during the next week, giving Johnny pleasure. When they drove in together on the following Monday, Johnny smiled, guessing that they had spent the weekend together. Ian was grinning giving off an aura of pleasure.

Ian’s work was showing great results from the employees who were projecting signs of pleasure with their work.

Nine thirty on the next Monday morning. Johnny was getting anxious.

Ian had not shown up. He was alerted when one of the newer young women had come to Johnny's office to ask a question that should have gone to Ian. She told Johnny "I haven't seen him this morning.

When he answered her question, she said "Thank you, sir. I think I can handle it from this point."

His phone calls to Ian's number were unanswered. "*Was this panic time?*"

At ten fifteen he called Olga to his office. When she was seated, he apologized. "Olga, I make it a point not to ask questions about an employee's private life but I am concerned. I happened to notice that you and Ian were spending some time together. He hasn't shown up this morning and I wondered if, by any chance, you saw him this weekend?"

Olga's face turned crimson. She stammered a bit before saying. "We had a lovely date on Friday evening. We agreed to get together Saturday at noon to leave for a weekend at Monterey." Her blush deepened. "After all we are grown, single adults."

Johnny hurriedly apologized. "No judgment here, Olga. Ian is my best friend and I am worried because he is not here."

She said "He never showed up for the date. I was packed and waited for hours but he never arrived." She had been thinking about possible reasons. "*Ian seemed just the tiniest bit hesitant for just a moment when I suggested that we might discuss the idea of moving in together soon. He suggested we could discuss that during the weekend. Now, I wonder if the idea threatened him.*"

She had been feeling guilty about that and shared the information and her fear with Johnny.

"I doubt that, Olga. He has been dealing with a good many demons during the past months. I do fear, though, that he has gotten himself into a drunken stupor and is feeling guilty that he has let both of us down." It turned out that Johnny understood only too well the road that Ian was travelling.

When he had awakened hearing Mrs. O's voice, he had a dim sense that he had broken some kind of trust. Through the four days in the detox center, he dealt with this overwhelming feeling of guilt.

On the following Friday morning, he took a cab to the Greyhound Bus Station where he boarded a bus headed toward Monterey.

Over the coming years, Johnny's guilt feelings faded but never left him. Olga moved to Salinas, taking a position similar to one she had while working with Johnny.

Five years later, Johnny's executive assistant, Jan, brought in the morning mail Her face was beaming as she held out an envelope that hinted of roses. "Look at the return address, Johnny."

He burst into a smile when he saw her name, Olga Stak. He tore open the envelope.

"Dear Johnny,

I have a slight feeling of guilt for not writing sooner, but I had promised Ian that I would not. We found each other about two years ago on a Sunday morning at the mission in Carmel. We bumped into each other, literally

while going forward to receive communion.

We renewed our relationship and after six months we finally moved in together. I didn't know I could ever have someone love me in the way Ian did.

With help of a counselor and Alcoholics Anonymous, he became and stayed sober until his death after a heart attack last week.

You should know that during the brief visit an hour before his death, he said "Dear one, I want you to let Johnny know that I have been walking the long straight path for more than four years including several more false starts."

Johnny could not finish reading the letter because of the tears that had filled his eyes. Jan silently left the room so that her boss could have some time alone.

The end.

