

The Visitor

By Cindi Lamb

The following is a compilation of articles published in *The Dundalk Eagle* newspaper from September 26, 2002 to February 26, 2003. "The Visitor" is a condensed excerpt from a book in progress entitled *I'm Not Madd Anymore*.

"I need to talk to you Linda. I'm getting consumed with this thought, this dream, I don't know what to call it, except that it is becoming more real in my mind. I think about it during the day, I dream about it when I go to bed, but it's never a nightmare," I tell her. "I'm not afraid; I'm overjoyed when it's done."

Linda is my best friend, but I have not seen her in seven months. She's watching her soaps and she smells like ten dryer sheets. I love her.

"It goes like this: me and my two 'brothers' go to the Ridge Inn, we see him sitting at the bar, strike up a conversation with him and lure him outside with talk of a sweet deal on a souped-up '72 Camaro. We walk and talk passed the dumpster, laughing about the old drunk bartender. As we walk, my men flank him, and in stereo, they grip his shoulders, twist his arms behind him and take him down, pin him face down in the gravel and broken glass; he scrapes the skin off his nose and chin trying to get up, struggling to move, and he bleeds. Such a pity."

"Now wait, is this real? Is this something you are planning or what?" she asks.

"Just wait a minute," I tell her. "He tries to yell, tries to get up, but they hold him down, one sitting in the middle of his back, the other sitting on his legs. Except for his head, he can't move...such a shame."

"I don't think I like where this is going," Linda says as she flicks off *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

"I do. I love it. I *love* this story. I've never said it out loud, but I think I'm loving it even more," I tell her, smiling, excited as a kid with a new bike.

"I open the trunk of the Camaro, and take out the crow bar.

I get on all fours, lay my cheek parallel with his face in the gravel and whisper: 'Let me see if I can do to you what you did to Laura.' And then, he spits in my face."

"Oh my god! This is awful!" she says.

"Hah! That ain't nothin'! I wipe the spit off with my hand, tossel it in his hair and have a little chuckle. I stand up, grab the crow bar with both hands, lob it high up over my head and with all the force of all the hate I possess, I lunge that metal bar into the back of his neck."

Linda's eyes are wide open and for a moment, she is speechless.

"Why are you smiling?" she asks.

"Because I'm happy."

"Did you kill him?"

"No. Oh no, that would be too easy on him."

"Man, that's awful," she says.

"That's not the end of it. Then I get down in the gravel, get in his face again and snarl softly, 'How do you like that? How does that make you feel? Oh, I'm so sorry, that's right, you can't *feel* anything anymore, can you?' Then I spit in his face and it's over."

"Oh my god, that's so grisly," she says. "You need to catch a buzz." She gets out her stash.

"How long have you been having this dream?"

"Sixteen years," I tell her.

"Wow. And they've never gone away?"

"Nope. Same dream all the time. Never gets worse, never gets better. After the dream, I laugh like Vincent Price, but then the laugh fades into this pitiful, painful echoing cry. Remember what the loons sounded like at night on Gull Lake up in Ontario where we fished? I end up sounding like that."

"How can you stand it?" Linda said.

"I drink a lot of beer, self-medicate, same thing I've been doing for years, I guess. I hate him so much for what he did to my daughter, it's eating me raw inside. I gotta stop this. I'm going to do something. I'm going to call him, meet him face to face."

Linda's chin dropped.

"Are you crazy? He threatened to kill you while he was in prison, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but that was a long time ago. Maybe he's changed by now. Maybe he's different," I said.

"Oh, right. The guy gets bombed out his mind at ten in the morning, has four prior DWI's, plows into you on the way to the grocery market, paralyzes your kid from the neck down, threatens to kill you, and you think 'maybe he's changed?' Get a grip, girl. Those kind of people don't change."

"I called information and got his number. He still lives in Frederick," I told her.

"You are out of your mind. What if he doesn't want to talk to you?"

"I think he will."

"What if he says yes and then tries to kill you?"

"I'll meet him in a public place."

"What if you meet him, and it only makes you feel worse?"

"I don't think it will."

"Why don't you just go to church and pray or something? You believe in God, don't you?"

"Hell yeah, I believe in God. But this doesn't have anything to do with God. It has to do with me and Charles Mead Jr.. Besides, I don't even go to church."

"So what?"

"So, have you ever had a friend that only comes over to your house when they want something?"

"Yeah."

"Does it tick you off?"

"Yeah."

"Get the point?"

"I still think you're nuts. Why don't you just let it go, and get on with your life?"

"I don't know. You're not the first person to tell me that."

"I suppose this will go in your book, right?"

"It will if I can get him to talk to me. I want to know what happened to him. I want to know why he did this to me, and present more than one side of the story. I want to know if he still drinks, if he's still alive, if he's sorry. I just have to do this."

"Let me know what happens. Call me, OK?"

Charles Mead's phone number stared at me for over a month, scribbled on a pale pink sticky note stuck on the side of my hard drive. I finally got the guts to call him.

"Hello, Charles?" I asked.

"No. This is Lois. Hold on a minute."

She had a very deep voice and I heard her yell for him. I thought I could hear her walking across the floor, but it was just my chest banging. The phone nearly slipped out of my sweaty palm.

"Hello." His voice was coarse and gritty, too.

"Charles?"

"Yes."

"This is Cindi Lamb."

Several seconds of silence and 22 years of pain overlapped. I thought he was going to hang up on me.

"Do you remember me?"

"I certainly do," he said solidly.

"I - I need to get rid of - I'm writing a book about Laura and about starting MADD. I want to talk to you. I, I..."

My speech rambled and trembled, along with the rest of me. I took a deep breath and tried to get a hold of myself, but it didn't work.

For several minutes, erratic, descriptive vignettes rolled out of my mouth, detailing bits and pieces of my life for the past 20 years, things I didn't want to say, things I didn't want him to know. I could hear myself talk like a buffoon, but could do nothing about it. Tears fell off my face like rain drops, and mottled the pink stickie note on my desk with his number on it.

"I'm sorry I'm getting so upset, but I've thought about this conversation for years. It's very upsetting to me."

"Yes, I know it is. It's upsetting me." His voice was low and soft.

"I would really like to talk to you."

"Well, I don't know about that," he said.

"How are you?" I thought to ask. I wanted to know. I was surprised he was still alive, actually. "I'm fine," he said calmly.

"How old are you now?"
"I'm 59 and by the way, I've been sober for nine years."

I covered my mouth and gasped. That's not what I expected.

"That's wonderful. That's very good news. Congratulations."

Congratulations? I'm congratulating the lowlife that killed my daughter? What am I doing? Spitting in Laura's face? Maybe I should just find out where he lives and make my dream a reality.

"Thank you," he said.

"Will you talk with me? We can meet someplace neutral. Will you talk with me?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about this."

"Why? What's the problem?" I said nastily. He heard it in my voice.

"This is hard for me, too. You don't understand. You don't

know what my life has been like. I know I can't ever bring Laura back, but you don't know what I go through every day. Besides, what good is it going to do?" he said. His patience was waning. He wanted to hang up.

"I think if we could sit down and talk I could explain what good it will do, especially for me. I've been filled with nightmares and hate for over twenty years and I want -"

"And you want to meet me somewhere so you can do what to me? You want to write a book and put me through hell again and again? I can't bring her back!"

"No, wait! Wait! Don't hang up, please, just think about it. You don't have to make a decision right now. I'll call you back a week from tonight. We'll talk again. Alright?"

I could reach through this phone and kill you...

"I guess so. I gotta go now. Good-bye."

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"Well, will you meet with me or not?" I asked him the following Wednesday night. We had chatted lightly. I was calm and I knew inciting Charles would do me no good.

"Yes, alright," he said, still reticent. "Will you be bringing a gun?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so."

"Good, cuz I don't heal as good as I used to," he chuckled. I didn't.

We finally agreed to meet at Denny's on Route 40 in Frederick on June 21st.

I grew more anxious and tense as the day drew closer. I rehearsed in my head what I would say to him, how I would act. No crying, that's for sure. The day finally arrived.

"Do you know what he looks like?" Ray asked me on the way to the restaurant.

"No, but he probably looks the same; long greasy black hair, wrinkled clothes, stands with a slouch. I'm sure he hasn't changed much."

"But that was 23 years ago, and he's been sober for nine years now. Don't you think he'd be

different now?" Ray said.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I'm sure I'll know him when I see him."

We stood in the waiting area at Denny's and I watched dozens of people come in and out that Saturday morning. I squinted, looking into the eyes of every older man, piercing their glance with my leer, certain I would be able to identify him, instinctively.

Ray finally grabbed my hand and led me to a table in the back. We ordered breakfast and waited.

"Hey Charles, how ya doing?"

"Real good, Buddy, real good. How 'bout you?"

A man was standing behind me, and he was talking to Charles Mead.

"That's him," I whispered to Ray.

"Well if that's him, he doesn't look anything like you said he would."

"What does he look like?"

"He looks like your Grandfather," Ray told me.

"No way! Bush or Sorensen?"

"Bush. He's got silver hair and glasses and he's dressed nice. Go tell him you're here."

Ray was right. As I stood up and turned around, I saw him. He looks like my Grandpa Bush, or anybody's Uncle, or brother, or friend. Just a normal looking guy.

"I'm Cindi," I said to him as I walked towards his table. A powerful surge came over me to lunge at his throat, ram his head through the wall, and kill him if I could, any way I could, right then and there.

"I know," he said in a low voice, and he extended his hand to me. I could not shake it. We both sat down.

"Ray and I ordered breakfast, and as soon as we're done, we'll have a chat, OK?" I asked.

"That's fine. Anything you like," he said. He was very accommodating, almost kind. It didn't matter, though. I hate him.

"I don't know if I can eat any-

thing, Ray," I told my husband as I sat down in our booth. "I just want to get this over with so I can go back to camp and self-medicate with beer." He smiled at me and reached across the table to hold my hand.

I didn't eat much. Ray finished his meal and got up to go to the restroom. I stared at the butter knife leaning off my plate. I picked it up, twiddled it, then clutched it tight. It would be so easy, so easy to go over there right now and plunge...

"Would you like more coffee?" the waitress asked me.

"What?"

"Would you like me to top off your coffee?" she asked again.

"No, no thanks," I said. I let go of the knife. Ray came back and said it was time to talk to him.

We went over to his table. Ray sat next to him and I sat next to Charles' wife, Lois. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't talk. I looked straight down at the table, and watched water from my eyes hit the formica.

"How are you, um, how have you been?" Charles asked me.

"Fine. OK. Alright, I guess. How about you?"

"Well, I guess I'm alright," he said. We chatted idly for a few minutes. He told me he's been working for the state for the last seven years, weatherizing homes for people who need special services, like the elderly. He also told me he got his driving license back and then:

"Why did you do this? Why did you drink so much? How come after 5 DWI's you just kept right on drinking and driving? Didn't you care about anything? Why did you threaten to kill me when you were jail? *Why did you do this to my daughter? Why? I just want to know why...*"

I sobbed. He sat, silent, staring at me.

"I'm sorry. I'll get a hold of myself," I said. And I did.

"Why did you drink so much?" I asked him.

For the next half hour, Charles told me about his drinking, how he started young, and how much he liked it.

"I didn't have any big problems or anything like that, I just liked it. What I did have was a bad attitude. I couldn't stand people telling me what to do; you can ask me nice, but don't tell me what to do," he told me.

"And don't accuse me of something I didn't do, I hate that too. I went into the military when I was 18, and that's all you get in there, orders. I was out of the military at age 20, with a dishonorable, for fighting." He kept talking, and I listened.

"For the next fifteen years, I was in and out of jobs, bars, and jail, and I just kept drinking more and more and more. You put that kind of drinking and that kind of attitude together, and well, it's just bad."

"Then, when I lent my stereo to my neighbors and they wouldn't give it back, I took my .357 and blew off their doorknob. I knew I would go to jail that time; I was on probation. But when I got to court, there was a big screwup, and they let me go! If the probation officers were doing their job, I would have been in jail and your daughter would still be here today."

I was incredulous. He still didn't get it.

"So you're telling me that my daughter would be alive today if the courts would have done their job; that if they would have locked you up for the assault charge, you wouldn't have been on the street? You take no responsibility for what happened? Is that what you're telling me?"

My voice grew louder. A thin woman and her two young boys sat in the corner booth, listening, watching, sopping up every word.

"Well, wait, no, wait, I'm jumping around here, no, no, I mean, when I hit you and your daughter, I got two years for the crash, and five years for violating my last probation. I did five years altogether; I had five years to lay there and think about you." He sipped his coffee. I shut up. He went on.

"I had a guy on my left that was in for murder; he got thirty

years. The guy to the right of me was in for manslaughter, and was doing twenty. And here I am, in the middle of murderers, doing time for a traffic violation?"

"I hated you. Every time you came on TV when you were starting MADD, and you would say my name over and over again. And I had hours and hours and days to think about how I was going to kill you. I figured out a way to do it, too," he said, eyes squinting.

He was back in that cell right now, I could see it in him. And I could feel my Laura again when I held her, hugged her, limbs drooping against my body.

"I know exactly what you had planned," I said, venom spitting, "because I had the same plan for you: find out where you hang, where you walk, then I'd get real drunk and run you over, and over and over! It would only be manslaughter right? Well worth the five years or so, right? Isn't that your plan, too?"

"Yes," he said slowly. He was surprised. "Yes, that's it exactly. I didn't think you had that in you."

"Ha!" I scoffed loudly. "What? That much hate? How many midnight ambulance trips, and helicopter air lifts do you think me and Laura went through? And collapsed lungs, pneumonia, tube feedings, cyanosis, suctionings every twenty minutes, broken legs and arms from a tiny atrophied body, heart failure, chest PT, seizures, green and yellow mucous, tracheostomies and infections, fevers, and on and on AND ON!"

I was coming unglued, and everyone knew it. My husband Ray tried to change the topic, and so did Charles' wife. I tried to calm down, lower my voice. I leaned across the table, and whispered:

"And then, to top it all off, after being tortured for six long years, both of us, she dies!"

I cried again. He sat, arms at his side, silent, motionless, awashed. His tinted glasses hid his eyes.

I continued to pummel him with gory recounts of a physi-

cally racked, limp, broken little girl and described in detail my murderous plans for his death. I couldn't stop. Over twenty years of 100% pure hatred and loathing poured out of me like molten iron. I just couldn't stop.

"And you didn't think I had that much hatred in me? Do you think you have some kind of patent on hatred? Well, you don't. You will never know, you could never know what you did to my little girl, what you did to me, and to my family."

Why is he taking this? Why is he just sitting here?

"So please, spare me of your stupid 'poor me in prison' stories, because you have no idea what suffering is. NONE! DO YOU UNDER..."

"That's enough!" Ray shouted. He grabbed my forearm and squeezed it. "Stop it right now! Calm yourself! This is not going to bring her back! Laura is not coming back! This is not helping anyone at all."

I stopped. I stared at Charles. He sat so still, as though he had turned to stone. He stared at me again. We were all quiet for a while. The lady and her two boys in the corner were still watching, still listening. Then small talk ensued.

Nothing much, just chit chat about work, his and mine; fishing, and family. He made some jokes here and there, and for a few brief moments, I let go of the past, and found him amiable and funny. He became a person. Just a man.

"Do you have kids?" I asked him.

"Yes, I do. I have two sons. I see them now and then, and if this had happened to one of them, I would have killed whoever did it," he said.

Then he started.

"At first I drank because I wanted to, because it was fun. Then I drank because I had to, because I became addicted. Then I drank to forget about what I did to your daughter, to you. But after a while, it didn't make any difference how much I drank, I hated myself. Drunk or sober. And I was killing myself. So I

finally quit. That was ten years ago."

He lit another cigarette, and sipped his coffee.

"So I've had ten coherent years to think about you and your daughter. Once in a while I'll talk to my wife about it, but most of the time I just keep it to myself. I think about it every day and every night. I feel bad always. And you don't know how many times I wished and prayed that it had happened to me instead of your little girl. I wished I could bring her back. And I have been praying that some day we could meet. Because I've always wanted to tell you how sorry I am. It probably sounds stupid to you now, but I am sorry. I am so sorry for what I did. I wish it never happened. I am so sorry."

I wasn't expecting this. I couldn't believe my ears. For several more minutes, he continued to apologize, and then:

"I know this is crazy to ask, but do you think you could forgive me? Ever?"

I could see his sorrow, I could feel his sincerity, and there was a tiny voice ardently whispering inside me to let it all go, to dump the pain and hatred, to forgive him. Yet with each tinge of pity that I might feel for him, the snapshots of a suffering Laura, a broken family, and the remains of my tattered heart pulsed through my body.

'If you forgive him, you are spitting in your daughter's face,' a different voice in my head glared. I looked at him, and suddenly, I saw those wretched snapshots of Laura suffering imprinted on his face.

Softly, I told him, "No. No, I won't forgive you. I don't forgive you now, and I really doubt if I ever will."

"I understand completely," Charles said.

My husband changed the mode of the conversation and we chatted again briefly. We all knew it was time to go. There was nothing left to say.

We began saying our good-byes, and I moved my chair back to get up. The thin lady and her

two young boys in the corner booth stood up to leave, too. The lady moved behind me, and I waited to let her pass by. She stopped behind my chair and began to speak in a fiendish voice.

"Me and my boys have been listening to your conversation and you have set some kind of example for them," she said, looking down at me. "And they should have never let you out of prison, you should have rotted and died there," she sneered at Charles.

He looked up at her. She turned and walked away with her boys. I was shocked.

"I can't believe that! She had no right to be -" I started to protest. But Charles stopped me.

"It's alright," he said. "I get it all the time."

Oh my God, He lives in hell everyday, too, I thought.

I gathered my things, said good-bye and beat feet to the parking lot. I was looking for that woman. She had no right to butt into my conversation. What did she mean, "I set 'some kind' of example" for her boys?

I saw her pulling out of the parking lot. Her window was down.

"Hey! HEY! Why don't you mind your own business, you b----!" I screamed at her. She looked at me and drove away.

"What are you doing? Why are you yelling at her? And why are you protecting him?" Ray yelled at me.

"She had no right to say those things! That's a terrible thing to say to me and to him, too."

"What are you talking about? She was saying that you set a good example for her boys, not a bad one! And why are you protecting him?" he asked again.

"I don't know. It just wasn't right. I want to get out of here. I need a beer."

We drove back to our camp in West Virginia. I stared silently out the window for the whole trip. Ray drove.

When we got there, I sat for nearly three hours in the RV and wrote down every word of our conversation that I could remem-

ber. Then I drank a six-pack of Miller Light and threw back a couple shots of cold Absoulute vodka.

That's the way I spent most of my summer. I tried to write the book, but every time I would write a few pages, I'd have to throw back a few to quell the ache. And then a few more.

I love beer; always have, always will. So what? I'm not hurting anyone, and I'm not driving, so what's the big deal, right? Right.

I tried a couple of different things to forget. I even tried going to church. I didn't want to go because I drank and cussed, and I always thought a person should clean up their act before they even go to church. But I liked it when I was a kid, so I thought I'd try it again.

I heard about a church behind Chesapeake Terrace elementary school, so I asked my Mom to go with me.

"Sure," she said. I tried not to drink too much the night before so I wouldn't smell like beer in the morning.

We got there a little after 11 am, and the parking lot was packed. So were the pews. I was nervous, and I think my Mom was, too. There was at least three hundred people milling around, shaking hands and hugging each other, and smiling and laughing.

To the right of the pulpit, a five-piece rock band was playing music that didn't sound like church music, and to the left of the pulpit was a beautiful grand piano and several men sitting in big red leather chairs, talking and smiling.

"What kind of church is this?" Mom asked with a grin.

"I don't know, but so far I like the music."

We found a seat near the front of the church. A beautiful blonde-haired woman with a cherub face stood behind the pulpit. She smiled so warmly and greeted everyone and I was so happy to see a young woman as the pastor. With a with a flip of her hand, she started the band playing and she began singing.

"Oh my God! Listen to that toots sing! She's awesome, don't you think?" I said to Mom, and she agreed. As I fumbled for the hymnal in front of me, my Mom gave me a nudge.

"Look! Look up there," she said. I looked up towards the front of the church and saw a huge white screen hanging thirty feet in the air slowly unrolling. The words to the song everyone was singing was on the screen.

"Oh wow! This is great! This is like church karaoke!" I smiled to my Mom, and we both started singing, but not for long. I gave my Mom a nudge in the arm.

"What?" she said.

"Everyone's looking at you," I told her.

"Do you think it's my hat?" she said.

"No."

"My jacket?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then what?"

"I think it's your voice!" I chuckled at her. Oh, how I love my Mom, but Miss Thing cannot sing.

"Oh, you," she smiled. She nudged me back and kept right on singing.

Oy.

We sang some foot-stompin', hand-clappin' songs for quite a while, and everyone was having a great time! It was like a big party in the church and it seemed like God was there as the guest of honor, too.

Some people were waving their hands, some were dancing in place, while other people were sitting and praying quietly. Everybody was doing their own thing. I had never been in a church like this before.

After the singing stopped, Pastor Howard Hancock took command of the pulpit, and he was terrific. He talked softly, then he'd get loud; he stood still, then he'd get to stompin' and by golly, there was no one sleeping in this church.

His sermon was no-nonsense and uplifting, but without condemnation. I liked it, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go back. This is a church that takes some

getting used to.

Throughout the summer, I did go back to the church. I don't know why. There were times when I didn't want to go, but found myself dressed up, in my truck, and on my way, drawn like a bear to a honey pot.

I wanted it all, though. I wanted the church and all the nice people in it, and I wanted the bar and all the nice people in it, too.

"Pastor, do you think it's OK if I have a couple of beers a day?" I asked him after a service.

"Well," he began with a big smile, "we do not advocate drinking alcohol beverages," he told me.

"Pastor, how about just a couple beers on the weekend?" I asked.

"Well, actually no, we do not advocate drinking just a couple of beers on the weekend," he smiled warmly at me.

I put my forefinger and thumb close together, held my hand next to my mouth and asked, "Pastor, how about just a tiny bit of beer now and then?" He started laughing, but held fast.

"No, not even a tiny bit."

"I really need my beer every now and then," I told him. He stretched another big smile across his face and looked me square in my eyes.

"Don't worry, God will take that need away from you."

Yeah, right, I thought. I thanked him for his time and drove home. On the way, I decided I would try to find a church that wouldn't mind if I had a few beers every now and then.

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It was the end of summer, and I was glad to start teaching again. Trying to write the book, meeting Charles Mead and refusing his plea for forgiveness, all of it drained me.

Teaching would rejuvenate me, and going to grad school would occupy my mind. I couldn't wait to begin a new semester. But the summer had one more surprise for me.

On Monday, the 26th of August, about 9:30 in the morning, the Visitor came.

No invitation was sent, no appointment was made. The Visitor entered my office without notice.

After twenty minutes with the Visitor, I had to tell my Mom what was going on.

"Mom! Mom! Look at me! Do you see something? Look! Look at my face! What do you see?"

"Are you alright? What are you talking about? Why are you crying?" my Mom asked me, confused.

"I don't know," I said breathy. "I was working on the new syllabus for class, and I got this feeling, this weird feeling that something was around me, near me, then it entered in me at my scalp and seemed to dribble down like that Milk of Magnesia commercial that coats your insides white, only it felt like it warmed me and left a fresh blanket of paint inside, then it gave me chills and made every hair on my body stand on end and made my eyeballs flood with WHOOPEE! water, not tears, and..."

I kept right on babbling, hoping she wouldn't think I was crazy, hoping she would somehow understand and still love me.

"How long did it last?" she said.

"It's still going on, but it was much more intense for the first twenty minutes or so. I thought I was going to explode. Then I thought maybe it was my hormones or menopause, but it can't be menopause, because no one would ever complain if it felt like this."

"Then I kept trying to analyze it and figure it out and pretend nothing was happening, but I couldn't ignore it; I can't ignore it. This is real, this is physical, this is a super buzz! I gotta sit down." She sat with me at the kitchen table.

"I feel like Dorothy when she came home from Oz," I laughed.

"What do you think it is?" my Mom asked.

"I think I know what it is, but I'm afraid to say it."

"Why are you afraid?" she said.

"Because if it's what I think it is, I'm in for a big change. Something is going to happen."

"What is it?" she said, holding my hands.

"I think it's God."

She hugged me tight and still loved me.

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"What's all this God stuff going on with you? What are you talking about? What happened?" My brother Steve popped in to see me. He was asking questions before he got in my office door.

"Hello to you too. Are you being sarcastic or do you really want to know?" I said.

"I'm asking you a question." He was serious. He pulled up a chair and pulled out his cigarettes.

For the next hour or so, I told him what happened and he listened intently. He had lots of questions, and I told him I had lots of questions, too.

"So a person who believes in Christ gets to go to heaven and be with God for all eternity. What do you do for all eternity once you get there?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know Steve, I just started reading the Bible myself, and right now I don't know my Exodus from my Acts," I said. "You wouldn't believe the stuff in there! You should read it. You would like it just from the historical perspective. You've always been so adept with stuff like that."

"Yeah, whatever," he said, and took another puff of his cigarette. "Are you going to shave your head and wear a pink robe and work at the airport?" he laughed. "I might, I look pretty good in pink!" I told him.

"I have a question for you and it's a big one," I said. "I told you that at the beginning of summer, I met with the drunk driver that hit Laura and me, right?"

"Yeah."

"And I told you he asked me to forgive him, and I told him no, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think I should forgive him?"

"Do you feel like you want to forgive him?" Steve asked me.

"Well, it's been a couple of months since this thing happened with God, but that didn't make any difference to me: I still hated him. Then I met this girl at church named Gale and we talked about it for a long time. She made a lot of sense to me, and then I've read some books about forgiveness that made sense to me. You lived with me and Laura, you took care of her, you loved her so much and..."

"Call him now. You want to forgive him." He picked up the phone and handed it to me. "What are you waiting for?" he said.

From my journal, dated Sunday, Nov. 17, 2002:

This was a huge day for me. I went to church this morning, drove to Frederick to meet Charles Mead, drove back to church to get baptized, and then had a big party at my house.

I was nervous all the way to Denny's, that same Denny's in Frederick where I had met Charles Mead for the first time in June.

I drove in silence, thinking about Laura, wondering what she was doing in heaven today, wondering what she thought of this.

Charles was sitting at the end of the counter near the door and was wearing a crisp red plaid shirt. I recognized his full head of silvery hair right away. He told me he was happy to see me again.

"How's the book coming along?" he asked.

"Pretty good. It's real hard for me to work on, but that's not why I'm here," I said.

"It's not?"

"No." When I called him to set up the meeting, I never told him why I wanted to see him again.

"A lot has changed since the last time I saw you," I began. "A whole lot. I was just sitting at my computer one day in August and something came inside of me and...." On and on I went, giving him my blow-by-blow description.

I wasn't even half way through

telling him about my wonderful experience when I stopped, looked him right in the eyes, those deep, dark wells, and said: "I guess what I want to tell you, what I'm trying to say is that I forgive you Charles, with all my heart."

He looked at me, and then down at the floor. He took in a deep, long breath, held it, and when he let it out, that breath hit the floor like a building. It was audible. His shoulders slumped forward, like it was the very last breath he had to give. I will never forget the sound of that one breath leaving his body, that massive thud.

"You will never know what you have done for me. I could never have the same kind of pain that you and your daughter went through, but you'll never, ever know what this means to me," he told me. He kept taking heavy breaths, putting his head down, and shaking it back and forth. His right hand was on the counter. I put my left hand on top of his hand and squeezed it.

"And I want you to know that I am not forgiving you because I think this will get me a one way ticket to heaven to see Laura again, or for any other reason than I feel it in my heart." I started shaking inside and out.

"We have something in common," I told him. "Pain. We both have had immense pain in our lives. I think it's time we dumped it. I'm dumping my pain right here, right now, at the counter of Denny's in Frederick. And I want you to do the same." He nodded.

"We have something else in common," he said. "I got a God, too. I don't go to church or nothing like that, but that doesn't mean my God isn't just as real as yours."

He was adamant about this. "I've asked my God to forgive me, and I believe He has, but there hasn't been one day that's gone by in ten years, since I got sober, that I didn't pray to my God and ask for you to come and forgive me. That's what I've been praying for."

Wow! Whew! This blew me away!

“You know something Charles? Maybe I’m here because God is answering *your* prayers. Does that flip you out, or what?” I laughed.

Then, I felt a lifting, I felt high, really high. Charles grabbed my hand with both of his and looked me in the eyes and said “Thank you.” We were both pretty quiet for a while, just sitting and sipping coffee.

“I gotta go back now. I’m getting baptized in my church tonight,” I told him excitedly.

“That’s wonderful! Congratulations,” he smiled.

We got up and walked outside. He lit another cigarette and we both looked up at the cold, gray sky.

“It’s over, Charles,” I told him. He hugged my shoulders, and I went home.

Thank you so much
for reading,



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My friend Darlene Oden and I picketing the White House with several hundred other drunk driving victims.

Laura Lamb,
Cindi Lamb,
MADD Pictures



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Representatives Matsui and Barnes, with Senator Claiborne Pell (center), me and Laura, lobbying congress.



Candy Lightner and I with Phil Donohue on the Today Show.



Four year old Laura Lamb.



Laura, about two.



Since Laura could not feel anything below her shoulders, she would sometimes chew her fingers, so we had to put mittens over her braces to protect her hands.