

Trilogies

18 sets of short fiction



Jerry Guarino

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ISBN – 13:978-1482508499

ISBN – 10:1482508494

<http://cafestories.net>

“50 Italian Pastries is a short story reader’s culinary delight. Jerry Guarino’s 50 slice of life pieces are filled with delightful takes on people, places and things that make America great. He infuses his stories with life’s delights: good food, great music, fine drink, and the emotional roller coaster of interpersonal relationships. I found his work honest and filled with delightful irony. He is a keen observer of the human condition and a writer of obvious talent. He is a master at mirroring to his readers all their foibles, their fantasies and their forever quest to understand why the wheel of life turns as it does. 50 Italian Pastries is short story telling at its best.”

Wayne C. Long (author of Eye Candy, Flash in the Hand and Stories from the Edges)

“What James Beard was to cooking, Jerry Guarino is to modern fiction.”

Paul Soderberg (author of The Elephant Queen)

“Jerry Guarino's sends his readers on a merry chase through a wild array of micro/flash fiction--humor, satire, and pathos. He artfully captures gentle souls and slick cons, the high brows and their unsuspecting victims in characters that step from the page to engage the reader. He finds the tiniest trait that creates zany folks the reader wants to protect or strangle. Often at the same time. Prepare for the surprise twist at the end. He gets you every time.”

Myra H. McIlvain (author of Legacy)

“The stories in the collection are tightly told tales with engaging storylines and interesting characters. There are plenty of twists and turns, and plenty of characters to delight in (and some to despise).”

Nathaniel Tower (Pushcart Prize nominated author and editor of Bartleby Scopes literary magazine)

“Guarino’s style is simple and consistently powerful, his storytelling a triumph of art over artifice.”

Ben Price (editor at Zouch Magazine and Miscellany (Canada))

“Guarino is a writer you can enjoy without feeling guilty, and I strongly recommend his work.”

Steven Miller (editor of Leaning House Press)

“Jerry’s writing is consistently fresh and inventive. His stories grab from the beginning, and then hurl the reader into surprising and powerful endings. Definitely a must-read. The Rich are Going to Hell, The Devil's Orchestra and The Grand Poobah are some of my favorite Guarino pieces. Always inventive, Jerry Guarino is one of my favorite short story writers. His work hooks you from the first sentence and doesn't let go until you reach the end, making this one writer you won't forget.”

Earl Wynn (editor of Weirdyear, Daily Love and Yesteryear Fiction)

"I found myself intertwined in the lives of each character, not knowing until the end that every one of them held a magical piece to the puzzle we call human nature; the larger picture of which only became clear after reading the final word. This collection of shorts is something that avid fans of storytelling should go out of their way to find."
Jim Idema (screenwriter and author)

"Jerry Guarino's writing reminds me of the late, but great, Jose Saramago's. His structure is both unique and compelling, always leading the reader to places that they never see coming."
Weeb Heinrich (editor of Writing Raw)

"Jerry Guarino's stories are a real treat for the reader. Each story is well crafted with the natural elegance of a natural writer. The Fringe Magazine has enjoyed his short stories and has had the pleasure of publishing these gems for the past year."
Scott Wilson (editor of The Fringe Magazine (Australia))

"The beauty in Jerry's work is the ease with which he breaks that serious concentration without sacrificing quality. Preheat the Microwave.Com has a relevant, poignant subject at its heart but it is delivered to the reader with eloquent comedy."
Jenny Catlin (editor of Scissors and Spackle)

"Jerry Guarino takes the nuances of everyday, places it on its head, and then tilts it slightly to the left. His comical spin on life will make you wheeze with mirth and leave you wanting more."
Daniel Poole (editor of Larks Fiction Magazine)

"I loved Jerry's short stories and his choice of words. These little tales are great! He has a way with words and pulling you into the story, wanting more! My one and only complaint was when the book ended. I wanted there to be 50 more short stories."
Reyna Hawk (author of Angels and Arrows and Looking Through Blind Eyes)

"Jerry Guarino has a knack for looking past the social illusions that poison our world."
Sand Pilarski (managing editor of The Piker Press)

"Jerry Guarino's writing is refreshing and authentic. His storytelling grasps the nuances of life, leading the reader into expertly crafted moments of intimacy, humor, thoughtfulness, and surprise. Read one story and you're hooked. "50 Italian Pastries" is a delicious read! He knows how to tell a story and with this collection, one finds bite-sized nuggets that heartily fulfill any reader's palate for variety! Guarino is a connoisseur with words, flavoring his stories with the seasonings of life, including laughter, loss, revelation, insight and wisdom. Go ahead, dig in. You'll enjoy every bite, I mean, story."
Sheila Pierson (author of Steak and Potatoes)

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New York, New York

Apple Juice

“I’d like the corned beef hash, please,” said Tony.

“What kind of toast?” said the slightly rotund waiter with the white apron.

“Wheat, please.”

“Eggs, over easy?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“What kind of juice?”

“Cranberry. No, make that orange.”

“I can bring you one of each. Coffee?”

“No, black tea with milk and sugar.”

“And for you, ma’am?”

“Just a bagel and cream cheese with coffee, thank you.”

“Very good, ma’am.” The waiter wrote down the order, nodded and slipped away.

Tony and Barbara were seated at a table in front of the delicatessen. They had a great view of Times Square, already bustling with people by 8am. “See that large glass booth over there, Barbara. That’s where you get the discount tickets for Broadway shows.”

“Oooh. There aren’t any people there yet. When does it open?”

Tony tapped on his phone for the answer. “Eleven o’clock. After breakfast we can walk around and look at the theaters to decide what we want to see, then come back to get the tickets for a matinee, or we can go to an 8pm show.”

“Or both” said Barbara, smiling as she squeezed Tony’s hand. It was her first trip to the city. Tony grew up here, so he was the tour guide for this vacation.

“Well, it’s a good thing these tickets are discounted. Prices have really soared since I lived here.”

“It’s been thirty years, dear. That’s not surprising.”

The waiter returned with Barbara’s oversized bagel and generous block of cream cheese and placed two small plastic glasses of orange and cranberry juice next to Tony, along with an extra glass. “In case you want to mix them,” said the waiter.

“Thanks, he does that at home,” said Barbara.

Tony could already smell the corned beef, carried by another waiter, prepping him for the taste to come.

He set down a huge plate of corned beef, hash brown potatoes, three over easy eggs and two slices of wheat toast in front of Tony. “Now that’s what I call corned beef hash,” he said.

“You better save me a bite,” said Barbara.

“There’s plenty, you can have as much as you like.” Tony pushed aside some hash browns to make room for ketchup.

“When I saw that this was \$19.95, I almost didn’t get it, but look how much food there is.”

“Look at the size of this bagel and there’s enough cream cheese here for a party.”

“I told you a New York delicatessen was the place for breakfast. You couldn’t ask for anything more.”

Tony shared his corned beef with his wife and she helped him finish the hash browns and one of the eggs.

The waiter waited the appropriate amount of time, then returned to check in on the couple. “How is everything?”

“Wonderful,” said Tony. “So much to eat and cooked to perfection.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll come back in a while to take your picture if you like.”

“They really know how to treat tourists, don’t they dear?” said Barbara.

“I think they know how to get a good tip sweetheart.”

Tony and Barbara ate leisurely, not rushed by a crowd waiting for a table. Tony opened up his iPad. “They even have Wi-Fi! We can look up the shows right here.”

“Are you ready for that picture?” said the waiter.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” said Barbara. She handed the camera to him and leaned toward Tony, smiling.

The waiter framed the couple in the viewfinder. “Say Big Apple.” Click. “Let me take two, just to be sure.”

“Big Apple” Tony and Barbara said in unison.

Barbara wanted to see a musical, while Tony was in the mood for a regular play. They decided to each pick one as they had always done in their marriage, not compromising, but caring for each other’s needs. By the time they finished eating, they were ready to buy tickets for a play that afternoon and a musical that night.

“Looks like we can have a nice dinner out, with the money we saved on breakfast,” said Barbara.

The waiter brought over their bill. “Thank you so much for coming. Have a wonderful day in New York.”

Their perfect breakfast had come to an end. “Leave a good tip dear.”

“Of course, they treated us like family. And we’re not even Jewish!”

Then Tony saw the charges on the receipt. “\$19.95 for corned beef hash, \$5.95 for the eggs, \$3.95 for toast, \$3.95 for the juice (twice!), \$3.95 for the tea, \$6.95 for the bagel and \$3.95 for Barbara’s coffee. \$62.57 with the tax!”

Barbara’s smile turned to a pout. “Well, almost perfect. Guess we’ll be having pizza for dinner.”

Tony and Barbara paid the bill and left to look at plays for the evening. They probably wouldn’t be able to afford a fancy dinner now, but looked forward to seeing a Broadway show. As they walked by the marquis, all lit up, even at early morning, the Friday morning commuters were walking out of Starbucks and off to work.

They walked across the street to look at the prices for *Wicked*, the updated musical about *The Wizard of Oz*. Orchestra tickets were \$175 each and all the lower priced seats were sold out for the next week, when they had to be back in California.

“Maybe the TKTS booth will have them half price?” said Barbara. They walked over to the booth where they could see the plays providing discount tickets. At the bottom of the board there was a notice. *Due to popular demand, the following plays are not discounted at this time: Chicago, Death of a Salesman, Turn off the Dark and Wicked.* Barbara sighed, the disappointment obvious on her face. Tony tried to think of how to make it up to her. Maybe a visit to the Empire State Building or a cruise around the city in one of those boats.

“Excuse me,” said a man dressed in a white shirt, black pants and jacket and a black fedora. His hair flowed out of the sides of the fedora, with curls on each side of his ears. He had a scraggly beard and horn rimmed eyeglasses.

Barbara turned to him and smiled. “Yes, hello. Were you talking to us?”

“Forgive me for listening to you, but am I correct that you wanted to find tickets for *Wicked*?”

Because of the earlier incident at the delicatessen, Tony was reluctant to bargain with this man. “Well, we had hoped to find affordable tickets here or at TKTS, but it looks like that isn’t possible.”

“I have two good tickets. They are for tonight at 8:00pm. Very good seats, third row orchestra on the aisle.”

Tony looked at Barbara and she replied. “I’m afraid we couldn’t afford those, but thank you for offering.”

The man looked disappointed as well. “You don’t understand, these are for tonight, after sunset. We are not allowed to attend shows on the Sabbath. You can have the tickets, no cost.”

Now Tony and Barbara felt embarrassed, thinking this man was trying to extort them. Barbara gave the man a hug and shed a small tear. “Oh thank you. This means a lot to us.”

“Simcha” said the man, blessing the couple. Then he walked away, nodding and reciting morning prayers.

“Like family” said Barbara.

“Like family” replied Tony.

Babybump.Com

In the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, one June morning, Annika was pushing her infant to the coffee shop while texting on her smart phone. Sasha was arriving from the opposite direction, also texting on her phone. The infants saw it coming but were unable to warn their mothers. As the two approached, the infants braced themselves for impact, all the while miming a message that was ignored. Traveling at close to 2 mph, the strollers collided head-on directly in front of the café. Sasha's infant threw her hands up in the air; Annika's baby mouthed something that looked like 'WTF'. Meanwhile, an alarm went off in police precinct #78, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Back in 2012, sociology graduate student Carl Lagerfeld was studying population demographics for the Park Slope neighborhood, as part of his thesis. He first noticed that a majority of women in Park Slope had developed a convex mound around their belly button. Following this population, he discovered that a little over eight months later, these same women were pushing strollers around, with wee versions of themselves inside. He reported these preliminary findings to his advisor who told Carl to conduct a long-term study of the women in Park Slope.

Carl hired middle school students to take digital photographs of every woman they saw, noting the time of day, date and location for each. Aggregating these photos into a database, Carl began to recognize patterns. In the first year, a majority of women dressed in work attire, took the subway and left the area for about 8 hours, returning after 5pm. In the second year, the same women displayed the previously mentioned mound around their belly button; Carl named this a *bump*. In the third year, the same population was pushing strollers in the neighborhood and spending most of their time in cafes, parks and yoga studios. That's when the trouble first started.

What began as a small group of women sharing conversation over a latte grew to dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of strollers throughout the neighborhood. Coffee shops that once served 100 people could only hold thirty-five because strollers took up the space. This did not please the owners of coffee shops, cafés and other establishments. And because the women who frequented these establishments tended to stay for hours and talk with one another, the revenue for the shops diminished. That doesn't even take into the account the ten percent of women who brought a dog along with them on their daily errands; dogs tended to bark whenever another person came close to the baby; that further disturbed the café patrons and owners.

Carl noticed that some of the women pushing strollers were developing the *bump* and that these women would exchange their strollers for double strollers eight months later with two wee versions of themselves inside. Most of the time, these double strollers were positioned one seat behind the other, but some strollers had a double-wide position for the infants and that's when the real trouble began.

Suddenly, Park Slope wasn't known for great public schools, restaurants, historical buildings and museums anymore, but congestion comparable to that of the rush hour in Manhattan. The congestion got so bad that the borough president demanded some local ordinances to manage the stroller flow and reduce the possibility of accidents. "Who is that professor who has been studying this?" inquired the borough president.

"Carl Lagerfeld, your honor, from Brooklyn Tech.

"Well, get him in here right away."

Carl had just completed a website, *babybump.com*, which mapped out the locations of moms and strollers and demonstrated it to the borough president.

"That's excellent, Carl. May I call you Carl?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Now this is a beginning. But what we really need is real-time information, sort of how the news stations track traffic during rush hour."

"Well, then we would need more technology sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if we could integrate the website with the Homeland Security cameras on every corner, then we could see video of congestion and stroller accidents."

"It's done. Joe, contact Homeland Security and tell them we're tying in the cameras to Carl's *babybump.com* website."

"Right away, Mr. president." The aide rushed out of the room to make it happen.

"Now Carl, we still have a problem. Seeing the congestion and accidents is good, but how do we prevent them from happening? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, you know."

"Yes sir. Well, I thought if we could install some stroller lanes on the sidewalk, that would help."

"Yes, excellent. That should reduce accidents quite a bit."

"Well, maybe" said Carl. "But there are these double-wide strollers mothers with two infants have been using. The ones with two in line are no problem but the double wide strollers wouldn't fit in the new stroller lane."

"Hmm. I see. What if we made the women pushing double-wide strollers pay a fee, like trucks do at toll booths?"

"That's a good idea sir. But how would we enforce this?"

The borough president thought a moment. “What if we required all strollers to get a GPS chip installed?”

“I see where you’re going. The DMV, or let’s call it the DSS, could license all the strollers, and issue the GPS devices and tags, like cars have. Who would enforce violations sir?”

“Well, we have the parking department. They’re out on the street anyway. They can issue citations like they do for illegal parking.”

“OK, well that would work sir. We have one more problem though.”

“Yes Carl, what is that?”

“Some of the moms are jogging while they push the strollers. One of our middle school students clocked a mom stroller going ten mph the other day. We are bound to have a major accident some day and someone is going to get seriously hurt.” Carl and the president were clearly concerned.

“Hmm. I’ve got it. In addition to the regular traffic lights and signs, we’ll install mini stop signs and lights for strollers, like we do for pedestrians. And put up mini speed limit signs for the moms, like 3 mph near intersections and 5 mph on long sidewalks.”

Carl was taking detailed notes. “That should help.”

“I can see it now Carl. A whole system to monitor, regulate and improve the flow of stroller traffic throughout the borough. They don’t have this in Manhattan, I’ll tell you that. The mayor will give me a commendation, don’t you think?”

“Quite so, Mr. president. But I think we can do even better. Since we will be installing the GPS chips on the strollers, why couldn’t we require the moms to purchase a bumper guard on the front of the stroller? We could link it to the electronics in the GPS. If a mom bumped into another stroller or pedestrian, a ping would go off and notify the appropriate people.”

The borough president nodded approval. “Yes, that’s even better. Couldn’t we also issue citations for bumping, like reckless driving, or strolling?”

“Of course sir.”

“But where to send the signal of reckless strolling? I know. We could send the signal to the local precinct. Put up a big board of the borough, like the subway people have to monitor trains. And if we use the Homeland Security cameras to record video of the infraction, we would have proof. No hassling with people fighting it in court.”

“There may be some upfront costs, your honor.”

“That’s alright. With the money we raise from licensing strollers, fees for double-wide strollers and citations for reckless strolling, we should be able to cover it. If we OEM the GPS devices and stroller electronics, we could sell those too. And then there’s the extra income we’ll get from visitors, unfamiliar with the ordinances, who will stumble into some citations by mistake.”

“Sounds like a plan, your honor. May I consult on this with your team here?”

“Of course, Carl. We’ll set you up with a desk here. Joe, let’s use the room we have for foreign visitors as a war room. Set Carl up there with a desk. He’ll be on point for this. And I want this done, ASAP. Spare no expense.” He looked at Carl. “Have we covered everything son?”

“Well, what about parking strollers while moms are in the cafés, shops and yoga studios? And there is the problem with dogs barking in cafés.”

“Parking, yes. Joe, have the parking department start painting little lanes for strollers, and spaces for the dogs too. Put in mini parking meters, but charge the same as for cars. That should add some revenue and make the moms carry the babies once in a while. Do them good and create more room inside the coffee shops for people. Wait, what if the mom didn’t put in enough money for parking the stroller?”

“Just like with cars, sir. We tow it away. Better yet, we sell the stroller?”

A loud siren interrupted their plans.

“Sounds like an ambulance, your honor.”

“Joe, what’s happening out there?”

“There’s been an accident, your honor. A jogging stroller mom was almost hit by a truck, but it missed her and ran into a fire hydrant. It looks like the driver will be OK too.”

“Thank goodness for that” said the president. “Carl, it looks like you better get started right away.”

“Yes, your honor.”

Double Sting

“I’ll take it,” said Frank. The man handed him \$500 in crisp, one hundred dollar bills. As he left the room, police arrested the Wall Street brokers for bribery of an SEC official. “Is that it for now?” Frank asked the attorney.

“Yes, Mr. Jones, we have everything on tape. We’ll call you when the trial starts.”

Frank nodded. “Thank you counselor. Glad I could help.”

Frank was an actor that police used in sting operations. But Frank had a secret. He was also a con man, good enough to fool law enforcement. Whether on the stage, conniving money out of a tourist or working for the police, Frank was a committed actor. He was always in character, a regular OCD in costume. Talk about hiding in plain sight.

Over on 42nd Street, Frank was playing Professor Harold Hill, the famous charlatan in *The Music Man*. Once a regular in the major theaters, he was still good enough for the off-Broadway revivals. “*Oh my dear little librarian. You pile up enough tomorrows and you’ll find you are left with nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to make today worth remembering.*” Frank charmed his audience just like when he was pulling a con.

When he wasn’t in the theater or helping the police, he would like to wander through the bookstores in the city, signing fake autographs for tourists or otherwise pretending he was someone else. A woman in her sixties bumped into Frank as she was leaving the Barnes and Noble. Frank apologized. “So sorry, Miss. Are you ok?”

The woman stepped away and excused herself. “Oh, it was my fault sonny. I wasn’t looking. Say, aren’t you Frank Jones? You’re in *The Music Man*.”

Frank smiled, “Yes Ma’am, that’s me.”

She took out a playbill. “We saw you last week. Could I get an autograph?”

Frank pulled out a felt pen. “Of course, what’s your name dear?”

After some small talk, Frank went into the bookstore and browsed. Then he saw her, the strawberry blonde clerk with horn-rimmed glasses, a crème colored cardigan sweater, navy blue skirt, knee socks and clogs, putting books up on a display. As an actor, Frank knew how to approach women and his good looks belied his age, easily 15 years older than the coed working part-time. Frank took note of her nametag. “Susan, can you help me?”

Susan put down the books she was holding. “Of course.” Her smile fell on Frank like a Hawaiian waterfall, complete with a rainbow.

“I’m looking for the drama section.”

Susan turned to her left. “It’s down here; let me show you.” Susan walked ahead of Frank in the narrow aisle. He could smell her perfume, a citrus blend and closed his eyes for a moment.

“This is one of my favorite sections. Sometimes an actor will come in and sign one of the copies.” Susan paused.

“Are you in school?” said Frank.

Susan nodded. “Yes, I’m finishing up at Columbia.” Frank realized this wasn’t one of those shop girls he could manipulate. “I didn’t catch your name.”

Frank extended his hand. “Frank Jones.”

Susan concluded. “Well, it was nice to meet you Frank Jones. Hope you find a book you like.”

She turned to leave when Frank interrupted. “Aren’t you going to show me those autographed books?”

Susan pulled a couple books out. “All right. This is signed by Angela Lansbury, this one by Meryl Streep and this one by Carol Channing.”

Frank tried to see a book on *The Music Man* while maintaining eye contact with Susan. “Do you have anything by Meredith Wilson?”

Susan checked the books under W. “Oh, yes. Here’s one, on *The Music Man*. Do you like musicals?”

Frank saw his opening. “This one, yes. I’m playing in it at the 42nd Street Theater.

“I thought you looked like an actor,” she said modestly. “Do you have a playbill you can sign?”

Frank looked into Susan’s eyes, smiled and offered. “I’ll give you one and a ticket to the show. What time do you get off work?”

Susan was pleased but held him back a bit, as she brushed her hair back. “I don’t know, what about tomorrow?”

Frank glided easily into his next line. “My dear Susan. You pile up enough tomorrows and you’ll find you are left with nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to make today worth remembering.”

In the elegant Italian restaurant, Frank wined and dined Susan. “Susan, I haven’t felt this way in a long time. It feels like the first time I was on Broadway.”

Susan blushed. “Really Frank, you must have had too much wine.”

Frank touched her hand. “I’m not acting Susan. You’re very special.” She squeezed his hand back. “Check please” said Frank to the waiter.

Frank gave the waiter a fake credit card and a generous tip. Susan pretended not to notice but she saw the name, Frank Johnson, before he put the card back in his wallet. Frank took Susan's hand and they walked out. A horse and carriage was waiting, with a bouquet of flowers on the seat. "These are for you." He helped her into the seat and put a blanket over her lap. Susan nestled her head on his shoulder and held his hand under the blanket. After a ride through the park, the carriage pulled up to Frank's apartment on Central Park West.

Seeing the bakery next door, Susan whispered in Frank's ear. "Can we pick up some dessert?"

Frank was confident now. "Whatever you like dear."

Susan picked out two rich chocolate pastries with berries and whipped cream. "Mmm. These are perfect!" They walked arm in arm upstairs to his apartment and paused at the door. Frank pulled Susan's face toward him and kissed her slowly. Susan leaned up against him and yielded.

Now inside, Susan saw the view from his living room window. "Oh, you have a view of the park."

Frank took her coat and pointed to the couch. "Would you like coffee with dessert?"

Susan relaxed on the couch, took off her shoes and felt the texture of the cushions. "Yes, please."

After a leisurely give and take with coffee and pastry, Susan took Frank's hand and led him to the bedroom. Frank liked the assertion of this young woman and followed obediently. "Dessert isn't over yet," she said looking back with a wink.

Susan took off her earrings and necklace, placing them on the dresser. Frank took out his wallet and put it in the dresser drawer. "Excuse me for a minute Frank" as she went into the bathroom. When she came out, Frank saw the full beauty of Susan's 5'9" athletic frame, silhouetted against the nightlight from the bathroom. "I used your toothbrush, ok?"

Frank would have agreed to anything at that point, but he merely smiled and touched her as he entered the bathroom. "Just give me a minute, gorgeous."

Susan quickly looked into the top dresser drawer and saw a credit card and passport with Frank Johnson's name. She also saw a gold bracelet with his name engraved on the inside. Taking out her phone, she snapped photos, then slipped into the bed, her dress draped across the bedpost.

After an intoxicating night of lovemaking, Susan made breakfast and they ate on the balcony. "Central Park is so beautiful at sunrise Frank."

Frank stroked her arm. "All the more with you here."

Susan ran her fingers through her hair. “So this isn’t some one night stand that you actors are famous for?”

Frank seemed surprised. “Not a chance, sweetheart. I’ve been looking for a woman like you for a long time.”

Susan, though much younger, seemed similarly smitten with him. “Then I expect you’ll make good on that ticket for tonight.” Frank made another offer. “I’ll leave a ticket for you at the box office. The performance runs from 7:30 to 9:30. Then we can have a late supper.”

Susan finished her coffee and left to take a shower. “It’s a date. I have to get ready for work.”

Frank and Susan continued their romance throughout the week and met for brunch that Sunday. While Frank was paying the check, Susan excused herself. “I’ll be right back lover” and she kissed him on the neck.

The waiter brought back the credit card, watched Frank sign it and gave it to the FBI agents who took him into custody. “Well, Mr. Jones. We finally discovered your little secret.”

Frank walked out with his head down, like he had been hit by a Hawaiian waterfall, a big one, without the rainbow. Susan came back to see him in handcuffs. “Sorry my dear” he told her as they took him away. He never realized he had been set up.

“Nice work Susan. See you at the trial?”

Susan put crisp hundred dollar bills in her pocket. “Of course. Have to get to my next assignment.”

Science Fiction

UFO

July 26, 1969 – East Orange, N.J. – The huge cylindrical object hovered above the high school while dozens of people stood and watched. Tony Ramirez was on his bike next to the baseball field. “Is that a spaceship?” he said to himself. His friends had left a while ago. It reminded Tony that last Monday, NASA landed the first manned spacecraft on the moon. The spinning ship continued to hover, for what seemed like an hour, although in reality it had only been three minutes. Then the ship floated upwards, turned 180 degrees and disappeared in an instant beyond his view.

“I saw a spaceship at the school today.”

His father gave him a puzzled look. “Son, there are no such things as spaceships.”

Tony knew he couldn’t prove what he saw. “But Pop, I saw it hanging above the school.”

His mom tried to be supportive. “Maybe you saw some sort of cloud storm.”

Tony insisted. “It was real, lots of people were there.”

His parents now looked at each other with concern. “Who else was there Tony?”

Realizing he had come straight home but should have talked to someone there, Tony gave up. “Never mind.”

Tony looked in the paper the next day hoping to see a story that would verify his account. Nothing. He went down to the school to see if he could find someone who had been there. No luck. He even asked his classmates. That was a mistake.

“So, you saw a flying saucer Tony.” From that day on, his life at school was tainted by what others saw as bizarre or at the least, odd behavior. Even though Tony stopped talking about the UFO, his reputation was already finished. Being a social outcast in high school seriously limits your potential. Tony would spend the rest of his life trying to get people to listen to him.

Summer, 2019 – San Diego, California – Surfers fell off their waves, joggers stopped in mid-stride and cars crashed in the street. Five hundred feet above them, a huge cylindrical object hovered over Mission Bay. Within seconds, people pulled out their electronic devices, taking pictures, recording the spinning craft and sending texts, tweets and emails to the Internet and points outward. News people were on the scene in minutes. They set up a remote broadcast link and handed the microphone to the reporter.

“Fifty years after the first moon landing, we are seeing what appears to be another alien spacecraft hovering over Mission Bay. Even though this has become a regular occurrence recently, people are still fascinated by the crafts, wondering when they will get to see the visitors inside. Once referred to as UFOs and flying saucers, these spacecraft provide proof that Earth is not the only planet with living beings. This is Tony Ramirez reporting from KBAY. We’ll have interviews on the scene right after this.”

Under the Apple Tree

“Sorry, my grandma doesn’t have a wireless signal; she has *dial up*.” These are two of the saddest words in the English language, along with *no signal*.

“No wait” said Jeff, looking at his laptop. “There are three networks showing. Must be the houses around us.” Jeff tapped the pad. “Well, two of the signals are locked, but here’s one that isn’t. It’s called apple.”

Ann knew Jeff might go a little crazy without an Internet connection. “Oh, try that,” said Ann.

Jeff tried to connect. “There, it works! Wait, it dropped.” Jeff’s facial expression mirrored the rise and fall of the connection. “Damn.”

Newlyweds Jeff and Ann had come to visit her grandmother, who couldn’t attend their wedding in San Francisco. “I’m so glad you could visit. I’m making you a special dinner.”

Ann held Jeff’s hand. “We’re happy to be here Nana.”

Jeff went through the house looking for a place where the computer would connect. He started at the basement, then the bedrooms, kitchen; he even tried from the bathrooms. No luck. The signal would catch for a minute and then drop.

Ann found him in the pantry. “Any luck dear?”

Irritated now, he was sweating from the search. “It has to be in one of these houses. I’m going outside.”

Ann looked at her watch. “OK, but we’re having dinner in thirty minutes.”

Jeff went out the back door. The hot Minnesota summer was oppressive, martins grabbing mosquitoes out of the air and the wind wheel spinning slowly colors of red, blue and green. The backyard of the house was in the middle of three other houses. “One of these must be the apple node.” Jeff held his notebook at eye level and walked around.

“Where is this router? Jeff said to himself. Tired and frustrated, he sat down on the lawn chair under an apple tree and closed his eyes. “Ping.” Suddenly, he was online! “Let’s see.” Jeff checked a couple websites. “Steady.” He checked his email. “Ah, working. Ann,” he called out. “It’s working.” No response. “Ann, I found the spot.” Jeff looked into the kitchen. The light was on and he could hear someone getting out plates and utensils. “Guess it’s time for dinner.” He took his computer into the kitchen.

“Ann? Grandma? Where are you guys?”

Two women turned around and screamed. “Get out.” Jeff didn’t recognize them. “Lisa, call 911.”

Jeff turned and left the house quickly. "I must have gone into the wrong house." But when he got back to the yard, the other houses were gone. He checked his computer. The connection dropped again. He went back to the chair where he started. Jeff heard a police car siren in the distance, getting closer. "C'mon, faster."

The two women were waiving the police car into their driveway, pointing to Jeff.

"OK, let's go. There's the node." Jeff clicked on the network and he was online again. The siren from the police car shook the tree above him. As the police rushed toward him, something dropped into his lap. It was an apple. He held it out to the police as they handcuffed him.

"Jeff, wake up. It's time for dinner."

Operation ICU

“That’s it. Now we’ll just activate the tracker.” The guard checked the wristband for security and comfort, then had the prisoner, soon to become an outmate, the new term for criminals released under the *Inmate Confinement Ubiquity* program, sign the release form. “OK, you’re free to go. Stay out of trouble.” With those parting words, the former con man left the island prison and boarded the ferry for San Francisco.

It was 2015, the year San Francisco took a bite out of crime. The new prisoner release program had already been a success. While drug dealers and those convicted of violent crimes like murder and rape were kept behind bars, delinquents, white collar criminals and first time drug users were allowed to leave confinement with one qualification. Each one would have to wear an electronic monitoring wristband, a sort of virtual parole system. Their movements and locations were tracked by the massive supercomputer (affectionately nicknamed ICU).

Now in it’s fourth year, the benefits were adding up. Prison populations were cut down to match available resources so more room was made for violent offenders. The cost of maintaining non-violent prisoners was cut by 80%. Instead of feeding, housing and rehabilitating these miscreants, the money saved was transferred to public schools and teacher salaries. It was ironic that San Francisco, the iconic city of liberalism, would be the first city to install the ICU system, also known as *Little Brother*. The engineers from Silicon Valley had created the technology on spec from the Governor.

In 2014, thousands of cameras were installed around the Bay Area to watch out for crime, an American version of London’s security program. These cameras were automatically turned on when one of the ICU outmates were in the area. If an outmate came in contact with another known criminal, an email and text message was sent to local authorities. Even though outmates understood how the system worked, some tried to get around it.

Danny was back in his neighborhood. “Hey Danny,” said Juan a member of the Chaves gang. “They let you out?”

Danny pointed to the black wristband. “Sort of. This is supposed to keep track of where I am, but I don’t think it works.”

Juan smiled. “We’re going to hit the bodega tonight. We could use a driver. Are you in?”

Danny gave Juan a fist bump. “I’ll pick you up at midnight,” and he laughed.

But the ICU supercomputer was already tracking their location and recording their conversation through an ingenious, micro-sized audio transmitter hidden in the wristband. They notified the bodega owner to make sure he was out of the store by 9pm for safety. The police quickly installed two new cameras inside and outside of the bodega and coded them into ICU's database. Blinking red lights confirmed their position on a digital screen in police headquarters.

Across the bay in Oakland, members of the MLK42 gang were welcoming back James, another outmate. James didn't tell the others about the ICU wristband. "My lawyer got me out. Some screw up by the cops." High fives all around. "Yeah, I need a score. Where's the mailman?"

Another member updated James. "He's over on International, by the record shop. He's sitting in his El Camino."

James nodded, "later" as he took the car keys from the table.

ICU heard the conversation, dispatched an unmarked vehicle to the drug dealer known as 'the mailman's' location and waited. The police positioned the camera at that corner above the El Camino, focusing on the drug dealer. James pulled his car up to the El Camino, rolled down the window. The mailman rolled down his window. "James, you're out. What can I get you?"

James handed \$50 dollars over. "Some ice." Flashes popped from the camera, sirens squealed and two patrol cars boxed in the dealer and his outmate.

"OK boys, game's over," said the detective as he cuffed them. "We have it all on tape.

"WTF," said James. The mailman yelled. "You brought this on me. I'll have your ass boy."

Later that night, Danny rolled his car over to pick up his crew. "I have some cold ones in the cooler. Didn't think we should take time to shop at the bodega."

His friends laughed and got in the car. "No reason to wait. The bodega closed early tonight." Danny parked in the alley behind the bodega and waited. He heard glass breaking, but no alarm. It would only be a matter of minutes. A flash from a camera above him went off. "Who's there?"

Suddenly, police cars boxed them in. "Danny, so good to see you. One day out, huh? I'll bet they missed you back at Quentin."

The guard at the island prison shook his head. "Well Danny, that wasn't very long. Guess you're going to bunk here for a while." Danny shuffled inside and held out his arm. The guard cut off the wristband. "Those damn engineers."

The Roosters

The Music Man

January, 1971 (WRSU, New Brunswick) – “...and that was *Light My Fire* by the Doors from 1967. Coming up after the news we’ll hear from Iron Butterfly, Led Zeppelin and Steppenwolf. This is Joe Mariani from WRSU, New Brunswick.” Joe took off his headphones and shook out his floppy hair when the phone rang. “Hi, you found Joe.” He was used to getting requests from the dorms.

“Joe, hi. My name is Annika.”

“Hi Annika. Where are you calling from today?”

“Glassboro, near the college.”

“Glassboro? Wow, you must have a powerful receiver to get us down there. The farthest call-in I’ve ever had before has been from Asbury Park. Guess you stumbled on us by accident.”

“Not really, Joe. I’ve been listening to you for a year now, but was afraid to call before now.”

“Hey, nothing to be afraid of. This is just a college station. What can I play for you?” Joe expected a request for the Beatles; girls loved the Beatles.

“Well, it’s kind of an unusual request.” Annika’s innocent voice gave Joe a pause and he wondered how old this girl was.

“If it fits into my show, I’ll be glad to put it on. What was it you are looking for?”

“Not what” said Annika. “More of who.”

“No problem, Annika. We have all *The Who* albums...” Annika sighed audibly, and then interrupted Joe.

“Not The Who, Joe. Who. You actually. I was hoping we might get together.” Joe checked the timer to see how long before he had to be back on the air. Two minutes left. Suddenly this call had gone from a friendly chat to a blind date. He had to measure his response and now began to visualize his new fan.

“Well, that’s very nice of you Annika, but I don’t get down to South Jersey in the winter very often. Were you going to be up near RU?” Joe needed more information before he would commit to such a long drive for an unknown meeting.

“Umm. I’m an au pair for this rich couple and they’re gone for the weekend. I can’t leave because I have to watch the house.” Joe put together his clues. Au pair named Annika. Alone in a fancy house. Maybe she’s one of those Swedish exchange students, probably college age. If she were stuck way down in Glassboro, none of the Princeton guys would have found her.

“You know Annika. Why not? My show ends at 3 and I can probably be there by dinnertime. I don’t know the area, but I could bring a pizza from our local pub.” This was his way of gauging how intimate the date might be. But the station manager tapping on the studio window interrupted Joe, putting up 10 fingers, time before he would be back on air. “Annika, I’m going to have to put you on hold until the next song. Can you hold on?”

Annika sounded excited and sweet. “Sure Joe, I’ll wait.” Joe nodded to his manager and turned his microphone back on.

“...and that was the news. Here’s Iron Butterfly with *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*. Ah, a seventeen minute song. Joe picked up the phone while the music played, hoping that Annika hadn’t changed her mind. “Annika, are you still there?”

“Here I am! Are you sure you can get here by dinnertime? I want to be ready.”

Annika’s enthusiasm was contagious, so Joe felt at ease with this new admirer. Just a few years earlier, he might have fumbled awkwardly on the phone. But hey, this was 1971 and the summer of love wasn’t that long ago. Besides, she called him. She reached out. “I’m sure I can be there by 6. Give me the address and directions. You sure I can’t bring anything?”

“Just bring yourself, sweetie. I’ll have something for us.”

As Joe drove down the N.J. turnpike, he had a sudden queasiness in his stomach. What if this girl was ugly, or fat, or God forbid, under age? Joe imagined himself with some gorgeous 15 year-old, who looked 22 and perhaps had planned this whole weekend with one thing in mind. Get the college DJ alone in her host family’s mansion and see how many rooms they could defile. That shocked Joe back. She’s probably at least 18. She said she was an au pair, didn’t she? Maybe she’s not an au pair at all, just some teenager home alone while her parents are away on some romantic weekend in New York City. But he could tell, right? As soon as he sees her, he’ll know. You can tell a girl’s age by the way she dresses and how she uses makeup, or at least he hoped so.

Meanwhile, Annika was preparing for Joe's arrival. She put out candles over a linen tablecloth, then fine china and silverware. Next she arranged pillows on the couch just so and burned jasmine incense to fill the room. Her ivory colored peasant dress and colorful beads lay on her bed, next to her clogs and knee socks. Annika was meticulous in her planning. She pulled out a mix tape with the most romantic songs from The Beatles, The Association, Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, The Righteous Brothers and The Turtles albums, icons of the late 60s, music she knew that Joe had grown up with.

Joe finally arrived at the upscale, country home in the woods. The driveway went on for a mile with no other houses in view. He could hear the sound of owls and squirrels and thought he saw a deer. A thousand stars were visible above him and the woods were illuminated by a full moon, a moon that seemed overly large tonight. This kind of privacy would be perfect for romance. Or a murder! Now realizing that he didn't know anything about this girl, was she going to be a lover or a stalker?

Annika made a French Coq a Vin, braised chicken with mushrooms in a wine sauce, roasted potatoes and steamed asparagus. Although she grew up in Stockholm, she had spent a year in France for a couple that taught her how to cook. She figured this gourmet dish was just the ticket to melting a college man's heart.

Joe pulled his jeep up to the carriage house. He saw a small light from the second floor window. He walked to the main house, rang the doorbell and waited anxiously to see if his prediction and fantasy was correct, if this was going to be an awkward, embarrassing moment or something even worse. "Just let her be 18" he said to himself. The door opened slowly with Annika peeking from behind, only her face showing. She was lovely and smiled immediately.

"Hi Joe" as she emerged from behind the door. Joe was pleasantly surprised to see a 5'9" beauty, looking like a flower child with her beads and long, blond hair. He could smell the jasmine in the air and heard Beatles music playing softly; ironically it was *Norwegian Wood*.

"Annika, so nice to meet you." He had just one more concern, her age. But before he could say anything else, Annika gave him a warm hug, much longer than would be appropriate for a first meeting. Maybe the summer of love was delayed in Europe. Joe didn't want to be the first one to let go, so he waited for her to reply.

"Thanks for trusting me. I didn't know whether you were really going to make the trip" as she let go of the hug and resumed eye contact. She took his hand and led him inside. Joe saw the dining room, exquisitely laid out like something from a gourmet magazine. Then he smelled the dinner, aromatic wine and mushroom sauce blending with the incense. Joe felt the warmth of a fire from the sunken living room nearby. Annika motioned him to sit down and resumed the conversation.

"You're just like I hoped." She set a napkin on Joe's lap, hugged him from behind and let out another audible sigh, then brought dinner to the table.

“You are more than I imagined,” said Joe, trying to maintain his cool while he was melting inside. “In fact, this seems like some kind of wonderful dream.” Sitting with his back to the fire, the light sparkled into Annika’s eyes.

“Just wait until you taste my cooking before you put me on a pedestal” as she sat down to eat. “But I think we will have something dreamlike later on.”

Joe was grateful for the long tablecloth in front of him. If this was a dream, he hoped he wouldn’t wake up any time soon. “Are you sure we’re alone for the night?”

Annika smiled. “We have the whole weekend.” She brushed her hair with her hand. “The Danielsson’s are in Martha’s Vineyard until Monday, celebrating their anniversary. We have some celebrating too. Our first date!”

Annika slid her hand over to Joe, and then leaned over to kiss him. The next hour passed quickly as time will when one is enamored. Annika took Joe by the hand and led him to the couch. The warmth and light from the fire encouraged their intentions. Annika pulled a quilt over them and they started to bond. Before long, she was unbuttoning Joe’s shirt and abandoning her dress.

Joe took Annika to the family bedroom, matching her passion, as they left their clothing in a trail. Too bad this lovely Scandinavian lived so far away from campus as he could see this turning into a great relationship. “Joe, take me” she said in that unmistakable accent. Joe followed her directions explicitly. Then as they were both about to meet in unison, there was a terrifying shriek from the bedroom window.

“Argh.....” screamed Annika as Joe’s body faded from passion. It was like something from a teenage horror movie. Joe had no idea what the sound was, but Annika seemed to understand what creature made such a sound.

“I know how to get away from this.” Annika bounced up, took two robes from the master bathroom and took Joe to the carriage house, then up the stairs to her room. Posters of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and The Beatles accented a tie dyed cloth forming a canopy over her queen size bed; now this looked more like a coed’s home. She put her mix tape into the boom box, turned to Joe and gave him a long, unmistakable kiss. “Where were we lover?” Joe and Annika were under the covers, exploring each other.

“This is like some kind of dream Annika. But I have to know, how did you know you would like me?” Annika paused a moment from her embrace and whispered in his ear.

“I saw your picture in last year’s yearbook, from the radio station page.” Now that seemed a little unlikely. Joe wondered why she would have a yearbook from a college so far away, but she quickly explained. “My cousin Sven plays for the football team.”

“Oh, ok.” This seemed a little less like stalking now and more like an infatuation. But her expertise in the bedroom seemed unlike any schoolgirl crush. Joe had to know how old she was, but what could he ask in the midst of lovemaking that wouldn’t put a halt to the proceeding. “Annika?”

“Yes, dear?” Annika continued her voyage around Joe’s body. Joe reconsidered his question.

“Nothing. We can talk later.” The moonlight shone from the window across from her bed. Silhouettes of trees and birds pierced the dark blue sky, like a sharper image of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. The odor of incense and wine was now replaced by Annika’s perfume, a scent Joe didn’t recognize, nothing the Jersey college girls would use; it was obviously expensive, probably a gift. This only heightened his ecstasy with the blonde angel who fell from Heaven. Joe forgot all about her age.

“Oh, Joe,” said Annika as she wrapped herself around the college DJ. Her sighs turned to moaning and soon they were both beyond the possibility of stopping.

“Annika, you are amazing. Hold on.” But then, a loud thud hit the window outside. Staring in at the couple was a large bird. As it turned, the moonlight revealed a bright red comb on the bird’s head. It was a rooster!

Annika shrieked and a twice-exasperated Joe cursed the flightless bird. “How did that get here?” Then the mix tape segued to *Light My Fire*. The demon floated into the night, crossing in front of the oversized moon, further convincing Joe that this had all been a dream. After all, roosters can’t fly.

Coq a Doodle Do

Damn French! No wonder they chose this bird as their national symbol. When you think of whining and complaining, who else comes to mind? It all started when Joe moved in with his new wife Barbara. “Joe, please do something about that bird.”

Joe grunted and pulled off the covers. “I’m getting my air horn.”

Barbara said “No, not that, you’ll wake the neighbors.”

Joe stumbled to the door. “OK, the hose then.”

Joe emailed the local police, explaining the situation. They showed up the next day. “Mr. Mariani, did you send the email about a rooster keeping you up?”

Suddenly Joe felt nervous. “Yes officer, every night there’s a rooster waking us up at 3:00 am. I was hoping the town might round him up.” The officer took out his pad. “It’s been going on each night for a month. Every time a car would drive by, the rooster thinks it’s sunlight. And not just car lights. Fire trucks, police cars, ambulances, every lunar phase except a new moon and even lightning sets him off. It started with fireworks on the fourth. That was the longest night ever.”

The officer feigned concern. “Tell me where this rooster is exactly?”

Joe gestured him to come in. “Back here” and they walked to the backyard. Then Joe pointed out the vacant county land, over the fence from his bedroom.

“Sorry, sir. You’re going to have to contact the county.” Needless to say, Joe’s attempt at finding the county official in charge of stray roosters was unsuccessful.

Barbara’s son Jim stopped by to see if he could catch the rooster. He ran fast, but he couldn’t change direction or dive under brush like the bird could. Jim got out his rifle and Pow!

Joe jumped up and ran outside. “Jim, you’re gonna get the cops out here.”

Jim lowered his rifle. “Sorry Joe, I had a clear shot.”

Joe gestured that it was ok. “Did you get him?”

Jim looked back at the bird running. “Almost, they’re very fast you know.”

That night Joe and Barbara were relaxing in the hot tub on the deck, trying to forget about their confused animal alarm clock. Joe was giving her a back rub. Both of them had their eyes closed. Candlelight around the Jacuzzi set the mood. Then they heard a rustling sound, like squirrels at the bird feeder. When they looked up, the rooster was in the driveway, bobbing his head and walking toward them. Incredulously, the bird walked up the deck stairs and stopped just ten feet from them. Joe looked at the bird. The rooster tilted his head and squeaked. Barbara gaped and whispered. "Throw some hot water on him." Joe scooped up a handful and let it fly. But the rooster was quick and headed back off to his den, like the roadrunner-evading coyote.

Joe had had enough. He went downtown to the animal control office. "Do you pick up stray animals?"

The girl behind the counter replied. "Yes, of course, is it a dog or a cat?"

Joe stammered "a rooster, it's on county property and comes up to our house every night and wakes us up."

The girl frowned. "I'm sorry sir, but roosters aren't covered in our charter. You can rent a trap though."

Joe saw the traps. "All right, then you'll take the bird if I bring it in?"

Another disappointment. "Sorry, we don't take roosters."

Joe took out his money. "OK, give me the trap" and he headed home. He'd worry about what to do with him if he caught him.

Joe lugged the big trap out to the field, put it inside a garbage bag and left a trail of food for ten feet up to and into the trap. How do you catch a French bird? Joe put out French toast and French fries, figuring it would bring literary good luck. That night, Joe and Barbara went to bed hoping to be woken up by something other than 'Coq a Doodle Dos'.

3:00am. This time it wasn't the midnight crowing, but a scream, like a dog had the bird in his mouth. "Barbara, I hope the rooster isn't in a fight." The screaming continued for minutes, then silence. Joe and Barbara gave each other a worried look.

The next morning, Joe walked out to check the trap. Silence. He pulled the garbage bag off the trap. There in beautiful red and brown colors sat the animal. "Oh no, I caught a fox." But when he picked up the trap, the bird came to life and Joe dropped the cage from the surprise. Luckily it didn't open. He practically ran back to the house. "Barbara, I got him." Now what to do with him?

Jim drove up. "Hey Joe, you got him."

Joe interjected. "Yes, but the city won't take him."

Jim had an idea. "I'll take him out to a winery. Should be a safe place for him to crow."

A week of restful sleep did wonders for Joe and Barbara. Now that the rooster was gone, they got back to their normal routines, including intimate dinners and movie nights. Barbara even made French food and rented Casablanca for the evening. Jim stopped by to update them. "Jim, sit, down have some dinner." French hens with country vegetables and wine sauce. Tempting fate, they even had napkins with rooster heads on them. Joe and Barbara were embracing the French now that the bird was gone.

"Delicious mom, but I have some bad news. The bird was doing fine for a while, then one of the vineyard workers found a coyote dragging the carcass away."

Barbara put down her fork and left the table. "Suddenly I'm not very hungry."

Joe looked at Jim. "That news could have waited."

Rooster Redux

My readers may remember Coq a Doodle Do, the tale of a rooster who tormented a couple and was allegedly found killed by a coyote in a Northern California winery. This is the story of revenge by that rooster's friends and the relative who tracked down the couple. It's not a pretty story, but it needs to be told.

"Vive la France!" Barbara rolled out the pastry in preparation for making coquettes. Since the departure of the rooster, Barbara and Joe had become quite the Francophiles. They took French cooking classes, bought French fashion clothing, and even started to learn the language with one of the home computer courses in preparation for a vacation they had planned in the summer. Little did they know what fate had planned for the loving couple.

Peering over the hill behind their house was Jacques, the brother of the rooster that Jim had so heartlessly sent to his death by a coyote in the vineyard six months ago. Jacques was the most infamous criminal rooster in all of France, having committed many thefts, burglaries and kitchen atrocities. But it had taken him that long to track down Joe and Barbara because, well, he was a rooster, after all, and not able to use the Internet, modern transportation or investigative services like Roger Rabbit had access to.

Gathered around Jacques was his gang of roosters, plus one hen, his girlfriend. There was Astor, who had the most prominent beak and the loudest voice; and Papillion, the getaway expert; and Marcel, the silent one; and Horace, who had the best eyesight. Then there was Marielle, the obstinate rebel hen, and perhaps the most devious of the bunch.

"What do you see?" Jacques asked Horace.

"The woman is in the kitchen and the man is trying to paint one of those by number pictures. It looks like a bad romantic view of the Eiffel tower, a café and couples staring at each other."

Jacques put a wing to his beak. "Hmm. Just what I thought." Marcel hopped up and down with panicked gestures. "Yes, Marcel, what is it?" Marcel used his facial expression (not easy for a rooster), his wings and feet to mime out a man shooting a gun." Jacques nodded. "OK, Horace, keep an eye out for any weapons. Papillion, start working on a getaway plan."

Papillion winked and said, "Right boss, we'll fly like eagles once the hammer is dropped."

Astor added, "We only have tonight's full moon, so let's go over the plan and get into position."

Jacques nodded. "Marielle, you're up first."

Marielle sneaked down to the house, waited for Barbara to leave the kitchen, then slipped inside and went to work. She added the wrong spices to the coquettes, over-fried the fish, added snails to the salad, and then wrote rude remarks in mustard on the wall: *We know you killed Coq, the gifted math rooster from Lyon. The only thing he ever hurt was the feelings of calculus students at the Sorbonne.* (Marielle, famous for her lengthy death threats, had to use all of the Dijon mustard and half a container of French's yellow mustard.)

* * *

Having tossed out the ruined dinner, Joe and Barbara decided to retire early. One benefit that they both had with their new French conversion was in the bedroom. Watching lots of French films had helped them refine their lovemaking. With Satie playing on the iPhone, Joe and Barbara caressed each other with passion and gentleness. Then it happened.

The first crow of a rooster!

Astor had positioned himself just outside their window and let loose with the loudest, most disturbing interruption to their activity at the most inopportune time.

“Oh Joe. He’s back!” shrieked Barbara.

Joe rushed out of bed and went outside on the deck adjoining the bedroom, armed with the garden hose. “Where are you, you French fry?”

But Astor was playing possum, waiting for Joe to return to the bedroom.

Minutes later, when the couple were again in the midst of passion, Astor let out more shrill shrieks. Joe had anticipated screams that night but not from roosters. Barbara was visibly shaken. Joe returned to the back deck, this time with his BB-gun. Astor lay in wait, chuckling quietly. On the other side of the bedroom was Horace. Then after Joe returned to bed, they listened for the sounds of love. Just when Barbara was about to give in to Joe, both Astor and Horace alternated cock-a-doodle-doods as loud as they could. Joe came out firing his gun, first to the left and then to the right. It didn’t seem possible that two roosters were tormenting them. *How did they find us?* he wondered.

Meanwhile, Marielle had snuck back into the house and hid in the closet. Astor and Horace dropped back in retreat. An hour went by. Joe and Barbara finally felt calm again. Unable to sleep, they decided to give passion one more chance. Marielle waited for just the right moment, and then let out the loudest crow she could. Joe grabbed his gun and shot into the closet, barely missing the hen, which ran out the front of the house and met up with the others. “Oh Joe, what have you done?” Barbara opened her closet to find her new French wardrobe ruined. Even Joe’s beret was in pieces.

Papillion got everyone into the back of a truck, under the hay, just in time before the driver came out and left. Marcel was frantically jumping up and down trying to get the other's attention. Jacques said, "Calm down Marcel, we're safe now; this truck is going out to a farm where we can hide." Marcel calmed down, folded his wings, and sat with a disconcerted expression. The truck pulled onto the highway, and Jacques had his revenge, knowing that Joe and Barbara would undoubtedly cancel their trip to Paris, give up their love of all things French, and go into therapy. And there was no chance that he and Marielle and the gang would be caught, because the sign on the side of the truck said: *PETER'S POULTRY PROCESSING*.

The Goldberg Variations

Practical Goldberg (A Love Story in 3 Parts)

Part 1 - David, a computer science major in college, was completing the setup of his new bird feeding system. Instead of the usual tree house, painted with bright colors, he had designed a more elegant solution. Altruism aside, he wanted to do more than just provide food for birds in the bad weather; he wanted to see the birds enjoy their treat while keeping squirrels from squandering the seeds.

So he set up a trough with three lids, mechanically operated based on a computer program. The first container had birdseeds and suet, the second fruit and nuts and the third meat scraps and insects. In front of the trough was a bar that activated a 13" LCD screen when the bird landed on it. On the screen was a picture of the three food types, corresponding to the placement of the trays. The bird would peck at the screen and a touch sensor would open the appropriate food tray. If the bird didn't peck, a camera would snap a picture of him and open the tray that species of bird prefers. To complete the environment, video with the sounds of like birds would play from the LCD.

But what about the bane of bird feeders, squirrels? The locked trays prevented them from eating. If a squirrel pressed the landing bar, the camera would snap a picture of the offender, then play a 3D video, complete with sounds of foxes, coyotes, hawks, owls and snakes eating squirrels. The longer the squirrel stayed there, the more graphic the video progressed. Last but not least, a small spray of that predator's scent would shoot onto the squirrel's leg (don't worry, it washed away in the next rain). Needless to say, most squirrels never returned to the bird feeder.

No matter where David was, he could enjoy the feeder. A second, wireless camera sent a signal to the Internet so he could watch from any computer. He even wrote an app so he could watch the action from his cell phone. Why all the work to feed birds? David discovered that this was 100% effective in meeting women, especially when showing it off at a coffee house or party.

Rube would have been proud!

Part 2 - David was talking to a particularly cute young woman at his favorite franchise coffee bar. But let me digress a moment. As you know, David is that computer science major who used his engineering skills to design an automatic bird feeder that not only recognized the bird, but also provided their preferred food and kept squirrels out with a diabolical program that guaranteed a squirrel would never return. To be fair, David posted a warning in 300-point font "No squirrels allowed" with an accompanying 500 hundred-word disclaimer to avoid any lawsuits that may occur.

Not that David needed any help getting dates. He had the casual good looks of a surfer, perfect teeth and a well-proportioned six-foot frame. Although he was technically a geek, no one would have guessed; he looked more like a graduate student in literature. But being the precise, analytical person that he was, the bird feeder more or less guaranteed a subtle and inoffensive way to have a conversation with the opposite sex. Coeds would sidle up to him, looking over his shoulder to the laptop screen with pictures and sounds of blue jays, robins and nuthatches. Inevitably, they would start the conversation with a sound usually reserved when seeing puppies.

“Oh, that’s so cute. Is that a movie clip?” said the 5’9” brunette with jeans, ugh boots and crème colored sweater.

David turned and smiled. “No, it’s a live feed from my place.” Well, I won’t bore you with the details, but suffice it to say that after about a half hour, the woman was convinced she had found that all too rare quality in a man, genuine innocence. David never divulged his methodology to any friends or even family; that might put an end to his understated masterpiece.

Ninety-four times out of a hundred (we saw the statistics), the woman would want to visit the apartment and see for herself, partly to confirm David’s claim that he designed and built the best bird feeder, but also to learn more about her new love interest. Since birds feed mostly at dawn and dusk, David had woman asking to spend time at his home during sunrises and sunsets, enhancing the romance. But you can’t just stand next to the feeder; birds won’t come close. No, you have to view from the second floor of his bedroom, meticulously cleaned and fresh. New age music and scented candles (unlit for the moment) completed the ambiance.

“Is that a blue jay?” said Karen.

“Yes, you see most of them in April, their mating season” replied David.

“Look, two more birds. What are they?”

David looked closely. “Red breasted nuthatches. They travel in small groups, sometimes in pairs. See how the male preens the female while she’s eating.” As the sun disappeared over the hilltop, Karen put her arms around David and kissed him.

Part 3 - Karen put her arms around David and kissed him. “David, I hear the birds” and she hopped out of bed and went to the window. David, still waking up, rubbed the sleepers out of his eyes. In panties and a college t-shirt, her lovely figure silhouetted in the window frame. Karen was different; she was genuinely happy with him as he was with her; no games here.

It wasn’t love at first sight, but it was contentment. “Hi” as he rubbed her shoulders and kissed her on the neck.

Karen squeezed his hand. “I think that’s a robin.”

David looked down at the feeder. “No it’s a Stonechat, but they look the same.”

David’s days of short affairs were over. Even though he had manipulated Karen into his arms, he had found an honest and wonderful relationship. Over the next few weeks, he realized that Karen was perfect for him. It seemed like whenever he needed anything, Karen was there. She knew when he needed to work and when he needed to relax, what stressed him out and all of his interests. She understood him completely. Their lives had become complementary, like puzzle pieces fitting just so. “This must be love,” David thought. “I guess I won’t be needing the bird-feeding program anymore.”

Anna was looking through Karen’s social networking program when she came in.

“Hey Anna, you’ll never guess what. David and I are going to a bed and breakfast up the coast this weekend!”

Anna looked up smiling. “I knew you two would hit it off. I had a feeling as soon as I started entering the data.”

Karen looked over her shoulder. “So who are you looking for?”

Anna replied, “It says Jeff Olsen would be a good match for me. It’s printing out his schedule, interests, love history and life goals now. I can’t believe how well this program of yours works.”

Karen gave her a little hug. “Well it worked for me.”

Rube would have been proud!

TV All the Time

David sat in front of his big screen television, set the sound field on his digital home theater and basked in the color and sound of the hockey game. Home theaters and HDTV cameras had made watching at home virtually as good as going to the arena and a whole lot less expensive; you just had to provide your own food. Add a girl that liked the game, a pizza and good wine and you had a date night to remember. David had mastered the art of at home dating on the cheap, thanks to his home theater, an investment that kept paying him back.

College students usually put their money into clothing or cars, but David wore his jeans and t-shirts while building a Blu-Ray collection of movies women liked.

Insider's note: some readers will think this is the same David that created the bird feeder in Practical Goldberg: A Love Story in 3 Parts – yes, it is, but that was later in his quest for love.

Engineers are like that, carefully analyzing the project needs, putting together the resources required and building a system methodically with constant refinement. His liberal arts friends may be conversant in literature and music, but David could simply buy the appropriate movie or music required for that particular girl's tastes. He did his research, carefully scanning through FB and Twitter pages before making an introduction. His online page had one picture; a romantically lit room, a soft leather couch, the black BOSE home theater system and a 61" HDTV screen with Andrea Bocelli singing in Tuscany; he even synched music to the page. When women checked it out, half the work of luring them to his small apartment was done. The page did the hard work, giving the women a glimpse of a romantic date. It looked safe and it was. David never treated his dates as captives or forced them to do anything. Your reputation is everything in college and David found himself dating friends of past date nights, usually with the recommendation "You just have to see his room". Women saw the room and willingly offered to bring their favorite music or movie for the night. More often than not, that wasn't the highlight of the evening. He even had requests from multiple coeds, with David the lone male providing simple food and drink and the girls fighting over what to watch. David had perfected the love nest and he kept that secret away from his male buddies, never allowing them in.

One day, while sitting in the campus coffee shop, a message popped on his screen.

Kelly(@kellywinter) is now following you.

David opened the link to see Kelly's twitter page. She was a coed at his college, a Psychology major and member of the field hockey team. "Hmm, pretty, athletic and smart" He sent a simple message to her,

Hi Kelly, thanks for following. David ☺

and then went back to his iced tea. After a few minutes another message appeared.

Hi David. I love the picture of Bocelli on the big screen; is that the Tuscany DVD?

David waited a minute, pulled up the link to Bocelli's Blu-ray disc, 'Vivere, Live in Tuscany' and sent it to Kelly with this note.

Yes, Vivere on blu-ray, amazing sound.

Most college guys would have tried to lure girls with some rock star music, but David knew what coeds wanted, a mature guy, a less common university species. Kelly quickly replied.

Are you a music major?

David paused long enough to consider his answer.

No, engineering, but I love music.

It's not a good idea to lie; the truth always comes out. Engineering may not be sexy, but David had his picture online and he looked more like an English lit grad student so his major didn't turn girls off.

My minor is classical music; I love Bocelli.

David wanted to invite her over (her picture was online too and she was quite pretty), but he knew from experience it was better to be asked than to invite. He kept the feed going.

The blu-ray classical DVDs are so rich. I just bought some Mozart piano concertos. If you close your eyes, you'd think he was playing live.

Kelly was hooked now.

I play piano. Mozart is so refined. I wish we had a piano in the dorm.

David had another clue; the dorm was only for freshman. Could this lovely be 19?

The dorm was fun my freshman year, but I needed my own space for studying and the frats weren't for me.

This line was his way of saying he didn't spend his weekends downing beer by the case, an essential piece of information to convey. He saw his opening.

I have a keyboard on my system, I'm not much of a musician, but I like to tinker.

Kelly was very interested. She was ready to invite herself in, but needed to know it was safe; she didn't really know enough about David.

My friend Susan is a music major. Maybe we could come over to hear the Vivere concert sometime, if that's OK? We could bring some Chianti.

David couldn't believe his luck.

Is pizza OK? I put all my money into my system.

Kelly sent a picture of her and her friend Susan, friends from Manchester by the Sea on the beach along with a message.

Pizza is great. How about Friday at 8?

David took one look at the rich girls from Boston in their bikinis, thanked God for his good luck and responded simply, but politely.

That sounds perfect. I'll send you my address and phone number.

David waited for Kelly to sign off, then packed up his computer for home. As he walked out, he noticed the pretty coed in the corner doing the same. He smiled at her and realized it was Kelly.

“Hi Kelly.”

“Hi David. Want to share a pizza?”

The Duke of Yelp

“Who is this person?” Said Armen, the owner of the new bakery. Armen looked around at his customers, sitting at café tables, drinking tea or coffee and eating desserts. Meanwhile, John was on his computer in the second floor apartment next door. He was playing a game of hide and seek with Armen.

“Guess it’s time to make another appearance” said John. Whenever the café was busy, John came in, bought a cookie, hung out a while and checked in, but since he also checked in from his apartment, Armen had no idea whom the Duke of Yelp was.

The modern coffee house was not a bohemian or flower child flophouse. Instead of a bearded man playing a guitar, there was jazz and spa music coming out of ceiling speakers. Tie-dye cloth and beanbag chairs gave way to expensive leather furnishings expertly matched to create an ambience of warmth and relaxation. At least a dozen people were connected by phone, laptop or iPad, tapping away while talking with companions; heads bobbed and eyes darted up and down. Although Armen was playing catch up, it seemed all young people were skilled in tech use. He just hoped none of them were hacking into his computer to get credit card information.

“Great shortbread,” John said to the cashier. “I’ll take four.”

The dark haired girl with Mediterranean looks selected four unbroken cookies and put them in a bag. “Will that be all?” she said smiling.

“And a coffee,” said John as he selected a large take-out cup and lid, then filled it from the self-service decanter. While John was waiting for his change, he tapped on his iPhone, checking in to the location.

Armen heard a ping from his computer and looked around the room. He walked over to his computer, set to the Yelp page that showed his bakery/café. “This one person keeps checking in with the name Pat27. Hmmm. Could be a man or a woman. No picture.” He needed another way to find him or her.

A 20-something Asian woman with faded jeans, soft, brown boots and a pink cotton sweater walked in; John’s head came to a stop as he saw her. He watched as she bought a tea and raspberry scone, sitting at the corner table and opening her kindle to read. Normally not one to take chances, John decided this was worth the risk. He walked over to her table, paused, presented his bag and said, “Have you tried the shortbread?”

The woman gestured for John to sit down, “No, I would like that. I’m Amy.”

John smiled. “John” and he sat down next to her.

“I don’t normally take desserts from strangers” she said.

“I don’t normally offer them,” said John. “Are you from the Mission?” John asked.

“No, the Sunset. My friend is in the wine bar next door.”

Armen walked around the seating area, glancing at screens. People continued to come and go. He decided to secretly take snapshots of them with his phone.

John wondered if her friend was male or not; he hoped she would offer this information. “Yes, it looks like a fine place, a little upscale for this neighborhood though.”

Amy broke off a nibble of shortbread and swallowed. “Well, that’s my friend’s way of meeting rich guys.”

John put his hand on the table. “And you?”

Amy took a sip of her tea, and then put her hand on the table closer to John. “Money comes and goes. I don’t waste it, so I don’t need much.”

John was feeling comfortable now. “Yeah, me too. But I guess you can tell by the way I dress.”

Amy looked John over. “You look fine, do you mean the plaid, flannel shirt?”

John nodded. “Holdover from winters in Berkeley. You?”

Amy leaned forward. “UCLA, but I grew up here. You’re not from here, are you?”

How would she know that? John had no discernible accent. “No, Boston. How did you know?” he asked.

“You speak more slowly than natives.” After about an hour of social dancing, John and Amy walked out, went up to his apartment and made love.

Back in the bakery, Armen looked at the customer pictures he had on his phone. It was 10:00pm, closing time when a man in a mask came up to the register, pointed a gun at Armen and demanded the money. The gunman tapped something into his phone. “Ping.” The dark haired girl took the money out and handed it to the gunman.

You could almost make out a smile from the robber as he turned to leave. “Remember the Duke!”

When the police arrived, Armen showed them John’s picture. “This is the guy who’s been casing my place.”

John escorted Amy back to the wine bar. “Who is this?” said Jenny as she saw John with Amy.

John extended his hand. “John, this is Jenny, a sorority sister visiting from L.A.”

Jenny could tell where Amy had been. “So, John what do you do?”

Amy gave her a nudge. “Hands off girl, I saw him first.”

John was flattered with the attention of these two beautiful women. “Would you ladies like a drink?”

Amy and Jenny said in unison “champagne please.”

In his peripheral vision, John caught them whispering to each other as he walked to the bar. “Three champagnes please, but let’s keep it under \$25.00.”

A waitress from the wine bar pointed out John to a policeman, who was letting them know about the robbery next door. “OK, I see him.”

As John and the women were toasting, John pulled out his phone and checked in to the bakery one last time, after they had closed. This would give Armen a laugh when he got in next day; it was just harmless fun.

The policeman, seeing John posting on his phone, confiscated it, looked at the posting for the bakery. “Turn around Pat27, we got you” and led him out the door in handcuffs. “Or should I call you Duke?”

The Mysteries

Poached

“Are you enjoying breakfast Jack?” Hannah watched her husband eat while reading the paper.

“Oh, yes. Sorry dear. There’s this story about a thief in the neighborhood.” Jack passed the paper to his wife. “Yes, these eggs are very good. Ana-Maria, remember how you made these.”

Their housekeeper smiled. “Gracias Mr. Jack.” The doorbell rings. “That will be the delivery for the dinner party. Excuse me.”

Jack looked at Hannah. “Ana-Maria is working out so well. I’m glad we gave her a room here.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes, we finally found the perfect help. I’m going to pick up a little present for her today.”

Jack and Hannah were two of the fortunate few, but not uncaring, Wall Street types. Jack was a medical administrator and Hannah, a pediatrician. Their only daughter had just left for college, so they had more time to entertain. Both in their mid-forties, with better than average looks, Jack and Hannah had been college sweethearts at Harvard. They stayed in Cambridge after Hannah finished med school, and then moved to Beverly Farms to raise their daughter Kelly, now at BU.

The salty, summer air of the Atlantic floated through the house as guests arrived. This wealthy town, north of Boston, was home to many accomplished preppy graduates from Harvard and Dartmouth, still in their button down oxfords, blazers and khakis. Women wore cashmere, cardigan sweaters over Izod polo shirts, pleated skirts and tights. Here political ties were less important than college ties and marina berths for their sailboats. They didn’t struggle with the down economy; they just adjusted some investments.

Meanwhile Ana-Maria directed the caterers and served the appetizers. Salmon on toast points and mini quiches, fresh vegetables with fragrant sauces and one of those large bouquets made out of fruit that are so fashionable now. She lined up the colorful food in the most alluring way, adding a sensual touch of flowers and seashell strings, so perfect for this house by the ocean.

Jack’s friend Alan came over to him, sipping his drink. “Jack, did you hear about the house burglaries?”

Jack nodded. “I was just reading about it this morning. Don’t you know a detective?”

Alan played this with a straight face. “Yes, and he told me today that they have someone in custody, a domestic working on Chestnut Street.”

Jack was curious. “Any details?”

Alan dropped the last line without giving away his ruse. “Yes, a male personal servant was stealing jewelry from the wife.”

Jack realized he had been taken. “Really, Alan? The butler did it. Your sense of humor hasn’t improved since college.” Alan had been playing jokes like this on Jack, ever since they were in school.

Hannah caught her new employee as she went into the kitchen. “Ana-Maria, we want you to have this in appreciation for all your good help here.”

Ana-Maria opened the box to reveal a small but beautiful pin, shaped like an egg, with yellow, pink and green swirls. “Oh, Miss Hannah, thank you!”

Hannah pinned it to Ana-Maria’s sweater. “You’re very welcome. We hope you like living with us.”

Ana-Maria gave Hannah a hug. “Very much. I love your home.”

Hannah smiled. “I’m glad you feel that way. It’s your home now too.”

The main dishes were brought in, traditional New England fare. Clams, lobster, corn, beans and biscuits were laid out in a buffet style on the table overlooking the ocean. A string of soft lights, colorful balloons and streamers gave festive ambiance while smooth jazz played in the background. After she finished, Ana-Maria disappeared upstairs.

“Hannah” said her friend Lindsay. “The rumor is that the burglaries are being done by people working in the house, maids and cooks. You haven’t had anything taken, have you?”

Hannah wasn’t concerned. “No, in fact we are very happy with our new, live in person Ana-Maria. She put this party together. Besides, she came with references from a family we know in California.”

The doorbell rang. Jack answered the door. “Detective Riley. May I help you?”

The detective took Jack aside to avoid interrupting the party. “We have a lead in the thefts that have been traced to your house. Please put your hands behind your back.” The detective started to put handcuffs on Jack.

“Officer, I can assure you that I had nothing to do with any thefts.”

Detective Riley smiled. “We have had surveillance on the house Mr. O’Donnell. The eggs, salmon and lobster you had today were all poached.” Alan and the guests behind them applauded and laughed, throwing streamers and confetti. “Happy Birthday Jack.”

The Waiting Room

Amy had been in many waiting rooms. Car service centers, banks, hospitals, etc. But the strangest waiting room she had ever been to was in her doctor's office in one of those professional suites. Amy walked up for her appointment and saw yards of heavy plastic secured around the entrance and outside windows, maybe 20 feet wide. There was a sign on the door.

Please excuse our appearance as we remodel.

We are expanding to serve you better.

An arrow pointed to the right of the door to a temporary entrance. Apparently, her doctor's practice was doing very well.

"I'm here for my 2:30pm appointment; my name is Amy Eng."

The medical assistant looked on her computer screen. "Here you are. I see you're a little early. While we are remodeling, our temporary waiting room is over there." The receptionist pointed to a small room down the hallway.

Amy walked into the room and saw office furniture that was older than she was. Plaid, orange and gray fabric over veneer oak armchairs, a black leatherette couch, a cheesy plastic table and the requisite middle class magazines, none from the 21st century. On the wall were paint by number pictures of clowns in cheap frames, an Ansel Adams photograph that looked like it was taken out of a magazine and one of those certificates proving that the doctor had actually been trained. The rug was industrial grade, tightly woven, charcoal in color with specks of yellow. There were no windows and a stale smell.

A young woman in blue scrubs came in and removed one of the chairs. Amy sat on the couch and watched. The woman returned and took another chair. Amy looked around. Then the woman came back and started removing the pictures. There was no one else in the room to commiserate with. The woman took the plastic table, the magazines and the framed certificate. Soon the only thing remaining was Amy and the leatherette couch. She didn't mind the removal of the eyesore furnishings, the ancient magazines, the clown pictures or the certificate.

Then a man, dressed in green scrubs, came in with the woman, holding a straight back, wooden chair. "We're going to have to take the couch. Would you mind sitting here for a moment?"

Amy acquiesced silently. She realized that this must be someone else's office that her doctor was taking over. She looked around the room, then at her watch. Surely the doctor would be seeing her soon. "Wait a minute," she said to herself, only slightly audibly. "Is this still a waiting room?" She looked down the hallway. "Hello, is anyone here?" No reply or for that matter any sound. Amy walked back to the receptionist's desk. The office was vacant, without life, like something out of a French existentialist story. Then a horrible thought occurred to Amy.

She was missing.

The Sonoma Murder Mystery

“Well, that’s certainly not what I expected,” said detective Laura Miller. Three hours earlier, David Bancroft, an English professor at Berkeley, had invited eight guests to his Victorian estate in Sonoma for a murder mystery dinner party.

“If only we had paid more attention to the clues,” agreed Robert Warren, an attorney. “The solution was right in front of our face.”

Laura shook her head, “the guys in the precinct are going to give me hell for missing this one.”

David had carefully selected the diverse guest list to create a most spontaneous evening, like a fine chef who mixes seemingly incompatible ingredients and comes up with a masterly meal.

In addition to Laura and Robert, there was Elizabeth Ashley, a 28-year-old debutante turned socialite from Alabama. Her naturally golden hair, quiet elegance and refined grace were as intoxicating as her accent. Jim Palmer was a rookie police officer from Los Angeles, but his clean cut looks and baby face belied his intelligence and maturity. Dr. Jenny Song, a neurologist from Boston, looked more like a model than a brain surgeon. She was tall and athletic, with long straight black hair and a graceful gait. Which brings us to Father John Lopez, a Franciscan monk from San Diego and descendent of the original Spanish missionaries who settled California. John was not only a priest; he had a degree in philosophy from Harvard. Switching from the cerebral to the creative, Nancy Lee was a caterer from Marin, with a who’s who list of wealthy clients from the golden county north of the Golden Gate Bridge; she was also very attractive with short hair, bangs, a button nose and sparkling eyes. To round out this gathering was Antonio Marini, a magician from Las Vegas. Antonio packed them in at the Desert Palm, with his incomprehensible illusion of making audience members disappear from the stage and show up seconds later at the back of the theater.

You might have noticed the one trait these people had in common, their refined looks. In fact, the guest list was as resplendent, alluring and beautiful as the mansion itself. Even Steven, the butler, was a tall, distinguished man with thick beard and mustache and Maria, the maid, a striking Latina in a French maid’s outfit; perhaps these two were quiet, but significant characters in David’s plans or merely servants. David never mentioned them in his bio of guests.

The last character was David’s Victorian house, magnificently settled in his vineyard, an odd architecture for California. Unlike the homes in New England, this home was just a few years old, with hidden electronics behind a décor of old fashioned wallpaper, carpet, furnishings, artwork and adornments. David even infused an artificial, slightly musty smell into the rooms, another realistic but diverting element for the night. It would take a qualified appraiser more than a little while to uncover the veneer; exactly the way David had designed it.

The guests were all gathered in the library now, relaxing in leather chairs and soft sofas, looking each other over. Steven and Maria were serving drinks.

“So David” said Elizabeth, “when are you going to tell us about tonight’s game?” David had sent out invitations that mentioned a mystery dinner party, but had not revealed much about the complexities to come.

“Certainly,” said David. “We are here to solve a make believe murder that will occur sometime tonight. Each of you has received background information on the others, although none of you have ever met before. I have spent considerable time and money to insure that everyone here is an honorable person, not likely to cheat or otherwise ruin the game. Each of you will get one true and private clue to the identity of either the victim or the murderer, along with the clues that all of you may see or hear.”

Elizabeth smiled and stroked her hair, Robert adjusted his glasses, Laura rubbed her palms together and Jim took out a pad to take notes. John sipped his wine and nodded in appreciation, loving the entertainment so lacking at the monastery.

“To win, you will have to uncover the identity of the murderer, the victim and how the murder was accomplished. The one who does that will also win \$10,000 in cash. Oh yes, and I’m the only one who knows who the murderer and victim are.”

Antonio rubbed the felt of his top hat, so common a home for doves in a magician’s act. Nancy straightened her chef coat, not sure why she was asked to wear it. Jenny held her stethoscope in her white lab coat, and then asked the question they were all thinking. “David, why are we all dressed this way?”

“Ah, yes doctor. You are all dressed in your work attire. Nancy is a chef, John is a priest, Robert is a lawyer, Laura a detective, Elizabeth is a socialite, Jim is a police officer and Antonio is a magician, all of you at the top of your profession, destined for great lives and accomplishments. But tonight will challenge all of your creative and intellectual skills.”

David adjusted his tweed deerstalker, the hat Sherlock Holmes made famous. “As I am the host of the game and a professor, I’ve selected this hat and pipe from my favorite detective. Now listen carefully to a few rules. You may go anywhere in the house, attic or basement and you must leave the company of the group at least once during the evening. But you may not leave the house. That would automatically disqualify you.”

Robert pointed to the large rectangular frame, maybe 80” in diameter, above the library entrance. “And what is this, an empty picture frame?”

David held up a remote control. “That, my dear barrister, is a video monitor, another source of clues for everyone. There is a smaller monitor in each of the rooms, usually above the entering door.” David pushed a button and the monitor revealed a view of the outside grounds, then the upstairs rooms, then the first floor rooms and finally the wine cellar. “The house may look old, but the electronics are state of the art. At various random times, the monitors will show you what is going on in different parts of the house, where others may be exploring for clues. Each room is also equipped with speakers, adding to the ambiance and providing audio clues. You see I have an obsession with murder mysteries, especially the sights and sounds of dark and stormy nights.”

David pushes another button and a loud clap of thunder comes through the speakers while lightning reflected on the guests.

Robert was the first to comment on the weather anomaly. “I see, because we don’t get storms up here.”

David nodded. “Yes Robert, I may have saved some money if I bought my house in Seattle.”

Jenny held up a Bluetooth earpiece. “And this, David?”

David pointed to the device. “Yes Jenny, each of you has one. During the night, you each will get a clue to the identity of the victim or the murderer.”

Laura spoke up. “Are the clues private for us?”

David liked the way his guests were engaged. “No one else will hear your personal clue, but if you choose to share it, you are more likely to become the victim than the one who solves the crime.”

The doorbell rings and a deliveryman hands Steven a shoebox-sized package wrapped in plain brown paper. “I’ll just put this upstairs sir,” said Steven.

David nodded. “Very good Steven. That package won’t be needed tonight.”

Jim offered his first question. “Are there any other restrictions David?”

David took out his notes and replied. “You may ask anyone anything, work together or by yourself. If a door is locked you must find a key or another way in, but remember, you can’t leave the house.” Another flash of lightning, the sound of thunder and a woman’s scream is heard.

John jokes. “That wasn’t Steven, was it?” There is laughter all around, and then the lights go out for 30 seconds. When they come back on, Antonio and Laura are missing.

Jenny was most concerned. “Maybe we have already learned who the murderer and victim are.”

Nancy, realizing that this was just a diversion, bubbled. “Sounds like a delicious evening. I can’t wait to start.” Steven comes down the stairs; he joins Maria in the kitchen to begin serving. A grandfather clock rings six times.

“That’s our cue for dinner” said David. As the guests meander from the library to the dining room, the monitor shows Antonio and Laura upstairs talking, but only Jenny notices this.

The guests find their place card and sit down. Laura returns to the dining room.

“Where were you?” said Jim.

Laura replied. “I heard footsteps; I thought it might be the killer.”

Robert excuses himself. “Before we eat, I need to be excused.”

Elizabeth puts her drink down. “I think I will step out for a minute too.”

As they leave, Antonio comes back in and John questions him. “So you’re back. What did you hear Antonio?”

Antonio points to his arm. “Nothing, somebody pulled on my arm when the lights went out and I ran after them.”

A spotlight highlights a drapery sash and a chime is heard. The sash looks like a rope, but not everyone notices this clue. Jim makes a quick note on his pad, out of view.

Then Jim leaves the table. “I need to see where that scream came from.”

Jenny joins him. “I’ll go with you.” They head upstairs.

David states the obvious. “Well, it looks like everyone is getting their time away from the group done early. Maria, you may start serving the soup.”

Laura compliments David. “I think you have created one hell of a mystery David.” The dining room monitor shows a male and female figure kissing, but in silhouette.

“More than you can imagine Laura. May I remind you, don’t trust anyone.” Spooky owl sounds emanate from the speakers, then the lights go out again and another scream is heard. A full minute passes in darkness. When the lights come on, Robert, Elizabeth, Jenny and Jim have returned.

Elizabeth speaks out as if she had never left. “What was that?”

David points them back to their seats. “Oh nothing, let’s sit down everyone. The first course is ready, French onion soup.” As Maria serves the soup, Steven pours dinner wine, a selection from David’s own vineyard.

“Absolutely gourmet David” said Antonio; “did Steven or Maria make this?”

With a wink to Nancy, David explained. “Actually this feast is courtesy of our resident chef, Nancy. Don’t worry; she made sure that no one’s allergies would be affected.”

A spotlight shines briefly on the candlestick of the centerpiece accompanied by a soft chime. Everyone at the table sees this clue and eyes the others.

With worried looks around the table, Nancy says, “It was prepared at my restaurant and brought here.”

Antonio says what most of them are thinking. “You mean we have been eating food prepared by someone who could be the murderer?”

Elizabeth agreed. “That is outrageous! Why didn’t you say something?”

Robert punctuated the point. “Bad form David. We may have missed a valuable clue.”

David countered. “Actually, you have all missed several clues already. You didn’t think this was going to be easy, did you?”

Just as John was about to speak, he heard a chime in his earpiece and his personal clue to the murder.

AS A MAN OF FAITH, YOU KNOW THAT WHAT IS VISIBLE MAY NOT BE TRUE. PEOPLE WILL TRY TO FOOL YOU WITH LIES AND DECEPTION. HAVE FAITH! YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM PLAYS A PROMINENT PART IN THE GAME.

With this information, John realizes that Steven and Maria are probably not directly involved. He compliments Nancy. “This is excellent Nancy. Where is your restaurant?”

Nancy was happy to oblige the privileged guests. “In San Francisco, near Ghirardelli Square. I made the dessert especially for you Padre.”

Laura jokes. “A Peach Bomb Surprise?”

Nancy continued. “Not quite. Alternate layers of angel and devil’s food cake. I call it *The Devil’s Orchestra*.”

John smiles. "I can't wait. I'll finally be able to separate good from evil."
Everyone laughs.

Jim kids him, "You mean play God, John?"

John was enjoying this. "I thought that was something you did son. Serve the good and punish the wicked."

Robert added his twist. "Well, Jim stops them, Laura investigates them and I put them away. You could call us a crime team."

Antonio adds his opinion; "your team seems to have an advantage in this game, being expert investigators."

Robert turns the accusation back to Antonio. "And you are an expert at misdirection and disguise. Do you have a weapon up your sleeve?"

Antonio couldn't resist. "No, just a rabbit;" and he pulls a rabbit out for everyone's enjoyment.

Jim has a fake look of concern. "What kind of soup did you say this was?"
Antonio frees the rabbit and it runs out of the room.

"Will he be all right?" said Elizabeth.

Antonio reassured her. "Oh yes, he'll find some warm spot and go to sleep. Rabbits are very good pets, you know."

"What do you say David?" said Robert. "Does anyone here have an advantage in solving the mystery?"

David is glad this question came up. "Not in the least. In fact, our expert investigators will probably think too much, making their conclusions faulty."

At this point Antonio gets up, takes Maria aside and asks "excuse me dear, where is the rest room?"

Maria responds politely. "The door next to the kitchen is closest sir."

Antonio puts his arm around her waist, whispers something, winks and then walks to the bathroom. Out of sight from the others, he sees a lead pipe in the kitchen spotlighted with that soft chime sound. "This may be an extra clue just for me," he says to himself.

Everyone is impressed by the soup and congratulates Nancy. "This tastes Mediterranean. Is that the region of your cuisine?" said Elizabeth.

“Well, it’s a fusion restaurant combining Mediterranean with Asian flavors. Even though I was trained in China, I also spent two years in Italy and that’s when I decided to blend these heavenly foods into one cuisine.”

David agreed. “Eating at your restaurant has elevated my palate Nancy. This is one reason I invited you to the game, to show these guests that we have world class chefs in the bay area.”

Jenny hears a chime in her earpiece but places her hand over it secretly in order to hide the fact that her personal clue was coming.

DO NOT JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS. DON'T TRUST YOUR EYES OR EARS. TO WIN THIS GAME YOU WILL NEED TO FIND FACTS. REMEMBER, PEOPLE LIE AND FORGET. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDER WEAPON WILL BE FOUND.

Her clue finishes just before loud thunderclaps resonate through the house. The lights go out again for another minute. A gunshot is heard along with the sound of a body hitting the floor. When the lights come back on, Steven is lying motionless on the floor. The rabbit has snuggled under his leg and there are hairs on Steven’s trousers. Then we see Antonio return from the kitchen.

Elizabeth screams, points and says, “Look, it’s the butler.”

Jenny rushes over to check his vital signs. As everyone comes closer, Jenny holds a card up that says VICTIM, truly a sign of relief. “Well, I guess this means the butler is dead. You are dead Steven, aren’t you?”

Steven looks up and replies “yes doctor. Thank you for confirming it.” The butler looks at David. “Since my part of the game is done sir, would you mind if I went to my room to take a nap? I don’t think I can lie still for five hours.”

Everyone looks at David and in unison says “Five hours?”

David ignores their complaint. “Of course not. Quite right Steven. Buttle off to your room.” He leaves with the VICTIM card and the rabbit under his arm to his upstairs room.

Expecting this interruption, David announces. “Let’s return to dinner. Maria, I’m afraid you’re going to have to serve by yourself.”

Nancy volunteers. “Nonsense, I am glad to help you. I believe the crabmeat stuffed in lobster mushrooms are next.”

Maria curtseys to Nancy. “Thank you for your help Maam” and they go into the kitchen.

Jenny says, “I believe lobster mushrooms are poisonous.”

David tries to reassure everyone. “Really Jenny? I can guarantee you that no one will really die tonight.”

Elizabeth adds, “Well, at least we know that the butler didn’t do it.” Laughter breaks the tension.

While Nancy and Maria serve the appetizers, Robert wants to hear more about the mushrooms. “Nancy, someone is concerned about the lobster mushrooms.”

Nancy clarifies. “No, these are porcini mushrooms, cut in the shape of a lobster. They’re perfectly safe,” then winks at everyone cheekily.

A spotlight shines briefly on a hypodermic needle on the sideboard, then that soft chime sounds. Only a few of the guests notice it.

Jim saw the hypodermic needle and was watching the others. “Since we are part of a murder mystery, I’d like to ask John about the nature of good and evil.”

John gestured with his hand. “Well, I certainly believe in good and evil. You see all sorts of unimaginable crimes against people because of anger, greed, envy and lust.”

Jenny inquires “the deadly sins padre?” then John continues.

“That’s right Jenny, along with gluttony, sloth and pride, but those three don’t usually lead to violence.”

As Maria and Nancy serve the appetizers, Laura shares her experience. “I think drugs are the problem. Nearly every violent criminal I have investigated was involved with illegal substances, either using or selling them.”

John adds “yes, but before that. What sends a person down that path to drugs and violence?”

Jim had his opinion. “Lack of education, poor parenting, drug use at home. It all begins in the home. If parents take care of their children and raise them right, drugs or gangs won’t tempt them. And it’s not limited to the poor. I know many poor families doing a great job at raising children.”

John kept the topic philosophical. “But what about faith? What about a person’s conscience? Why do some people resist the temptation of crime while others succumb to it?”

David notices that wineglasses are empty. “Maria would you please go to the wine cellar and get us another couple bottles?”

Maria nods and says “right away sir.” Jenny offers to go with her. They exit through the basement door.

Elizabeth brought them back to the conversation. “Are you saying that some people are born good and some are born bad?”

John answered, “What I am saying is that we have free will. We all have choices to make. Those who make bad choices follow a path that leads to crime, or in extreme cases, even eternal damnation.”

Laura agreed. “So everyone is responsible for his or her own actions.”

John nodded. “Remember, people don’t choose evil for evil’s sake. They are mistaken into thinking they are choosing happiness. This is how Satan deceives man.”

Robert wonders what happened to Maria and Jenny. “I think I’ll see what we have for a wine selection.”

“Aren’t some people pushed beyond their limit, their ability to make good choices? What about someone who steals to feed his family” said Elizabeth?

John added. “Yes, that seems like a paradox, stealing to feed your family. The fault lies in trying to understand the will of God. We are limited in our capacity to do so. Certainly the injustices of the world are one of those mysteries.”

A spotlight flashes briefly on a dagger hidden into the wallpaper, only the men hearing the chime in time to see the dagger. “What was that?” said Elizabeth, “what clue was shown?” No one was willing to answer.

Laura asked, “So why do good people fall out of God’s grace?”

John responded. “Man is an imperfect being, subject to sin throughout his life here. This is not the kingdom of Heaven. This world is where Satan’s lies and deceptions lead men astray. Only a focus on Christ and the word of God can repel the power of Satan.”

“But how many people can do that?” Laura asked John.

“Actually, no one can. That’s where grace comes in. Sometimes we are being protected without realizing it. But if you know something is wrong, then you have an obligation to resist it.”

Jim agreed. “I’m with the Padre. If you resist evil, you’ll get help from above. Maybe angels, maybe something else. But if you look for trouble, you will certainly find it.”

John was slowly winning over the others. “Very true Jim. How many of us can say they haven’t looked for trouble now and then?”

Laura asked John. “Even you Padre? Have you looked for trouble?”

John paused, remembering a time in his life when he was troubled. “Before I entered the seminary, I was almost lost to the dark side. My friends robbed a bank. Unfortunately, I was in the getaway car. The police caught them before they got to the car. When I heard gunshots, I took off out of there.”

Jim didn’t think John could have been involved. “So you didn’t know they were going to rob a bank?”

John was relieved to clear this up. “No and my friends never gave me up. They either wanted to protect me or knew it wouldn’t help them, maybe both.”

“You’re lucky Padre. Today, with DNA, we would have brought you in,” said Jim.

At this point, Maria, Jenny and Robert return, each straightening their clothing. Jenny and Robert take their seats while Maria pours new wine.

“So that’s when you decided to join the priesthood?” said Laura.

“No, things got even worse for me. A drunk driver killed my sister. She had just gotten engaged and was coming home from her shower.”

Jenny was visibly upset. “That’s terrible John. I’m so sorry.”

“Between escaping the bank robbery and the injustice of my sister’s death, my world was turned upside down. That’s when I started looking for answers.”

Laura asked “but you must have known that these circumstances had nothing to do with you.”

“I know,” said John. “But in my mind, you can either believe in free will or fate?”

“Can’t you believe in both” said Laura.

John thought for a moment. “Maybe. I personally think that man has free will, except for the important things in life.” The discussion was interrupted when Elizabeth hears her clue coming.

SOCIAL PARTIES ARE YOUR HOME FIELD. YOU KNOW HOW TO READ PEOPLE. DON'T BE FOOLED BY FIRST IMPRESSIONS. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER'S NAME HAS FIVE LETTERS.

“My friends and that drunk driver had free will. They decided to do what they did. But their decisions affected me greatly and after my sister’s death, I started to drink. It was only a year later when I realized I was self-destructing.”

Jim asked. “You mean you were falling victim to Satan?”

“Yes. That’s when I joined the seminary. I knew I needed a lot more than my own will power to survive. The order showed me how to protect myself and to help others.”

Although Robert understood the subtleties of John’s philosophy, he worked in a world where judgments were made in a black or white manner that is guilty or not guilty. “I can’t afford to make such distinctions. It doesn’t matter whether or not someone had free will, only that they understood the difference between right and wrong.”

Nancy and Maria bring out the main course: Asian duck marinated in a marsala sauce, risotto and finely cut vegetables inside of mu shu pancakes with hoisin sauce. Nancy announces “Bon appetite everyone!” The main course was a most welcome way to lighten the ambiance with more carnal pleasures. There was applause and pleasant comments as the food was set in front of everyone. The seriousness of John’s good and evil sermon was replaced with small talk and gentility.

As they were finishing their dinner, the grandfather clock struck seven times. The sounds of owls, thunder and rain are audible throughout the house now. Most of the guests had not heard their personal clue and their senses were heightened as they prepared to solve the mystery. Was John’s loquaciousness an attempt to divert attention from his true role as the murderer? What about the long absence of Maria, Jenny and Robert in the basement? How long could it take to find a couple bottles of wine? Antonio slipped out of sight for a while; and who brings a rabbit to a dinner party? Is it possible that the murderer has an accomplice? The only undisputable clue was that Steven was the victim. Finding the murderer will indeed be more difficult, as David had warned. Speaking of David, could he be the murderer?

With dinner finished and dessert to come later, the guests return to the library. The video monitor is now a focal point for clues. Maria is doing double duty, serving after dinner drinks and cleaning up the dining room table.

Elizabeth was the first to reiterate appreciation for the meal. “That dinner was divine Nancy. You can expect me at your restaurant before heading home.”

Nancy was humbled. “Just let me know; I’ll get you a table with a view of the bridge.”

Robert made a suggestion. “I say we all gather there for a celebration with the winner picking up the tab.”

Nancy liked the idea. "I'll even give you the murderer's discount."

None of the guests needed (or in John's case wanted) the \$10,000, so the atmosphere was generally convivial and more a friendly test of intellect, a game rich people play for amusement between their careers and obligations. As everyone settled down with their cognac and other aperitifs, Robert heard a chime in his earpiece and his clue.

AS A LAWYER, YOU SEE LIARS EVERYDAY. SOMEONE WILL TRY TO DECEIVE YOU. TREAT THEM AS YOU WOULD AN ADVERSARY. DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH AND DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS YOU DON'T ALREADY KNOW THE ANSWERS TO. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER IS NOT AFRICAN-AMERICAN.

Robert looked up, muttered to himself "Really?" and surmised that he wasn't being given as much help as the others.

"Did you get your clue Robert?" said Laura.

"Yes, but it wasn't that enlightening. Does anyone want to share their clues?" There were general smiles and silence all around. "That's what I thought. Then I'll just keep mine to myself too."

Laura couldn't contain her detective instincts. "While we're waiting for dessert, I think we should start exploring the house, looking for evidence. Jim, would you like to join me?"

Jim readily agreed, comfortable working with a detective. "Sure Laura", pulling out his small notepad, "I need a lot more information." Laura and Jim went upstairs.

A spotlight shows a wrench in a toolkit in the corner of the room, and the sound of the soft chime. Only Nancy and Antonio seemed to see the wrench and subtly look in another direction. "Did anyone see what the chime announced?" said Antonio, diverting attention away from him while trying to finesse information from the others. Shaking heads and silence were the response.

"Nancy, would you like to explore with me?" he said. Having completed her kitchen duties, she agreed.

"Sure, sounds like an adventure." They take the other stairway upstairs, on the opposite side of the house behind the location of the video monitor.

Robert decides to stay and make notes on his tablet. "I think I'll just consider the facts from here for now." He discovers that the house has a high-speed Wi-Fi connection as well, not at all surprising, but something that may be useful in his research.

Elizabeth gives Jenny a flirting glance, and then asks. “Jenny, you’re kind of a detective, examining patients and looking for clues for a diagnosis.”

Jenny replies to Elizabeth but addresses everyone. “I suppose so. But I’m not sure of anything except that Steven is the victim.” Then turning to David. “Do you think that there could be more than one murder?”

David stroked his chin. “It certainly is possible, but I won’t say any more than that.”

At this point, the silhouetted figures of two people kissing are visible in the monitor. “Look” said Robert, so that everyone would get this clue.

John then decides he would like to go upstairs. “I think I’ll explore by myself. This is one time I don’t trust anyone” laughing at his own comment. He starts by going into the kitchen, although there are stairs to the basement and second floor from there.

Robert looked at David. “Aren’t you going to search the house?”

David replied “no need. I’m sure I’m not the murderer and I can’t win the game.”

Elizabeth walks by Jenny and whispers something into her ear. “Yes, I would like to find out what’s going on upstairs too. Jenny, would you like to join me?”

Jenny makes eye contact and smiles. “Certainly, at least to keep an eye on the others.” They take the stairway. Halfway up the stairs, Elizabeth takes Jenny by the hand, although only Robert noticed this fact.

David asked Robert, “You don’t seem to be in a hurry to explore.”

Robert looked up from his tablet. “I think the answer to this mystery lies in watching others, listening to what they say and do and what they don’t say, like in court.”

David smiles. “You may have the right strategy Robert. Good luck.”

Laura comes back downstairs holding a bloody dagger with a gloved hand. “You might be interested to see what I found in the attic.”

Robert asks nervously “David, I hope that isn’t real blood.”

David replies “of course not, just a piece of the puzzle.” Before they could continue positing about the significance of the dagger, the lights go out. We hear thunder and footsteps. There is the shadow of a person running outside, past the first floor window.

Although still in darkness, Robert points it out to Laura. “Did you see that?”

Laura quickly deduced the significance. “Yes. That person was outside the house. If it were one of us, they would forfeit the game. We should be able to detect rain on their clothing.”

The lights come back on and Nancy returns as well announcing another discovery. “I found a clue. This rope was under a bed upstairs.”

Forgetting that she was involved in a game, Laura responded in her normal role as a detective. “Give that to me. There may be skin cells on it.”

Robert contradicted her theory. “Come now Laura. You can’t believe there has been an actual murder here, do you?”

Laura took a yard size white cloth out of her pocket, laid the dagger and rope on it and said “I’ll just keep an open mind until we have some answers.”

Nancy hears a chime in her earpiece and listens for her clue.

YOUR SEARCH HAS BEEN REWARDED. YOU FOUND A CLUE TO THE IDENTITY OF THE VICTIM. THE ROPE WAS PLACED UNDER THE BED BY THE MURDERER TO DISTRACT YOU. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM WAS POISONED.

Not wanting to let anyone know she got a clue, she quickly changed the attention back to Laura. “By the way, wasn’t Jim with you?”

Laura responded naturally. “Yes, but we split up to cover more rooms. Wasn’t Antonio with you?”

Nancy gave her answer quickly. “He pulled a disappearing act. I turned around and he had just vanished. Ironic for a magician, yes?”

Robert tried to put in a puzzle piece. “We saw the shadow of someone run across that window. It could have been Antonio.”

Laura added “or Jim, John, Elizabeth or Jenny. We will know more when everyone returns.”

Just as his name was mentioned, John returned from the kitchen, holding a small bottle of liquid labeled *Aconitum*. “I found this hidden in a kitchen cabinet. Nancy, is there any reason this would be used in cooking?”

Nancy had never heard of the substance. “Not that I know of. David, is this a clue?”

David took the bottle, read the label and then opened it. “Well, let’s see” and he took a sip, shocking his guests. “Well, I guess it’s not real poison.”

Laura realized the same fact. “Let’s put it on the table with the dagger and rope.” Then she heard the chime in her earpiece and her personal clue.

JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE A DETECTIVE, DO NOT ASSUME THAT YOU ARE ABOVE SUSPICION. IN FACT, SOMEONE IS TRYING TO LEAD OTHERS IN YOUR DIRECTION. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER IS A MAN.

Robert summed it up. A dagger, rope and poison, but no gun. “Wasn’t Steven killed by a gunshot?”

Laura assumed so. “He must have been shot. I heard the gun. Let’s look for it.”

Robert held up his hand. “Wait a minute. Jim’s in uniform and I think he’s armed.”

Jim returns to find the others staring at him. “Jim, we think your gun was used to kill Steven.”

Jim is shocked. “No, it wasn’t,” showing his gun. Jim empties the bullets out and one is missing. “Someone is trying to frame me. This gun hasn’t been fired.”

Then Laura says, “Let me see your gun officer.” Jim hands her the gun. “He’s right. This gun hasn’t been fired.”

Jim was relieved to hear Laura defend him and now he hears a chime with his clue.

AS A POLICE OFFICER, YOU PROBABLY EXAMINED ALL OF THE EVIDENCE, BUT WHAT YOU DIDN’T KNOW WILL HELP YOU SOLVE THE CRIME. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE VICTIM IS A MAN.

“But this one has” said Jenny as she comes into the room. “I found this one upstairs and it’s still smoking.”

Robert’s expression is incredulous. “A smoking gun. Really?”

Jenny hands Laura the gun. “Well, this may be smoking, but it’s not a real gun. It’s a starter pistol, but it sounds like the real thing.” Laura puts the gun on the table with the dagger, rope and poison.

Antonio and Elizabeth return. “What’s going on?” said Antonio. Then he hears the chime in his earpiece.

YOU ARE PROBABLY WONDERING WHY IT TOOK SO LONG TO GET YOUR CLUE, BUT YOUR PATIENCE WILL PAY OFF. YOUR CLUE IS THAT THE MURDERER LEFT THE HOUSE DURING THE GAME.

Steven enters the library with a bag of money, the kind you saw in the old monopoly game with an oversized dollar sign on it. "Here you go sir."

David took the bag. "Thank you Steven. It's time for each of you to guess the name of the murderer."

Jim was first to guess. "Well, let's look at our clues. We have a dagger with blood on it, a rope, a bottle of poison and a gun." I think it is Antonio. He was missing at some key times and he's the only one I can't account for."

Jenny agreed. "Yes, I think it was Antonio too."

Laura was the only real detective here. Surely her guess would be correct. "I think it was Jim. Even though we ruled his gun out as the weapon, he could have used the starter pistol earlier." Antonio and Nancy readily got on board with Laura's guess.

Robert added his thoughts. "But what about the person we saw running across the window? And why didn't anyone have rain on his or her clothing? I think it was Elizabeth. She was out quite a bit."

John agreed with Robert. "Yes, Elizabeth. She was out a couple times."

Elizabeth was surprised to hear she was being accused. She knew she didn't murder Steven. "Well, I happen to know the murderer's name had five letters. It was my personal clue, so I think it had to be Nancy. After all, there was poison in the kitchen."

David gave everyone the answer they had been waiting for. "You're all wrong! Actually, Steven was the murderer. He poisoned ME with the soup. But since I am required to manage the game, I could not divulge my secret until now. Remember the directions I gave you in the beginning. Only personal clues are accurate; whatever else you see, hear or infer could be misleading. You are likely to see and hear many things. Don't trust anyone."

Elizabeth objected. "Wait, my clue was that the murderer's name had five letters."

Then David explained. "Yes, Steven has five letters. S T E V and N. The E is used twice."

David points to Steven. “He doesn’t have rabbit hairs on his trousers anymore because he changed clothing when he came inside from the rain. His clothing was dry and there weren’t any rabbit hairs from when the rabbit cuddled up against him earlier. This means that no one here was correct and this money will go to charity.” The guests applauded David for his generosity and asked about having another game next year.

Nancy’s refined sense of smell alerted her. “Something smells funny.”

Robert looked up. “It’s coming from upstairs.”

Jim heads upstairs and returns with the package delivered earlier. “The smell is definitely coming from this package.” While Jim took a note out from brown paper wrapping, the guests looked at each other, while grimacing with the increasingly putrid smell.

“What does it say Jim?” People are holding their noses now, making exaggerated sounds of disgust. Jim reads the note out loud.

“To our detectives. I know you have all done your best to solve our mystery. Here’s some final food for thought.” Jim opens the box to show everyone the rotting contents. “I hope you enjoyed the red herrings.”

With no winner, the guests finish their drinks and have dessert. During the evening, acquaintances became friends and promises were made to keep in touch. A date to get together at Nancy’s restaurant was confirmed. David joins the others in an oversized limousine and Steven drives everyone to a jazz club in San Francisco.

Mozart’s chamber music emanated from the room speakers. The ominous sounds of owls, thunder and footsteps are gone. The sound of rain has been replaced by the swishing of washing dishes and the wind gusts by the vacuuming of carpets. Although no one was ever in danger, the house has taken on a peaceful, if not sedate, demeanor. Finally, Maria has finished putting away the dishes and is wiping down the excess water around the sink when she hears a chime. She pauses and looks at the speaker above her head when a voice comes on.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN ME FOR A DRINK?

Justice

The Black Hole

Sometimes you walk right into the devil's lair and don't realize it until it's too late. What may seem like a perfectly safe activity can turn into a nightmare that can last for years. We have all fallen into this trap. Thousands of messages have drugged us into the belief that this is a place of refuge, a haven in the midst of chaos, a respite from the storm of life. This false sense of security has sent millions into the abyss. Very few have survived a visit here and even fewer have had their vengeance.

"Welcome, son. I'm Sam Wakowski. What's your name?"

Don hesitantly offered his hand. "Don Marinelli."

The manager took Don's hand firmly and pulled it in a little. "Good to meet you Don. Thanks for coming in today. How can I help you?"

Don's guard was up. "My lease is ending and I'd like to start a new one."

Sam smiled, not pausing long enough to give Don time to think. "Always a good idea. Let me show you something a little better for a guy like you." They walked right past the base model to the Eclipse coupe. "Not married Don? I could tell. This is what you should be driving."

Don looked at the price tag. "Whoa. I don't have that kind of money."

Don slid into the sports car, wrapped his hands around the custom leather grip and closed his eyes. The smell was intoxicating. Don could imagine a lithe coed in the passenger seat, twenty something, with jeans and a Danskin top under a loose cardigan. "How much a month?"

Sam rubbed his thumb and finger. "We can take your car in, pay it off and make a new lease work for you."

The next week Don opened a letter from the dealer. They wanted to renegotiate the terms of his contract. They wanted to increase his monthly lease by \$100. He ignored the letter(s). The next month they started calling him. Finally they sent a certified letter-threatening lawsuit. Either sign the new contract or return the car. That morning, at 5am, Don drove the new car into the lot, slid the keys into the service slot and hiked over to the BART station to go to work. The coed would have to wait.

More letters, more calls. Don was having trouble sleeping but he had to end this. He called the dealer. Sam answered. "Don, yes thank you for calling. We just want to sort this out, let us all move on." Don agreed to come in. He sat in the manager's office, on the swivel chair that didn't swivel. He started to perspire. In the corner was a sign that read:

All signed contracts are final. Consumers may not change the terms of their agreement after they have taken possession of the vehicle.

“Don, we want to put this behind us so we’re prepared to make a deal. You can still take the new car with the new lease or you can take back your trade in and leave.”

Don was puzzled. “But I returned the car. Your letter said if I return the car, it’s settled.”

Sam was getting testy. “But returning the new car means you have to take back your trade in.”

Now Don was feeling his heartbeat. “But I have a signed contract releasing me from the trade in and your sign says...”

But Sam cut him off. “I’m sorry, that’s the way it works.” Sam reached over and touched his arm. “Listen, you don’t want to make this legal. You can’t win.”

Don was feeling short of breath. “I’ll think about it.”

Sam looked like the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary. “Sure, take a day or two. We’ll clean up your old car or have the new one ready by Friday.”

Don met with an attorney but was told that it would cost him thousands of dollars to fight it and most firms wouldn’t bother with such a small case. He left crestfallen with no idea what to do. He decided to plea his case to a legal website where dozens of law firms may review it.

The tall blonde walked into the dealership, sat down in the chair and crossed her legs. Her face was perfect and her body was even better. The blue blazer over a white blouse, the grey, wool pleated skirt, the white stockings and navy blue high heels turned every head in the place. Her hair didn’t just shine; it sparkled. When she opened her lips, her smile rendered the men immobile. Every man in the place was locked in his own private fantasy; even the female customer service manager was drawn like a Klingon ship caught in a tractor beam.

The manager straightened his tie, tucked at his belt and sat across from her. With the false hope of an amateur against Mohammed Ali, he glided toward her. He had no chance. Everyone knew it but him. “How can I help you sweetheart?”

The blonde leaned forward, revealing some cleavage and opening her mouth a little more, then said with a low, slow voice. “What’s your name sailor?”

Sam was visibly tense, but he stammered. “Sam Wakowski, gorgeous. And you are?”

Ready for the close, she flipped her hair back, winked and replied. “Serving you with a lawsuit.” Then she silently laughed and walked out the door.

Sam opened the subpoena. *Class action suit for fraudulent and misleading business practices against Sam Wakowski of Mantup Motors, Burlingame, California and their partners on behalf of five hundred seventy four (574) plaintiffs. This lawsuit seeks a judgment of \$40,000,000.00. Etc, etc and so on.* Sam clutched his chest and fell to the floor.

Trick or Treat

Joseph liked to use his lunch hour to exercise on the basketball court. On a windy, late October day, the sky was dark and threatening to rain. Colored leaves were strewn over the court and his usual group of friends had not shown up. "Must be the weather. Wimps." As he went up for a jump shot, a buzz in his pocket disrupted his concentration; the ball hit the front rim and rolled off the court. "What now?" He punched a button and saw a text message.

*Private client meeting...5pm at the Barclay
Restaurant of the Ritz Carlton. Tell no one and don't
be late.*

"Hmmm." He had been courting some clients away from his former firm. Maybe this was the payoff. Joseph headed back into the showers, and then returned to his brokerage office.

Karen was in the middle of a divorce settlement negotiation when her phone vibrated in her purse. "Excuse me a minute please." She flipped open the earpiece and saw a text message.

*Meet me at the Ritz Carlton at 4:30pm. Dress for
dinner. Keep confidential. A friend.*

Joseph and Karen had been married for six years. Their careers in finance and law had taken a toll on their plans for children as well as their love life. Professional obligations had often disrupted dinner plans. Both turning 30, they were entering another phase of life, one filled with stress and a review of their once ideal romance.

Joseph dotted off an email to Karen before heading to the hotel. "Honey, I have a business dinner. I probably won't be home till 8pm."

Karen paused a moment, then replied. "No worries. I'll have dinner with a friend and see you at home."

Karen left work early to shower. She put on her black dress, pearl necklace and earrings, then got into her BMW and left for the Ritz. When she arrived at the lobby, a concierge greeted her. "Karen Johnson?" Karen nodded. "Follow me please." The man led her behind the restaurant to the spa area, and then handed an envelope to the woman at the desk. "Ms. Johnson will be having a treatment before dinner."

Karen was startled but excited. "I don't have anything to change into."

The woman brought out a complimentary bundle of clothing, towels and toiletries. "We've been expecting you. Change into this Danskin and robe and go into the massage area at the back of the locker room."

Meanwhile Joseph pulled out his standby suit and shirt, all pressed for unexpected meetings. He thought the meeting must be with one of his college buddies he had been trying to get to invest so a professional appearance was necessary.

An athletic girl, no more than 20, greeted Karen at the massage table. “Ms. Johnson?” Karen smiled. “I’ll take your robe. Please lie on the table here.” New age music and scented candles accented the low lighting in the spa. The masseuse gave Karen a relaxing 20-minute massage. “Please take 10 minutes in our Eucalyptus steam bath, then dress for dinner. Your reservation is waiting under your name at the Barclay at 5:30pm.” Karen was too relaxed to question the directions and happily glided into the steam room to continue her relaxing diversion.

Joseph walked up to the host at the restaurant. “Do you have a reservation for Joseph Charles?”

The host was expecting him. “Certainly, Mr. Charles, right over here” leading him to a secluded table in the corner by the piano. As he sat down, he noticed the table was set for two. Joseph took the menu and looked over the entrees.

“Joseph, is that you?” said a tall brunette in a business suit. It was a woman from Karen’s law firm.

“Susan, so nice to see you. What brings you here?”

Susan gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Just finished a business meeting. I was going to have dinner. May I join you?”

Joseph saw how this was going. “Love to” and he held out a chair for her. Joseph had flirted with Susan at the Christmas party so this was a most pleasant surprise. If she had planned this, he knew his night would be exciting.

Knowing that her husband was busy, Karen arrived at the restaurant with anticipation. “I believe there is a reservation for Karen Johnson” she told the host.

“Yes, Ms. Johnson, you’re table is over here” leading her to a booth out of sight from Joseph and Susan.

Noticing that the booth was set up for two, Karen continued. “My guest hasn’t arrived yet?”

The host reassured her. “He will be right here. He said he had to pick up something.

Then Karen saw Rick, an old boyfriend from college, holding flowers. “Karen, so nice of you to come.”

Karen stood up and kissed Rick on the cheek, noticing he was not wearing a ring. “What’s this about?”

Rick sat down. “Oh, there’s no harm in old friends getting together for dinner. I figured you’re working too hard in that law firm and needed a night out.”

Karen stroked her wedding ring but didn't object. "Dinner would be lovely, thank you and the spa was especially just what I needed."

Rick didn't know anything about a spa treatment, figuring Karen came early and got a massage. "Yes, their spa is quite nice."

Joseph assumed that Susan had arranged this all along, especially when she rubbed her foot against his leg and held his hand. Joseph hadn't felt this kind of excitement for quite some time with Karen and he welcomed the attention. But he knew this indiscretion would have to be their secret since Susan worked with Karen. "So Susan, are you seeing anyone?"

Susan made eye contact. "Not presently. Does it matter?" she said with a wicked smile.

Joseph stroked the inside of her arm. "Just curious," he replied. Joseph and Susan had a most flirtatious dinner, each letting down their inhibitions, helped by champagne and body language. When it was time for dessert, Susan excused herself. She leaned over to Joseph and whispered in his ear. "I'll be right back lover. Bring us something chocolate with whipped cream" and she blew slowly into his ear.

"Waiter" Joseph called and he ordered something decadent from the dessert menu. The romantic jazz playing on the piano only heightened his anticipation.

Karen was similarly letting go. She needed a night of romance with an attentive man. "Rick, didn't you ever get married?"

Rick sighed. "Yes, but it didn't work out. My wife was married to her work and we drifted apart. I won't make that mistake again."

Karen was relieved by his attitude. Maybe this could be an affair without the complications. "I know what you mean" as she held his hand. "Would you excuse me a minute?" Before she could enter the ladies room, (and possibly run into Susan), a buzz came from her phone.

Go to the lobby and get a key for room 742. I'll be waiting. ;)

She freshened up, went to the lobby and picked up the key. When she got to the room, she saw candles and rose petals around the bed and heard Diana Krall music coming from speakers. It was dark, just the flickering of candles to see by. Karen gently undressed and got into bed, then closed her eyes.

After a few minutes, Joseph got a text from his phone. Thinking his wife was looking for him, his smile turned to concern.

I'm in room 742. Bring the dessert with you in ten minutes. Our little secret ;)

Joseph's tension was reignited. He asked the waiter for the check and to have the dessert bagged to go.

Joseph picked up the dessert and a room key, and then got into the elevator. Loosening his tie, he decided that he deserved this fling. Karen had been paying more attention to work than to him and what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. He silently entered the room, put down the dessert, undressed and got into bed. Then, like an earthquake, the two devoured each other for thirty minutes before either of them realized it was their spouse. What happened? Deciding that this was some delightful mistake, each pretended that the other had arranged for this meeting, less the dinner companion and made the best of it.

"Why lover, how long have you been planning this" she said to her husband.

Also, ignoring the obvious, Joseph replied. "You scamp. It's a good thing my wife is working."

After more champagne, conveniently laid out on the table, and dessert, Joseph and Karen continued their illicit lovemaking with each other, still pretending to have an affair, when suddenly a loud knock on the door interrupted their bliss.

"This is the police. Open up or we'll break the door down," which they did. (Cops never wait, do they?). "Ok boys, take them away."

The couple was shocked and confused. "What is this about?"

The policeman took out his pad. "So you don't know anything about the murder of one Rick Johnson and Susan Wilson? We have witnesses that put them with you earlier tonight at the restaurant. Thought you could make this a murder scene with sex chaser, did you?" Then the police took them away in handcuffs.

The Thief

“Hurry, that construction crew won’t be here all day. Cholo, stop playing with that makeup and look for jewelry.” The gang of three boys and one girl rifled through the house with speed and intensity. Opening all the drawers and closets, they threw personal items all over the floor. Balbina, the seventeen-year-old accomplice, took makeup, some purses and a scarf, putting it all in a school backpack she brought. She withheld her anger at Diego, the boyfriend, fearing he would send her back to the home she hated or the street. She stammered a reply.

“OK, I’ll go to the bedroom,” and off she went. She paused to look in a glass cabinet, filled with family heirlooms, Disney figures and colorful glass artwork. She took out a gold jar, admiring the delicate lines of inscription. ‘*To my beautiful daughter on her graduation day.*’ Balbina knew she wouldn’t graduate and didn’t have a father who would care if she did. Her mother was only twice her age and struggling to provide for her two younger brothers, still at home. Balbina left to get away from the poverty and child care duties she had been given. Her father was in prison, taking away any security she might have hoped for.

“Put a, you still daydreaming! We don’t have all day,” said the boyfriend. “Smash that cabinet and get to the bedroom.”

Balbina’s heartbeat quickened while she held back a tear. “Right away Diego,” and she gently laid down the jar, hoping Diego wouldn’t destroy it or the cabinet filled with this family’s memories. But Diego and his brothers were too busy disconnecting electronics and searching for drugs to care, so they left the fragile pieces alone. Maybe he just didn’t want to make more noise that might draw attention from a neighbor.

In fifteen minutes they were gone, out the back yard, across a county lot and into a panel van. The guys, still in their late teens, grabbed two HDTVs, a laptop, 200 DVDs (mostly blu-ray) and a digital camera. Balbina took two purses, makeup and costume jewelry, items that made her feel as though she was part of a family. Diego and his brothers threatened to leave her behind next time, saying she wasn’t taking anything worth selling.

Susan drove into the driveway and saw the smashed sliding door. She panicked, looked around and called her husband. “Jeffrey, we’ve been robbed,” and she began to cry.

Her husband tried to get her to calm down. “I’ll be right home. Call 911 and don’t go inside until I get there.” Susan, still shaking, walked out to the front of the house, afraid to run into the burglars and waited for the police. The police secured the home, dusted for fingerprints and left the homeowners to put back their lives after this invasion.

Back in the neighborhood, Balbina was showing off her makeup, jewelry and purses. She gave a purse and a necklace to her friend Gabriella, who wasn't part of a gang and still in school. "Gaby, this is for your quinceanera and for staying in school." Gabriella hugged her friend.

"These are so beautiful. Gracias Balbina." Gabriella's childhood wasn't taken from her, like Balbina's. Balbina never told her that these items were stolen. They looked new and Gabriella didn't know Balbina was in a gang now, much less that she just helped rob a house. Feeling more guilty than happy, Balbina decided to break up with Diego, leave the gang and move out of the area.

Meanwhile Susan and Jeffrey were trying to recover from the physical losses and emotional terror. Although a lot of the jewelry was locked in a safe, the ones that were taken were from her mother, who passed away just after Susan had gotten married. When she discovered that her mother's wedding ring was gone, Susan cried and held onto Jeffrey. "They took my mom's wedding ring."

Jeffrey consoled her. "It's going to be all right Susan. Maybe the police will catch the thieves."

Gabriella was chatting with a friend in study hall when a police officer came in and put her in handcuffs. "What are you doing," she screamed. In the back of the patrol car she cried hysterically.

"One of the teachers turned you in. The homeowners you robbed sent an email to the school offering a reward for information on items that were stolen. This purse was on the list. See the inscription on the inside."

Gabriella stuttered and replied. "I didn't steal anything. That purse was given to me by a friend for my 16th birthday."

The officer reviewed his report. "Yes, Balbina Gonzalez, we have her print on a jar from the crime scene. We're looking for her now."

Humor

Preheat the Microwave.Com

Instead of complaining about old people, Lisa decided to make lemonade. She got the idea during a visit to her grandmother. “Nana, what do you want for dinner?” she said.

“There’s some chicken in the freezer, Lisa. That would be good.” Nana filled a plastic measuring cup with water and put it in the microwave, set the timer to three minutes and pressed start.

“I can make your tea, Nana. You relax and watch your show.”

Nana put her hand on Lisa’s arm. “No dear. You have to preheat the microwave.” Lisa paused silently, realizing that her grandmother was completely serious.

So Lisa made a deal with the maintenance guy to put hidden cameras and audio bugs in and around her Nana’s elderly housing apartments, in the dining room, laundry room and in the elevator. They created an Internet site, *Preheat the Microwave.Com*. “Oh Mike, this will be so funny” she said touching his arm. If Lisa and Mike weren’t married to others, this might have been the start of something. “These old timers never go on the Internet and we’re not going to use any names. Besides, I checked with a lawyer and he said there’s no problem.”

Unit 204: “Where’s the remote control?” said Sam.

“Here, eat your oatmeal dear,” said his wife Alice.

“My show is coming on and I need the remote.”

“Look, I left the lumps in, just like you like it.”

“What lumps? I don’t want lumps in my oatmeal. Lumps are for cream of wheat!”

Alice watched Sam search for the remote. “Did you take your medicine dear?”

Sam poked his oatmeal with a spoon. “How do you make lumps in oatmeal anyway? Are these raisins or something?” A bell rings from the kitchen. “Phone” said Sam.

“No, that’s the bread I’m baking dear. The lumps are fiber, they’re good for you.”

Sam reaches into the seat cushion. “It’s got to be here somewhere.” As he shifts, the television starts up. “See, it went on.” A telephone from the show rings. “Alice, the phone is still ringing.”

“That’s the TV dear, eat your oatmeal.”

Sam finds the remote. “Ha, got it. I don’t want lumps of fiber, I want lumps of cream of wheat.” The doorbell rings. “Alice, please get the phone!”

Alice walks to the door. “That’s the doorbell dear. Eat your oatmeal. The doctor said it’s good for you. Oh, hi Cathy. What brings you here?”

Cathy peeks in at Sam. “Hi Sam. I just wanted to tell you guys, the movie tonight is supposed to be ‘R’ rated!”

Alice giggles. “R, how about that? OK, see you there. Sam did you hear that?”

Sam strains to get out of his chair. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

The Laundry Room: Ralph was doing the laundry for his wife. He put her clothes and detergent in the washer, turned the temperature dial to hot and waited. When they were done, he put them in the dryer and sat reading the sports page. *Bzzz*. Clothes were dry. “I told her I could do laundry.” He folded the red dress and pink underwear, put it in the cart and headed back to the apartment.

The Dining Room: A conspiracy theory was going around that the serving lady didn’t like short people. One of the smaller residents compared her meal to the others. “See, your fish is twice as big as mine. And you have more vegetables too.”

Her dining companions looked at her sympathetically. A man replied, “I have the chicken with rice.”

The Elevator: Margaret pulled her vacuum cleaner while carrying her laundry basket. She walked into the elevator and pressed one for the laundry room. Unfortunately, the cord for the vacuum cleaner had come undone as she walked. A few seconds later Margaret heard a whipping sound, the cord catching between the elevator and the floor she had left. The vacuum cleaner started to bounce up and down from the tension. She took refuge in the corner until the elevator stopped.

Juan, a San Francisco policeman, found the bugs when visiting his mom; the prints came back to Lisa, so he got a techie to reverse the signal on the camera and audio bug, along with a transmitter and placed it in Nana’s apartment. The wireless signal was then sent to a police surveillance website.

The tenants were gathering to watch the movie. “Who is this, Clara?”

“Oh, this is my grandson Jeffrey,” said Clara.

“What do you do dear?”

Jeffrey said, “I’m an attorney.”

After he walked away, Clara whispered. “It’s sad, he thinks he’s a lawyer, but he just got released from the psych unit at Stanford.”

With Nana upstairs at the movie, Lisa arranged to meet Mike at her apartment to look at some of the videos. Lisa pulled up the website and selected her favorite. “This is great, I still can’t believe that vacuum cleaner clip,” she said laughing. The laughter turned to passion and Mike grabbed Lisa and pulled her to him. Lisa yielded eagerly and within minutes their clothes were off and they were on the living room floor.

But somehow the router in the building picked up the video signal. In the community room where the residents had gathered to watch the movie, Mike and Lisa were now on the big screen. Suddenly, dozens of elderly citizens were being treated to an X-rated show, with Mike the maintenance guy in a leading role!

“This is ‘R’ rated,” said Ralph. “What’s the name of this movie? I want to get the DVD.”

One of the dining room staff even walked around with refreshments. “Would you like some lemonade?”

An elderly woman reached over and said, “Do you have any pop corn?”

The cook said, “In a minute, we’re preheating the microwave.”

Traffic Stop with Annie Kim

“And those are the headlines. Let’s check in with Annie Kim and Traffic Stop.” The readers should imagine themselves in front of a large screen television where Annie Kim is driving the traffic stop reporters car.

“Thanks Bob. Well, here on the 405 it’s a typical LA drive time adventure. Some kids in a mustang speeding down the emergency lane and my producer Juan and I are trying to avoid some motorcycles weaving in and out of the fast lanes.”

A two-way camera is mounted in front of the traffic stop van providing a unique perspective as viewers at home see both Annie driving and the road ahead. These live traffic reports have bumped their news ratings up five points.

Bob, back at the anchor desk voices over the live feed. “Looks like you’re giving us a front row seat Annie.”

“That’s right Bob. You can almost feel what we’re...” Annie screams and slams on the brakes. Annie and Juan lunge forward and the inside windshield is sprayed with a take out menu, some Mexican food leftovers, soft drinks and reporter notes. Hip-hop music blares from a nearby El Camino low rider. “I think we’re all right Bob, but that was close.” The traffic stop van continues down the freeway.

Normally, traffic reporters hitch a ride with a news helicopter or report from the studio while watching camera feeds. Helicopters are often grounded by weather and their perspective is from a mile off the ground. Reporting from a studio is even more remote and lacks the sounds of the road. Traffic Stop had revolutionized traffic reporting, even making it interesting and no other station had it.

“I’m telling you at home. If you don’t have to drive, don’t. There must be a full moon, eh Juan.” The viewers see Juan nod in agreement. “As I was going to say, we’re approaching the 10 in Culver City and we’re just getting back up to cruising speed.” A farm vehicle cuts the van off. Annie screams again, slams on the brakes. Annie and Juan are sent forward again. The inside windshield is sprayed with donuts, plastic utensils and a hairbrush. Outside, a chicken bounces off the windshield and we hear squawks and panicked chicken sounds. Some mariachis band music comes up from a pickup truck on their left.

Bob interjects from the studio. “Annie, maybe it’s time you called it a day.”

Annie composes herself and they continue driving. “No way, Bob, but this does remind me of driving in Rome. We just passed the 10, heading towards the Marina freeway and Inglewood. Things are starting to calm down ahead of us. We can see the farmer in our rear view mirror picking up poultry and some pigs running in between cars, holding up traffic behind them.” Juan takes some notes and shakes his head. “Three’s the charm Juan?”

We see a picture in picture pop up box for the weather reporter. “Annie, you won’t believe this, but we are hearing that strong cross winds are headed right for you. Maybe you should call it a day.”

Annie hits the accelerator. “Not now. I think our viewers at home would like to see how this ends.”

But the traffic lightened and there were no more incidents for the moment. “False alarm, Bob. We don’t see anything that would indicate strong cross winds. You might as well go to a commercial.” As Annie and Juan continued down the freeway, an ambulance siren is heard from behind them.

Coming out of commercial, Bob throws it back to the traffic reporter. “Folks, we’re going to rejoin Annie in Traffic Stop, just to make sure they’re all right.”

The television screen flips back. “Bob, I think we have an ambulance coming up on our left. We’re going to pull over. We’ll see if we can catch up to give you a first hand report.”

The traffic stop van eventually caught up to the accident. A semi-tractor truck had spun off the road, blocking the two right hand lanes. The back doors were open and you could almost see what was falling out, slowly jamming traffic. Suddenly, something flew up in front of their van. It was a super ball; in fact it was hundreds of super balls. “We’re almost there Bob. It looks like.” Annie screamed and slammed on the brakes. Annie and Juan were thrown forward again. The inside of the windshield was sprayed with burger wrappers, French fries and water bottles. Outside, the front of the windshield was pelted with dozens of super balls. You could hear metal music loud and clear from a motorcycle sliding by, trying to avoid the rubber obstacles. The van now looked like it had been through some sort of Halloween prank. The camera shot returned to Annie.

“And that’s the way the way the ball bounces. This is Annie Kim with Traffic Stop for KOOK in Los Angeles. Back to you Bob.”

The Rich are Going to Hell

“Why would he say that?” The gentrified couple couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“It’s just to get our attention,” whispered the woman to her husband. “It must be about being thankful for what you have.”

The husband adjusted his glasses. “I don’t see the point. We don’t have to put up with this” and they left brusquely. The preacher continued without hesitating.

The audience was adorned with khaki slacks, polo shirts and topsiders. The tax lawyer in the third row queried his second (trophy) wife. “We take time out on a Sunday to come here and this is what we hear.”

The preppy blonde with the degree in art history agreed. “This is in very poor taste. We could have gone to the beach.” Their attention was drawn back to the speaker.

“Look at your cars, your homes, your vacation homes and your country clubs. Do you think they make you a better person? Do you think you have some special blessing from above? No, you’re the same as the homeless man in the street, the poor woman who takes the bus to clean your house, the laid off teacher struggling to feed her children.”

Old money and Nouveau riche sat side by side this morning. There was a tailored man in a seersucker jacket, crisp Brooks Brothers oxford and pastel blue tie who looked like he just landed from Martha’s Vineyard. Next to him was a woman in pinstripe blue and power tie, obviously a Wall Street broker. She leaned over to her friend and spoke. “I thought this was going to be about the goodness of money, how it’s a sign of being blessed.”

“Look at your life. What do you think about? What do you do each day? How much time do you give to self-examination, peeling back the layers and finding out what your core really is? Who among you can say ‘I have earned everything I have’?”

People started to file out, first one by one, then in small groups. The congregation of about 100 quickly dwindled to just a couple dozen willing to listen.

“But not everyone wants to hear” he said gesturing to the people exiting the tent. “They don’t want to give up their comfortable life or face the fact that their life has been wasted in the pursuit of money. Who here is willing to peel away the layers of shame in public, to examine their life in full view of God and this audience?”

A man in his thirties timidly raised his hand. “Thank you son. Don’t be afraid. Come up here and tell us your story.”

The man took the microphone. “My name is Alex. I made a lot of money with an Internet scam that preyed on the elderly. I’m ashamed of what I have done.”

The preacher nodded as he placed his hand on the man’s shoulder. “We have all sinned son. Repentance starts with confession. What do you want to do now?”

Alex cleared his throat and continued. “I could send a gift anonymously to all those I cheated.”

The man of the cloth looked up. “Anonymously? Will that clear your conscience Alex?”

Alex responded, “What else can I do?”

The preacher replied, “Get down on your knees and pray, in front of your brothers and sisters, so that you may be cleansed.”

The man knelt down as the preacher held the microphone for him. “Now admit what you have done son.”

Alex spoke into the mike. “I have stolen money and ruined the lives of decent honest people. I have done this without guilt or remorse.”

The preacher reassured Alex. “This is the start of a new life. Through your confession, you can begin again. Go and sin no more.”

Suddenly, two men hustled the speaker off his pulpit, dragging him away from the congregation. This surprising incident shocked the listeners, many of who whispered to their companions with explanations of what just happened. Everyone finally left the tent toward the row of BMWs and other luxury cars. On their way out, the trophy wife asked her husband. “Why do you think this guy was speaking at a car dealership anyway?”

Sins of the Father

Like Father, Like Son

The headmistress called the boy's parents in for a conference to discuss a troubling incident she had just discovered. "Mr. and Mrs. Rook. Thank you for coming in. I'm sorry to say that Clay has been stealing money from classmates."

"Stealing?" said Clay's mother Amber. "We certainly taught him better than that."

"Are you sure?" said the father. "Clayton was given very specific instructions for the school year, considering the fiasco of last semester. By the way, has everyone been compensated?"

"Yes, Mr. Rook. The settlement was quite satisfactory. The parents were more embarrassed than anything."

"Call me Charles, please."

Meanwhile, the school psychologist, Dr. Wilson, was examining Clay in his office. He began by asking him when he first learned how to manipulate people.

"My father helped me build a lemonade stand when I was five. First, we white washed it, and then we used yellow paint to write *LEMONADE* on the top, with the 'E' reversed of course. Pictures of lemons and a pitcher completed the simple graphics."

"And how old were you when you had this lemonade stand?" said the psychologist.

"I was five. I believe my father was 43."

"Master Clay, I don't need to know how old your father was. Now tell me, why did you want a lemonade stand? You don't need the money?"

"Father said it would be good practice."

"Practice. For what?"

"Using people to make money. Father says you should always use people to get what you want."

"That sounds like the cause of our present day problem, Master Clay. Our math teacher, Mr. Wood, says you were running a Ponzi scheme on your classmates."

"And two staff members as well, doctor."

"And how did running the lemonade stand prepare you?"

“We charged \$3 for a small cup. Father said the people in Oak Park couldn’t resist a small boy’s pleas. I held a sign with a picture of a yellow pitcher of lemonade and the price, \$3 next to it. People were meant to think that a whole pitcher was \$3, and then when they asked for just a cup, I would oblige and ask for \$3. They were too embarrassed to admit they had misinterpreted the cost and too wealthy to care.”

“Your father taught you this lesson at age five?” The psychologist was astonished at the prodigy in his office and the depth of depravity his father displayed in raising him this way.

“Father said it was time I put childish things away. I’m not sure what he meant at the time, but I suppose it had something to do with my proclivity to play, rather than work. He said playing was for the waifs in the city.”

Dr. Wilson, stunned for the moment, tried to fathom why his mother didn’t intervene. “What about your mother?”

“Oh, mother helped also. She wore a tight sweater and short skirt in order to distract the men while I pitched the lemonade, no pun intended. She was particularly effective at whispering in their ear, something I couldn’t hear, but it certainly made selling small cups of lemonade for \$3 quite easy.”

The doctor shook his head and sighed. “I’m sorry your childhood was cut short. But I don’t think it’s too late. I’m going to speak with your parents about this and see if we can salvage some fun before it’s too late.”

“Mother and father may fight you on this one doctor. I am really quite content with my life at this point. I wouldn’t want to trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble, Master Clay. I can assure you. As a doctor and therapist, it is my duty to protect you from an unhealthy environment and work with your family to rectify the problem before it’s too late.”

“What problem, doctor?”

“I’m afraid you display all the signs of a narcissist and sociopathic personality disorder. Unchecked, this could lead to more serious consequences when you leave school.”

“I see. Will this require ongoing therapy?”

“I’m going to recommend at least three sessions a week, until we can work through the major issues. At least until I know you aren’t a danger to yourself or others.”

“I don’t think I’m a danger, doctor.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. You can continue attending school and we can meet here on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I’m also going to meet with your parents every Thursday.”

“If that’s what you recommend, doctor. Can we start next week? Today is my birthday and my parents are taking me out to the city tonight.”

“Of course.”

Then there was a knock on the door. The headmistress and Clay’s parents asked to come in. Dr. Wilson opened the door.

“Come in. We were just finishing. I’m very optimistic that we can put together a plan, a team approach, so that Clay can get a new direction with love and support from you both.”

“Thank you doctor,” said Charles. “Then we’ll be on our way. Clayton has a birthday party to attend in the city.”

“Come along Clayton,” said Amber. “It’s your special day. You only turn seven once, you know.”

“Yes, mother.”

Unfaithful

“I’d like to open an account,” said the engaging Latina with long, black hair as she glided into the office.

Clayton held out a chair for her. “It’s a great day to invest. What is your name dear?”

She crossed her legs and stroked her pearl necklace. “Ariadna Ramirez. Call me Ari.”

Clayton shifted his body to hide his enthusiasm. “Ari, how much did you want to start with?”

She leaned forward. “\$10,000 for now, Mr.?”

Clayton excused himself. “Sorry, Clayton Rook. Ari, I’m so glad to meet you.” His smile was as crooked as Ari’s was pure.

But Ari was really an undercover agent for the SEC, assigned to flush out brokers who were stealing from their clients. Clayton came to her attention because he had swindled her cousin Mateo out of his life savings between 1999 and 2005. He encouraged Mateo to invest in high tech sector funds, with huge broker fees, even as the bottom was falling out of the market. Mateo lost \$80,000 over that time period without even a phone call or letter from the broker advising him to make changes in his portfolio.

After Clayton created Ari’s account, now tagged with electronic traces, he thought he would try to establish a different kind of rapport. “Ari, I have time for lunch. Would you join me to celebrate your future wealth?”

She knew he had taken the bait without a clue. “Why not.”

At lunch Clayton brushed his hand against hers and left it there. Ari glanced and replied, “Aren’t you married?” spying the wedding ring.

Clayton rubbed her finger slowly. “Well, that depends on you” and he made eye contact.

Ari played the part. “Hmm. Do you have time for another meeting?” as she nodded toward the registration desk from the hotel restaurant.

The next day Clayton was making changes to Ari’s account. He saw a flash investment memo pop up on his screen:

*Evergreen utilities stock. Opening now at \$7.50 per share.
40% commission on new account investing over \$5,000.*

Clayton decided to move Ari's entire account into the stock, take his commission and falsify documents to show her where her money was invested. He figured he had at least a year to create a trail of circumstances that would explain any losses while he pocketed a cool \$4000. What he didn't know was that Evergreen Utilities was a dummy company, set up by the SEC as part of the sting.

Together in the hotel bar that night, Ari asked Clayton about the investment. "So where have you put my money?"

Clayton had the cool demeanor of a used car salesman. "Diversified portfolio. Stocks, bonds, annuities and even a little gold."

Ari teased him a little. "Will I get a statement soon?"

Clayton never hesitated. "It's all online. Here is the login and password."

Ari thought to herself. He even set up a dummy portfolio. Smooth. She stroked Clayton's cheek. "Good. Then we have more time for us." As they were about to go upstairs to the room, they heard a commercial on the television set above the bar. It was for Clayton's financial services company.

Stay on the right financial path. Follow the yellow brick road to retirement. Call an advisor you can trust. We'll give you the time and attention you deserve.

Unknown to Clayton (and the SEC), Ari ran a stealth program on his finances, gradually funneling funds from his accounts to an untraceable account for Mateo. Basically, it worked this way. For every dollar that Clayton took from Ari, \$8 was transferred to Mateo from Clayton's accounts. But the missing money never appeared on Clayton's records; there were phantom numbers to keep Clayton in the dark.

"Don't you feel bad betraying your wife?"

Clayton took Ari in his arms. "If she doesn't ask questions, she can't get hurt, right?" It was the same character flaw that led to his financial malfeasance.

"Well, I'm glad you don't treat your clients that way." Ari winked. "Or your girlfriends."

Ari arranged to be in Clayton's office the day he was arrested for securities fraud. Mateo was reimbursed and Clayton had to make restitution to the SEC for the original \$10,000.

What's in a Name?

Clayton had just been released from prison for committing securities fraud. The guards took his orange jump suit and returned his civilian clothing, a fancy Wall Street suit, shirt, tie and Italian shoes. Having lost his license, he had to find a new job, one where his past transgressions wouldn't matter.

He was walking down the street where he once took expensive lunches with clients. He saw the men and women in their refined clothing, frittering away the afternoon with gourmet food and fine wines. He envied the men for their position in life, one he once had and the women he once had the pleasure of. Beautiful and intelligent women, with means and discretionary funds, money that he had stolen over the years. If only he hadn't run into Ari, the undercover SEC agent, the one who sent him to prison in the first place.

Then he saw her, Ari, eating lunch at one of the window tables. Ari was wearing her power blue business suit and she was dining with two women, dressed in jogging outfits. They must be famous athletes, to be dressed that way in a fancy French restaurant. Clayton ducked so that Ari couldn't see her and moved quickly down the street.

Within a month, Clayton had landed a job with a small broker who didn't bother to check up on his license. He knew he couldn't defraud anyone now or he would find himself back in jail. After work, he headed to the local watering hole.

"Hi, I'm Clayton" he said to the pretty brunette at the bar. "Do you mind if I sit here?" For all his faults, Clayton was still an attractive man in his early 40s and he hadn't lost his charming way with others.

"Sure. I'm Janet." She moved over to make room for Clayton. The bartender came over and Clayton held up a finger.

"What would you like Janet?"

"White wine, please?"

"Make that two, something top shelf."

Janet smiled and thanked Clayton for the gesture. "So what do you do Clayton?"

"I'm in brokerage. Mostly bonds. It's not as exciting as stocks, but a lot more stable." Prison had stifled some of his personality; he was more reserved than he used to be. This new persona was more attractive to women also.

"Oh, that doesn't sound boring," said Janet. "I'm in retail at Macy's. But I love clothing." She crossed her ankles and relaxed her body language, facing Clayton.

“Well yes, you’re surrounded by color and fashion and get to meet lots of people. Most of my work is on the phone.”

Small talk turned into dinner as they continued to get to know each other. By the end of the night, Clayton walked Janet back to her apartment. She gave him her number. “Call me if you’d like to get together again. Thanks for a nice night.” She kissed him on the cheek.

The old Clayton would have pushed to get into the apartment, but he just smiled and reciprocated. “I’d like that Janet. I will call you later.” And he did the next day.

Over the next month, the two became exclusive, meeting after work and on weekends with occasional overnights at her apartment. Clayton loved his new life, the chance to start over. If only he could keep his past transgressions from ruining this new relationship. But it never came up; perhaps Janet had something in her past too.

They met at a sports bar for drinks and dinner. “I made a big sale today Janet; one of the professional basketball players from the WNBA. We’re supposed to meet here to sign some papers. Do you mind?”

Janet hugged him. “That’s wonderful. Can I meet her?”

“I don’t see why not. Just give us a minute to do the paperwork and I’ll introduce you.”

“OK, I’ll wait at the bar. Just wave when I can come over.”

The patrons turned to notice the 6’5” athlete coming in, some clapping from the guys who recognized this forward. Clayton turned to meet her.

“Hi Ms. Robbins. I’m Mr. Rook. Seems like you have a lot of fans here.”

“It’s a blessing and a curse, believe me. But I have to get to the arena in an hour. Do you have the papers to sign?”

“Yes, right here.” He opened his portfolio and made an “X” where her signature should go.”

“You don’t mind if my friend reads this over first. I’m not a contract person.”

“No, not at all.”

Clayton’s whole body shook when he saw Ari walking over to the table. She quickly took out her phone and made a call. Janet could tell that Clayton was upset about something, but waited at the bar.

“Julie. You’re not signing any contracts with this man. He was convicted of securities fraud. Do you have his card?”

“Why yes, here” and she handed Clayton’s card to Ari.

“You’ll be hearing from us Mr. Rook.” The two left as Ari reassured her friend what she almost got involved with.

Janet came over to Clayton. “What’s wrong honey? I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Did you lose the sale?”

“Yes dear. I’m afraid so.”

Within weeks, Clayton was arrested and convicted again. As he was processed into prison, they took his clothes and issued him an orange jump suit with his name on the back:

C ROOK

Back from the War

The Chess Table

U-Tapao, Thailand (1972)

Soon after his arrival, Tony found it in a shop outside his Air Force base on the Gulf of Siam. It was a two-foot chess table made of teak wood-stained with light and dark squares- with two drawers for pieces and sitting on five-inch legs. This simple set reminded him of games with his father back in Boston.

He smiled at the short, old man wearing a brown and yellow shirt. “Hmm. How much for this?”

“500 Baht,” said the proprietor after holding the table up and showing the dovetail joints. “Fine craftsmanship. See how the pieces are dressed.”

Tony wiped his palms on the seat of his pants. “50 Baht,” he said, trying to hide his enthusiasm.

The old man shook his head. “This is a lucky table. Will bring good fortune to owner. 400 Baht.”

Tony rubbed his chin. The set would look great in his hut, but he mustn’t seem too eager. After pausing a moment, he countered, “200 Baht.”

“300 Baht, American. That’s it.” The shop owner said with a wave of his hand.

Tony reached into his pocket slowly and handed the old man fifteen dollars. The set was a bargain at twice the price. In the states it would cost over one hundred dollars. “Okay.”

The old man was right; the chess table may have indeed been lucky because Sergeant Tony Mariani’s life took a turn toward prosperity.

As an E-4 airman, he could afford the good life in Thailand. Two hundred and ninety dollars a month got a hut in a nearby village, food, clothing and even a woman.

Many women lived with GIs-cooking and cleaning- in order to earn money for the rest of their family. Some dreamed of marrying an American and moving to the states, not an uncommon practice in wartime. If a loving, beautiful Asian girl in her late teens wasn’t enough to get Tony through the end of the Vietnam War, he couldn’t imagine what would be.

Thailand became his home for the next year.

Lawan was Tony's girl. She had long, straight black hair- like most Thai women- clear skin the color a California beach bunny would die for and a warm, innocent face. She often wore a colorful sundress, flip-flops, a pearl necklace and a fresh hibiscus flower in her hair.

Back in Boston, Tony would have been the envy of his pals. In fact he sent pictures of Lawan back to them and several friends wrote back about enlisting.

Tony taught Lawan English and learned to speak Thai. After a traditional dinner of noodle soup, fried rice and grilled yak or pork, they would play chess. Lawan learned Tony's playing style and soon she could give Tony a good game, even beating him every so often. They both enjoyed it more when Lawan won, though Tony never intentionally let her. This simple game bonded them, much like their lovemaking.

After such a game, Tony would play the iconic music of his generation: Led Zeppelin, The Who, John Lennon, Santana and Three Dog Night- reminding him of home even while reveling in the hot, humid and exotic jungle of Southeast Asia. The contrast between his surroundings and American rock music was intoxicating.

Time passed quickly, as it will when one is in love. Before he wanted to leave Lawan, his yearlong tour in Thailand came to an end.

Since the military picked up the shipping cost, GIs sent a lot of furniture and electronics home. As Tony's tour in Thailand neared its end, the chess table was packed up and sent back too.

Check.

During his last week in Thailand, a number of misfortunes fell upon Tony. On the flight line, one of the bomb loaders ran over his foot, severely spraining it. He got food poisoning from something he ate in the base mess. He even had a fight with Lawan, which had never happened before. Their parting was sad and emotionally draining.

His military transport home had a six-hour layover on Wake Island. The eternity of waiting gave Tony time to think about the man who sold him the chess table; maybe he had shipped his good fortune back to the states. Now he was anxious to get home.

As soon as he arrived back in Boston, he borrowed a truck from one of his friends to pick up his belongings. He checked off each item on his list. Papa-san chair. Stereo components. "Ah, there it is." He grabbed the chess table with both hands, held it to his chest and sighed. "Good to see you again, old friend."

Before going into the service, Tony had thought about being a hospital technician, so he started taking extension classes and worked at one of the hospitals as an orderly. Settling back into civilian life was going well, until one day when he returned to his room in Cambridge near Union Square.

The house had been burglarized- everyone living there lost valuables. Tony ran to his room and discovered his chess table had been stolen. It felt like the day he had to leave Lawan, as if part of him would never be right again.

Almost immediately, his life started to go badly. He lost his job to someone with more experience and did poorly on his exams.

Tony knew what he had to do. He started to canvas the pawnshops and game stores to see if he could find his table. In a shop called *Games People Play*, he saw his prize in the window.

It must be his.

He couldn't call the police, since he really never had proof of ownership. He decided he must use another tactic to get it back. "How much for the chess table?"

The teenager took the table out of the display window and looked at the price sticker. "Three hundred dollars."

Anger welled in Tony's gut. He was going to have to buy back his property. "Where did it come from?" he asked the clerk.

The teenager shrugged. "I don't know. The Middle East maybe?"

Tony winced. *This boy is either uninformed or a con man.* "Look at the Asian craftsmanship. Look at the pieces." The teenager hadn't noticed the fine detail of Hanfu clothing.

"I don't know. That could be from anywhere."

Tony rubbed his forehead hard in frustration. "See the king. He's wearing an ancient tunic called a *pao*, and the pants are called a *ku*."

The kid's stare was blank. "All I know is that it's three hundred dollars, man."

Maybe he could take advantage of the kid's ignorance and get a deal from this boy. "I'll give you a hundred."

The teenager looked askew. "Man, this chess table shows fine details of Hanfu clothing. Look at how the king is dressed with the *pao* tunic and *ku* pants."

Tony realized he had undermined his bargaining position. Bargaining in the states was far different than bargaining in Thailand. His face flushed. “All right, all right,” he said and handed the kid a credit card.

With the chess table under his arm, Tony stepped onto Brattle Street and walked to the Red Line T-station. As he rode the escalator down to the tracks, he saw the Dunkin Donuts kiosk, a woman selling flowers and college kids from Harvard waiting for their ride into Boston. Then he saw a dark haired woman with a colorful sundress, a pearl necklace and flip-flops waiting for the outbound train.

His pulse quickened. Was this Lawan?

He bought a flower from the vendor and walked up to the Asian beauty. “Here,” he said and handed her the flower.

She turned to reveal a pretty face and smile. “Oh, thank you. What a lovely chess table. Where did you get it?” As he told the story, Tony realized his good fortune had followed him home from the war.

Life was good again. Checkmate!

The Road

On top of a hill, fog rolled slowly over the university campus on a cool, September morning. At the bottom of the hill was a city filled with crime and poverty. Between the two worlds was a road. The two towns were less than a dozen miles apart but could have been separated by two oceans. Tony Mariani traveled that road each day, hoping to join the elite culture above while living in the dysfunctional, urban ghetto below.

In the university campus coffee house, he sat doing his community college homework, imagining that he was a student here. He sipped his earl grey tea with half and half, and took a bite from a blueberry muffin. He avoided conversations.

Tony had been recently discharged from the army with two tours served in Afghanistan. He could only afford an apartment in the run down section of East Oakland. No one was looking for applicants with skills in urban warfare, weapons marksmanship or hand-to-hand combat, so he got a job lugging baggage at the airport. Only his survival skills transferred from war to living in the hood, this time the enemy dressed in gang colors running drugs and prostitution on his block. Instead of roadside bombs, he had to look out for drive-by bullets shot indiscriminately.

Like heaven and hell, two opposite destinations based on which direction you were going, what choices you made. That road was more than highway, it was a chasm he had to cross if he wanted to get anywhere in life.

“Excuse, me. May I sit here?” said a pretty coed holding tea and a scone. Tony looked up from his screen and smiled awkwardly.

“Sure” he said pulling his laptop closer to himself to make room for this beautiful young coed. She sat down across from him, set up her computer and opened a literature book.

Tony wondered whether he should introduce himself, but decided not to. She was obviously a serious student. She wore clean, faded jeans, a pink L.L. Bean shirt and a matching cardigan sweater. Around her neck were small pearls and on her wrist a jeweled watch. Tony could just make out a scent of an expensive perfume. She wasn't only out of his league; she played in the majors. If he was a student here, he might introduce himself; but he quietly enjoyed her presence. An hour passed without either of them talking.

This was the best part of his day, in the coffee house on campus. By noon, he would leave the university campus for the community college; take two classes and head home to make dinner before his swing shift job at the airport. Dinner consisted of frozen meat and vegetables, fried in a pan and a microwave rice packet; he put soy sauce on everything to give it some flavor. It was chicken or ground beef every night. He hadn't had a good meal since he left home, before his mother passed away while he was in the Middle East.

One night, as he was putting his dishes in the sink, he heard gunshots and screams from a baby. He peeked out his front window blinds. A punk was standing over another punk, making threats while next to them a woman and baby were screaming hysterically. He called 911 and left for work. Tony knew he had to get out of this neighborhood so he saved as much as he could from his paycheck.

In nine months, he had saved enough to get out. He moved five miles up the road. It was only a studio in a run down part of town, but there weren't any gangs around and he was closer to the university. Tony was climbing out of poverty, slowly but he was moving in the right direction. He was almost halfway up the road from the gangs and drug dealers. Now he just had to avoid slipping back there, but trouble tries to suck you back.

At work, some guys propositioned him to smuggle drugs onto a flight. "Tony, help us get a package on a flight and you can make a quick \$5000."

Tony realized he could get away from the streets. He could get a better apartment, some good clothes, decent food, and maybe even find a girl. But he wanted a chance to think about it. "I'll have to sleep on it Mike."

Sitting in class the next day, he couldn't concentrate on the lecture. He looked up the penalty for drug trafficking; six to nine years in state prison. He'd be locked up with all the drug dealers and gang members he was trying to get away from and he'd probably never get to the university, the life he wanted. He decided he wouldn't do it, even if it meant taking more years to get somewhere.

The next morning Tony was back at his favorite coffee house, with his earl grey tea and blueberry muffin. He opened his computer to do homework when the email ping alerted him.

Dear Mr. Mariani,

I am pleased to announce a new program we have for veterans with honorable discharges and service in combat locations. Our university extension program will accept you for matriculation. If you can complete two years of prerequisite courses with a 3.0 grade point average or higher, you will be eligible for acceptance into the regular university. We have to limit our admissions to the first 500 applicants. To apply, please click on the link below.....

Tony quickly clicked on the link and began entering the information. He finished the application and pressed enter to send it in, sure that he was one of the first 500. He had made it to the right side of the road. His daydream was interrupted.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" said a pretty coed.

A broad smile ran across Tony's face. "Not at all. My name is Tony."

"Nice to meet you Tony. I'm Angela."

The Social Justice Experiment

Tony waited for his girlfriend Angela at the table where they first met. He had his Earl Grey tea and scone and a raspberry yogurt and muffin for Angela. She walked in promptly at 9am. “Hi Tony,” she said and they kissed.

“Hi girl.” They sat next to each other, holding hands and going over their schedules.

“I’m in the library until lunch time. What about you?” she asked.

“Sociology at Zellerbach. I have to come up with a social justice project, but I’m not sure what to do,” said Tony.

Angela thought while eating yogurt. “You were in the military. Why don’t you do something with veterans?”

“Hmm. Maybe. Any ideas?” Tony dipped his scone in the tea and waited for Angela. She was the creative thinker.

“Well, there’s a lot of homeless on Shattuck. I’ll bet some of them are veterans. You could meet with them and find out how their life went.”

Tony made a couple of notes and rubbed his face. “OK, but this has to be more than a survey. I have to contribute something. What could I do for them?”

Angela paused and thought while eating. “Don’t they have veterans benefits?”

“Yeah. But if they’re homeless, they probably don’t know how to use them. They can get health care at the clinic downtown for free; maybe they need help with that.” Tony doodled on his pad, sketching a route from the park to the clinic. “I guess I could help them with the paperwork and bring them to the clinic for a checkup.”

Angela smiled. “That’s my guy. Why don’t I do the paperwork while you meet and talk with them?”

Tony smiled, realizing how lucky he was to have Angela in his life. “Oh, you’re the best. Where would I be without you?”

Angela beamed. The contented couple finished eating, and then went their separate ways to class.

Tony found a half dozen homeless veterans and brought donuts and coffee. “Guys, I know life hasn’t been fair to you since service. I’d like to see if I could help you get some health care.”

Joe, a short, thin man in dirty jeans and a plaid shirt took coffee and a donut. “And why should you care man?”

Tony continued handing out coffee. “I’m an Army vet myself. But I was lucky enough to wind up here,” pointing to the university sign. “I just want to give back.” Tony could sense that trust was the first order. “Listen, it wouldn’t hurt to get checked out at the clinic. Veterans can get that free and I’ll do the paperwork for you.”

Another man spoke up. “So you don’t get paid or anything?”

Tony knew the men were skeptical. “I’ll be honest. It’s for a class, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care. I’m not here to change your life, just get you some help. Get you some medicine if you need it.”

The six ate donuts and drank coffee, mumbling softly so he couldn’t hear. Tony waited patiently, hoping they wouldn’t bail on him.

“So no money?” said one.

Tony wasn’t sure what they were asking. “No, I’m not getting any money for this, just class credit.”

“No I mean you aren’t giving us any money?” said the man.

Tony realized that these guys needed more than a checkup. “All right. Tell you what. If you go with me to the clinic, I’ll give you each twenty bucks.”

“Twenty five” said another, sensing their opportunity.

Tony knew he had to cut this off. “OK, twenty five, but you have to promise to take any medicine they give you.” The men looked at each other and agreed. Tony had his project underway.

He arranged to take the men to the clinic. Angela joined him to fill out forms while Tony gave each man a sandwich and some juice. After all the men had been seen, the doctor met with Angela.

“I’m sorry to tell you this. I can’t discuss their medical conditions with you. Privacy laws. But I can tell you that Sam may have a serious illness. We are giving the other men medicine and they should come back next month. We do appreciate you bringing them in. Sam should go to the veterans hospital in Oakland for more tests.”

Angela wasn't sure what to say. "Thank you doc," realizing that Tony may have taken on more than he could handle. She pulled him aside and told him what the doctor said. Tony thought this would be something he could handle in town, not expecting to get involved with serious illnesses. He hugged Angela and prepared to tell the men.

"Guys, let's go over to the park and talk."

"I want to thank you for coming down today. The doctor says that Sam needs to have a follow up visit to the veteran's hospital in Oakland. The rest of you can take the medicines and come back for a follow up visit next month."

"What about our money?" said one of the men.

"I have your money here," said Tony. As he handed out the bills, he hoped they would be spending it on food, but realized that wasn't likely. As he gave out the money, each man took off, leaving Sam alone with Tony and Angela.

Sam was the first one to speak. "What did the doctor say was wrong with me?"

Angela was tearing up. Tony tried to explain. "Sam, they can't tell us about your health. There are privacy laws. That's why they want you to go to the veteran's hospital for tests; I can help you get there."

"I feel all right. Why don't you just give me my money?"

"Yes, here you go. But I really think we need to go to Oakland." Tony could sense Sam's reluctance.

"Maybe later." Sam took the bills and headed off.

Angela took Tony's hand as they walked back to campus. "What do you think is wrong with Sam?"

"I don't know dear, but what can we do?"

A month later, Tony and Angela escorted the guys to the clinic for their follow up visit. Everyone was there except Sam. "Where's Sam?" he asked the others.

Heads shaking, none of them had seen Sam in the last week. "He must have moved out of the park," said Joe.

"Can you show us where he slept?"

"I guess we could for a finder's fee," said Joe.

Tony checked his wallet. "I'm tapped out man. All I have is ten dollars."

"Deal!" Joe reached out for the bill and started walking to the park; Tony and Angela followed.

"Sam's tent was right under this tree," said Joe, pointing to a narrow dark underbrush.

"You go first honey," said Angela.

"Sam. You in here?" Tony called. No answer.

Tony walked in a little further and saw a large lump under a blanket. Tony nudged it with his hand, but it didn't move. He pulled the blanket back gently and saw Sam lying there with bugs crawling around him.

"Oh God. Angela. Call 911." Tony felt for a pulse and listened for breathing. Sam was just barely breathing with a slow and weak pulse.

As the ambulance arrived and took Sam away, Tony held Angela close to him as they cried. "I should have paid more attention." They followed the ambulance to the hospital and waited hours for some news. Finally, one of the doctors came out and saw them.

"Are you related to Sam Kowalski, the man who came in this morning?"

Tony stepped up and replied. "No but we're concerned about him. Is he going to be all right?"

"Well, he should be some time, but we had to amputate one of his legs; it was seriously infected. He really should have been seen months ago, but that happens sometime with the homeless. They don't like hospitals."

Tony and Angela cried as the doctor walked off. "It wasn't your fault Tony" said Angela. "It wasn't anyone's fault."

"I could have done more dear. I could have done more."

Nostalgia Stories

It's a Lot of Work Being a Girl

Joey and Sam were watching his sister Susan through the window of Sam's house next door. They used the telescope Sam got for Christmas; Susan left the window shade open to get some natural light as she got ready for a date.

"What's she doing now Joey?"

"I don't know. Putting some kind of cream on her face."

"I thought she already did that."

"This is makeup, I think. It's different."

"How long does it take?"

"Once last year during prom it took two hours."

"Two hours! Impossible."

"I swear it Sam. On my baseball card collection."

"Well, where is she going?"

"Some dance at the college."

"The college? But she's still in high school."

"What can I tell you? Some guy saw her studying at their library. I don't think he knows she's in high school."

"Do your parents know?"

"No, they think she's going out with her friends to the high school dance tonight. They would never let her go to the college with a guy. They're afraid..."

"Afraid of what?"

"You know."

"No, what?"

"Remember what your Dad told you about how babies are made?"

"Ew! That. Think she wants to do that?"

"I don't know. It seems that's what college guys do with college girls."

"But Susan's seventeen. Isn't that against the law?"

“Not if she wants to. I think. How should I know? I’m eleven.”

“Wait, she’s left the room. Probably to get dressed.”

“Sam, you have that *Playboy*, the one with the college girls?”

“Yeah Joey. It’s under my bed. Why?”

“Those girls, you know. They do it. Let’s see what they wear.”

“That’s some funny underwear. Why is it shiny?”

“I guess that’s so the boy can find them in the dark. What’s that thing?”

“I don’t know. Looks like a dog collar. Why does a girl need that?”

“Beats me. Has a nice pin in the middle, but no way it would hold a dog. It looks more like ribbon.”

“Look, see here. That’s the same dog collar, black with a white pin in the middle. Oh, now I get it.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I thought it was something to hold on a cape, but here’s a girl with just the collar and underpants on.”

“Man. You’re right. Wait, she’s wearing shoes too.”

“Oh, yeah. OK. I didn’t see that. Don’t look like shoes I’ve ever seen before, more like something from a fairy tale.”

“Yeah, like Cinderella. Don’t look comfortable though. Too high off the ground.”

“Hey, your sister’s coming back into the bathroom. Whoa!”

“What, let me look.”

“She’s wearing shiny underwear and one of those collar things. Now she’s putting on a red dress.”

“My turn. Give me the telescope. Oh. This isn’t good.”

“What?”

“She put the collar in her purse. Guess she doesn’t want your parents to see it.”

“Wow. That’s some dress.”

“Let me see. Uh oh. That’s the red dress she wore at junior prom, the night she got in trouble for staying out too late.”

“Did she wear shiny underwear that night?”

“How do I know? We were camping in the backyard that day, remember? And we didn’t have the telescope.”

“Yeah, the telescope was a great Christmas present that year.”

“Yeah.”

“So, is she done getting ready?”

“Nope. Now she has to do something with her hair.”

“Her hair is already dry. I saw the hair dryer.”

“Yeah, but now she curls it with some hot thing and some spray.”

“How long does that take?”

“Another half hour. I timed it.”

“No wonder she started at five. It’s six now. When will she leave?”

“Probably not until seven. After she gets dressed, she talks on the phone with her friends. They talk about what they’re wearing and boys and other stuff. I don’t listen too well.”

“And what time is she supposed to be home?”

“Eleven o’clock, a half hour after the dance ends.”

“But she’s not going to the dance. She’s going to the college.”

“I know. But she would be foolish to be out too late, not after prom last year.”

“I’m going to get dinner. You want to come over? We can see her up close when she leaves.”

“OK. Let me hide the magazine first. Mom doesn’t know I have it.”

“Yeah, they never look under the bed.”

“If she did, she would have talked to me about it.”

“All right. I’m going home. Tell your mom you’re coming over to my house for dinner.”

“Hey! If I ask her to sleep over, we can wait till your sister comes home.”

“That’s great. Yeah. Maybe you should bring the magazine, you know, in case we get bored.”

“Yeah. I’ll roll it up in my sleeping bag.”

“Bring two, OK?”

“Yeah, two.”

Who Stole Asbury Park?

In the halcyon days of 1964, when simple love songs played on pocket radios and boys turn their thoughts to girls and their first kiss, Tony was in the hullabaloo on the Asbury Park boardwalk, with the other eleven year old boys, watching the girls dance to the sounds of The Beatles, Beach Boys and The Four Seasons. Every so often a girl would come over and take a boy by the hand onto the dance floor while the rest of them tapped their feet, nodded to each other and wondered when some girl would rescue them from the wall. It was too risky to ask a girl to dance, but if they took the initiative, you were safe in the eyes of your buddies and there might even be a slow dance, a chance to hold a girl close to you.

“There goes David, with Becky Johnson,” said Tony. Becky had short, blonde hair, saddle shoes, knee socks and a plaid skirt. “She’s a good dancer.”

Tony’s friend Bobby agreed. “Yeah, if you like dancing.”

Tony nudged Bobby. “Yeah, if you like dancing.”

Tony was hoping some girl would ask him to dance, but couldn’t let on to his friend. “The music’s good though” as they bounced with the beat.

“Yeah” said the other boys.

The girls, completely smitten with Beatles music, were dancing, mostly with each other while others talked and checked out the boys on the wall. As Tony and Bobby watched the girls dance, another girl walked over to them from the left. “Would you like to dance?” said a pretty Italian girl in bell-bottom jeans and a red Danskin top.

“Me,” said Tony, not sure if she was talking to him or Bobby.

“Yes, my name is Angela.”

“Sure I guess so. I’m Tony” and he walked out to the dance floor with Angela as *Twist and Shout* played from the speakers. She turned to him and smiled, then started to twist, the main dance style at the time and the only dance adolescent boys could do. Tony watched Angela and tried to match her while maintaining a serious expression. Angela could tell how nervous he was.

“That’s good Tony” trying to coach a smile out of him. He relaxed his facial muscles a bit.

“I’m not a good dancer, sorry” as his sneakers squeaked on the wooden floor.

Angela smiled. "It's ok." Her movements were much more graceful and pretty. Tony noticed her long hair and bangs bobbing with the beat. The DJ smoothly changed the song to *A Hard Days Night*.

As Tony looked at Angela, his thoughts raced and before he knew it, a slow song came on; *Because* by The Dave Clark Five, another group from the British invasion. He wasn't prepared for this. Tony looked at Angela and she looked back. He clumsily tried to slow dance, but it didn't matter. They were close. Tony held Angela's chest close to his but left just enough space below the waist to hide his newly found excitement. He wondered if this would scare her away. His anxiety was answered after the song.

Angela took Tony's hand and walked toward the exit. Tony followed obediently, his heart quickening. He could feel that Angela was nervous too, her hand moist. As they were about to leave, Angela turned to Tony. "Can we go for a walk?"

"Sure" he said, trying to hide his own nervousness. "Where are we going?"

"Down the boardwalk. I like seeing the rides at night."

"Yeah, they're neat. Hey, would you like an ice cream?"

"OK, a twist please." Tony ordered two cones and the couple continued walking. Eating the ice cream replaced a lot of conversation, as both of them were entering a new part of their young lives. When they were finished, Tony took a napkin and wiped some ice cream from Angela's lip, then she closed her eyes. With all the confidence he could muster, he leaned in and kissed her. Angela put her arms around Tony and they kissed again.

"Do you want to walk on the beach?" she said.

"Sure" both of them smiling now.

They left their shoes under the boardwalk and walked barefoot near the water, Angela holding his hand tightly. Tony could smell her hair; it had a fruity scent, he wanted to tell her without sounding dumb.

"Your hair smells nice." Tony was starting to relax.

"Thanks. It's my shampoo. Strawberries."

"Neat. You dress nice too." Tony couldn't help glancing at her small breasts, curving through the top. He was thinking about kissing Angela again and hoped she was too.

"Thanks. I like your turtleneck." They walked up and down the beach, and then returned to get their shoes.

Angela gave Tony a look that he understood. They lay down in the sand under the boardwalk and spent the next hour kissing and holding each other closely. It was Tony's first make out session and probably Angela's too. These were the memories that last a lifetime, the first, awkward steps into love.

It was the summer of 2012 when Tony and his California wife Barbara, in town for a wedding, drove to Asbury Park, her first time on the Jersey shore and his visit reminding him of that magical night in 1964. He was surprised to find parking close to the beach. As they walked up the stairs onto the boardwalk, he noticed something odd. It was deserted; only a few people on the beach and the buildings that once held a carousel, stadium and dance hall were rusty, disintegrated and empty as if they had been bombed. Tony's dream memory fell flat.

"What the hell happened here?" he said.

"The beach is beautiful. Why isn't anyone here?"

"I don't know. This was such a great place when I was a kid. Let's get back in the car and go somewhere else."

As Tony drove, Barbara did some research on her phone. "I have it. The town went bankrupt back in the 90s and the city can't afford to bring back business. But they still charge \$5 to go on the beach."

"Only in New Jersey could you have a beautiful beach and boardwalk and not make money. No one is on the beach because there aren't any bathrooms, food stands or anything else. We're not leaving until you see the real Jersey shore."

They drove up to Seaside Heights and parked. Walking up the steps to the boardwalk, they saw what Tony had been hoping for. "This is the real thing, Barbara." Thousands of young people filled the beach, boardwalk and restaurants. There were hundreds of painted, wooden buildings with all sorts of food, games and shops with cheap souvenirs. Barbara's eyes lit up when she heard music.

"Hey, look over here. There's a dance floor." She took Tony's hand and rushed them over to the music. *Can't Buy Me Love* came on. Tony and Barbara twisted like it was 1964. Tony thought of Angela as he danced with his wife.

Now I Understand

“Sam, remember when we were in 4th grade, that night your sister Susan went to the college dance?”

“Sure do Joey. Why?”

“I was just thinking. We didn’t know why she was dressed that way or what goes on at a college. In just a couple years, we’ll be in college too.”

“Hopefully” said Sam.

“Well, yes, hopefully. It’s kind of funny how life has changed in just five years.”

“You said it Sam. I wonder what life will be like five years from now.”

“Yeah, I wonder.”

“You’ll probably still be dating Sarah, maybe even getting engaged.”

“And you’ll probably still be dating Mary, if you’re not married by then.”

“Could be. We’ve been going out for six months now. Unless I’m playing college football. You know those guys have lots of girlfriends.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, you still want to be a doctor?”

“Sure. They make loads of money and drive fancy cars. I just have to get my science grades up. I think you have to get at least a “B” in science to get into medical school.”

“All “B’s” in science, I think. Nothing lower.”

“Wow. You think?”

“Sure. They don’t want any doctors who make mistakes.”

“What about math; I’m failing math.”

“No, math doesn’t count; you don’t need to know math to be a doctor.”

“Good. Hey, what do you want to be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe an engineer. I could design computer games and make lots of money. I’m really good on my X-Box.”

“I thought you were failing math.”

“No, you don’t need math to study computers, just be good at gaming.”

“So, in a few years we’ll be rich. Maybe we’ll want prettier girls by then.”

“Yeah. Better not get tied down with Sarah and Mary.”

“OK, but we should still take them to the sophomore dance, right?”

“Yeah. I think that would be OK. We can let them down easy in the summer. Give us time to plan for the future.”

“Hey what about your sister? How is she doing?”

“Susan. Yeah, she’s in college, but dating different guys. She says nothing serious.”

“Really? But she’s like 22. I thought by then girls are all engaged.”

“I guess not. But they sure are pretty in college. I was over at their library the other day and you wouldn’t believe these girls.”

“Hot, huh?”

“Totally. They all have long, straight hair and big boobs. And none of them have acne like high school girls.”

“Wow. Good thing we’re not getting tied down with Sarah and Mary.”

“Yeah. But they’re nice girls. Got my first feel with her. What about you?”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“We did it last Saturday?”

“You what! No way.”

“I swear. Her parents were out and we were watching a movie, *‘I know what you did last summer’* with Jennifer Love Hewitt.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Well, we were making out when I saw Jennifer with a tight top on. My boner sprung to life. I thought it was going to pop my pants.”

“So?”

“So Mary saw it and thought she was getting me hot. She got so excited she started to take her top off. By then, it was all she wrote.”

“Dang. When were you going to tell me?”

“Mary said we should keep it a secret.”

“You did. For 3 days. Gimme five!”

“Yeah. Now you can’t tell anyone. If Mary found out, she’d never let me have it again.”

“You can trust me man. So, you have that movie on DVD?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I told Sarah we should stay in Saturday and watch a movie. Her parents are going out.”

“The future is bright, my friend. I’ll get you the DVD.”

“I’m just glad we’re guys.”

“Yeah. It’s a lot of work being a girl.”

“I hear you Joey. I hear you.”

Frustration with Technology

I am the writer; I speak for the programmers (with apologies to Dr. Seuss)

Has anyone else noticed the phenomenon of clicking on the wrong application when using a mouse? This happens most often when you start your computer and multiple applications are loading. It also happens on websites where advertising or alerts are popping up when all you want to do is begin a task. Because you are a savvy tech user, you anticipate where on the screen you will be clicking next. But instead of the satisfaction that comes with being able to increase your efficiency through learning how to navigate, you are thwarted from accomplishing your task. *I am the writer; I speak for the programmers.*

Here are a couple of examples. You open a website and a pop up appears simultaneously, asking if you want to join their mailing list or advertising a deal or asking to complete some annoying survey. You immediately run your mouse to the 'X' or 'NO' mark, but just before you press the left key on your mouse, one of four things happens: 1) the pop up disappears and your left click closes the website you just opened or 2) closing the pop up generates another pop up asking "if you are sure you don't want to join their mailing list or get a deal or complete a survey" or 3) the screen shifts so that your click does not close the pop, but moves it slightly, negating the right and good efficiency your mind has programmed or 4) closing the pop up also selects something on the website you didn't want to do, extending the time it takes to get where you want to go. *I am the writer; I speak for the programmers.*

Now technology is not the problem. The problem is marketing people who set up these roadblocks to productivity. If it were up to programmers, applications and websites would be clean, efficient and pop up free. They would be designed for speed and place selection buttons in the most convenient place on the screen (the center right of the display for most people). Moreover, generating code for all these pop ups and sub routines creates an excess of bytes floating around the electronic world. The Internet is large enough without the exponential addition of bytes that not only don't serve a useful purpose, but also actually make life more frustration and time consuming for the average computer user. We blame the programmers because who else could have designed it this way. *I am the writer; I speak for the programmers.*

Ah, but you say, there's an easy solution to this. Disable pop ups on your browser or application. But there are some programs and websites that don't work if you do that. Well, maybe you can contact the developers of those programs and ask how you can enable pop ups for their application. ? Oops, I forgot that you wouldn't know which programs aren't working perfectly, because the programmers are too busy coding the unnecessary desires of the marketing people to properly add more elegant design that would notify you if pop ups were required. *I am the writer; I speak for the programmers.*

If this isn't stopped soon, there will be so many millions of extra bytes floating around, the virtual equivalent to a hole in the ozone, that they may get together and form a virtual union or some exclusive club. The time is now. These bytes are already planning their takeover of the virtual world. They have already taken over the online pornography sites, where closing a pop up generates more pop ups. Even now as I write this, they are moving through firewalls to attack mainstream programs. We are all doomed. Unless!

Mama Mia

The sky was dark blue with a perigee full moon, filling the sky as Tony drove his wife and mom from church to the Hofbrau for their usual Saturday night dinner. He pulled into the parking lot and stopped at the door. “You guys go ahead. I’m gonna get pizza at Mama John’s. I should be back by 6:30 at the latest.”

His mom delayed his exit. “Can you get me a medium pizza so I have something for tomorrow?”

“OK mom” and he left for Mama John’s around the corner. He could make the trip to Toto’s, his favorite pizza, but that was five miles up the road, at least twenty minutes extra and he had to get back to pick up his wife and mom. It was already six o’clock and there was a show he wanted to watch that night.

He remembered the Mama John’s carryout special back at his town. *Mama John’s has the eight-dollar carryout special. I’ll get two for sixteen dollars.*

But when he entered the shop, he saw a different set of pricing. *Twelve dollars for a large?* Then he saw the flyer with the specials. *Hmm. Large five topping pizza for \$10.50?* He handed the flyer to the boy with the hat on sideways. “I just want a large cheese; can’t I get this price?”

“That’s just an online price. It’s twelve dollars for a large.”

Tony grumbled to himself, sat down with the flyer and pulled out his iPhone. *All right. I’ll go to mamajohns.com and place the order.* He discovered it wasn’t that easy. Online pizza ordering systems want your life story before you can order. *Argh. Name, address, zip code. Ah, a pop up ‘would you like to use your current location’. Yes. That will save a minute or two.* After that, he was prompted with the specials. He didn’t see the special that was listed on the flyer.

Tony walked up to the counter and showed his iPhone to the boy with the sideways cap. “Hey, there’s no five topping large pizza on here for \$10.50.” The boy looked at Tony’s phone.

“Oh, you need to use the Mama John’s app, not the website.”

Tony gave the boy a frustrated look. *Argh.* He went back to his seat and searched for the app. *Ah, here it is. Free. Install.* Pop up. *Enter your Apple ID password.* Tony entered his Apple password and saw an error message. Tony had been frequently frustrated by Apple's insisting on a password when he tried to install a free app, download music or even for random, seemingly mysterious reasons. *Damn. What was that password?* He tried another. Same error message. *Damn.* He tried another password. No luck. Tony was starting to lose it. The phone asked him if he would like to change his password. *Yes.* The phone prompted him again. *Would you like to change it by email or by answering your secret questions?* Tony knew the last time he tried to answer the secret question, he got it wrong and was in for more frustration. *I'll change it by email.* He made his choice. *Ping.* His email prompted him to click on the link. When he did, the page prompted him to put in a new password. He entered a new password. *Sorry, that password has been used in the last year.* He entered a different password. *Sorry, your password has to include at least one capital letter.* He entered a different password. *Sorry, the password and confirmation do not match. Please try again.* By the time he finished all this, he had lost the app and had to start over.

Tony's phone made that pinging alert sound, a text from his wife. *We're ready to be picked up.*

Tony typed back. *It's going to be a while.*

His wife texted back. *Did you go to Toto's?*

Argh. Tony texted again. *Don't ask.* He returned to his mission.

When Tony finally got back to the app, he noticed that he had to add his name and address again. *Ah, the pop up 'would you like to use your current location'.* *Yes.* Tony searched for the special large pizza with five toppings for \$10.50. *Found it. Finally. I might as well get mom a large too for this price. What type of crust? I'll get regular crust for mine and thin crust for mom. What toppings for the first pizza? OK. Onions, peppers, mushrooms. That's all I want. Now for mom. Thin crust with olives, peppers, onions, mushrooms and extra cheese. OK, I'm done.*

But the phone just wasn't cooperating. It asked him to put in his credit card information. Tony pulled out his card. *Mastercard, not Visa. Card number. Security code. Am I done now?*

Your card does not match your address. He had let the phone pick the location, which was his mom's town, not where he lived. *Argh.* Tony entered his correct address. Another error message. *What is the name on the card?* Tony made the correction. The phone, now clearly in charge of Tony's sanity burst out another question. *Would you like to add a 2-liter Pepsi for only a dollar?* Tony angrily entered 'No' and finished the transaction. But the phone app wouldn't let Tony get away. *Would you like to take a one-minute survey after ordering?* Tony thought he would lose his mind. He pressed the button for 'No' and waited. *Thank you for your order. Mama John's appreciates your business. A confirmation receipt is ready. Would you like it emailed to you?* Tony pressed the 'Yes' button. *Thank you. Please enter your email address again.*

Tony looked up at the ceiling. *Why me Lord?* He entered the email address, and waited a few seconds for the confirmation. *Ping.* He opened the email. *Mama John's welcomes you to our club. You'll be getting special offers and alerts by phone and email. Your order has been placed. Please allow 25 minutes for your order to be ready.* Tony looked up at the clock. 7 o'clock.

Another text from his wife. *Are you OK?*

Tony responded. *Yes, I'll be there by 7:30.*

His wife wanted to know why. *What could be taking so long?*

Tony realized he had gone through this nightmare in order to save \$1.50 and decided he couldn't tell his wife that. *Just stay there. I'll call when I get back there.* He ended the text chat and sat down, closing his eyes and wondering what he had done to deserve such angst. Twenty minutes went by. Tony got up to use the bathroom. On his way, he noticed a woman getting up to pick up her order.

"That's one large and one medium pizza, Miss Jones. That comes to \$17.42."

That's just what I wanted! He couldn't stand the thought of finding out why and proceeded to the bathroom. A few minutes later, he returned to the counter to see if his pizzas were ready.

The boy with the Mama John's hat on sideways looked up. "Are you in the system?" Tony never heard this expression at a pizza shop.

"I hope so" realizing it had been over twenty minutes since completing his order. The boy looked at his computer screen, then smiled at Tony.

"It says your order is ready" and he turned to pull the two pizzas from the warming area and handed them to Tony, all paid for.

Tony got in the car and headed back to the Hofbrau, the two pizzas on the back seat. He was stopped at a red light and called his wife to come outside and wait. When the light turned green, he pressed the accelerator. A motorcycle raced through the red light in front of him and he jammed on his brakes, missing the motorcycle by inches.

After his heart rate returned to normal, he pulled into the parking lot for the Hofbrau. He looked behind him to see one of the pizzas splattered out over the floor and the other pizza sitting harmlessly on top with the box lid still closed. That was his mom's pizza.

Like I said, it was a really big full moon.

Phone Booths and Mailboxes

Times change and we change with them. Television, movies, clothing, food; you could probably name your own list. Technology has probably been the most significant catalyst of change. Think about the cell phone, digital camera and the Internet. Joey was one of those people who resisted change, someone still looking for phone booths and mailboxes in 2013.

“I’d like a roll of stamps please,” said Joey.

“Sorry, we don’t sell stamps anymore” replied the pretty teenager.

“But it’s Sunday. The post office is closed.”

“You can always email,” said the grocery store clerk.

“I don’t have a computer,” said Joey. The girl just shrugged a little, not knowing what to say.

Guess I’ll just go to the library. Joey figured he could get a book to spend time with. As he drove into the library parking lot, he noticed designated spaces for *fuel-efficient vehicles*, *school vans* and *compact cars* along the front entrance. His 1978 Cadillac didn’t fit any of these categories, so he parked in the back and walked up.

When he arrived, he saw the modern, grey Formica desks in neat rows, at least 50 of them, with black computer keyboards and monitors. No computer boxes, just thin coated wires running into the floor. He looked for the library card catalog, but he didn’t see it, not even a Dewey Decimal system sign to direct him to the non-fiction history titles he liked to read. *Hmm. How about that?*

He walked up to the checkout counter, but no one was there. *What kind of library is this?* He saw people checking out their books by scanning their cell phone over the bar code. Joey didn’t have a cell phone; in fact he still had a rotary dial phone at home. *Guess I’m just a dinosaur.* The woman walked up to the checkout counter.

“May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for books on The Civil War. I didn’t see the card catalog.”

“No, sorry. We replaced those years ago. You can use the terminals over there.”

“I don’t know how. Can you just point me to the right aisle please?”

“C’mon. I’ll walk you over to it. We don’t have many people looking for American history anymore. It’s good to know someone does.” The Asian beauty didn’t look like any librarian he remembered. “Here we are. Civil War books are on this shelf here.”

“Thank you” and he watched her walk away. The books were older, some with broken spines and several with dust on them. *Oh, let’s see. ‘The Red Badge of Courage’ by Stephen Crane. I’ve read that. Maybe something about Lincoln. What’s this one? ‘Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America’.* Joey took the book out, hoping the librarian was back at the check out counter.

She was. “Hey, you found one. Yes, this is a very good book. Give me your library card.” Joey handed her the card and the librarian quickly scanned the book. “Here you go. It’s due in three weeks.”

“Thank you again,” said Joey. He walked out of the library, admiring his new book.

Turning the corner, he heard a loud honk. He looked up just as a motorcycle hit him. Joey fell hard and hit his head. The next sound he heard was an ambulance siren.

“Just lie still sir; don’t try to get up,” said an EMT. He scanned Joey’s head with some space age gadget. Joey heard beeps and other sounds. “You’re going to be fine sir. But we’re going to take you to the hospital to make sure.”

Joey went in and out of consciousness during the ride in the ambulance. Meanwhile the EMT monitored his blood pressure and breathing. He slipped away again as they rolled him into the emergency room.

A nurse attached an IV bag of fluids to his arm and an oxygen clip to his index finger. The doctor examined his eyes, pulse rate and other vital signs. “Do a CBC and keep salts and fluids in him. His breathing is fine, but let him rest. Call me when you get the blood count.”

The nurse stayed with Joey as he slept, monitoring the heart rate and oxygen levels. Another nurse returned with the doctor as he scanned the blood count numbers. He walked over to Joey, just as he was waking up.

“Mr. Wilson, I’m doctor Rivera. You were lucky it was a motorcycle. Otherwise you might be looking at broken bones or worse. It looks like you just have a concussion, and we’re going to keep you here overnight for observation. If everything is OK in the morning, we’ll release you and you can rest at home.”

Joey looked up, trying to focus his eyes on the doctor, still hazy from the bump on his head. His speech was soft but understandable.

“Do you sell stamps?”

Happy Endings

Boxes and Ladders

Hannah could have had an easy life. She could have spent her days with charitable causes or artistic pursuits. She could have been free to write or paint. If only she had chosen Richard or Ben. Their devotion and money was the type of temptation that many women would be satisfied with, but Hannah was less conventional.

A modern flower girl in looks and dress, with a contemporary liberal arts education, she had borrowed her parent's idealism and combined it with her grandparent's pragmatism. She was everything an accomplished man might want as his mate, a partner with values, intelligence and beauty.

But we all know that it isn't the man who chooses the woman. Richard didn't know that. Neither did Ben. As successful as they were, there was one area of life, they couldn't control. Finding a mate.

Richard was a financial analyst. His rise from Harvard business school to a seven-figure income on Wall Street was typical of the privilege that comes from wealth. His path was as sure as his parents had designed, laying out the ladders from a private grammar school to elite prep school to the Ivy League. One ladder led to him to sailing camp on Martha's Vineyard, another to meeting debutantes in cotillion balls and another to a summer job working at the stock exchange for family friends. With his family connections, wealth and resources, it would have been surprising if he hadn't been successful. Like many in his social circle, he attributed his success to providence, while ignoring the more demanding requirements of responsibility that privilege may owe back to others.

Ben was a brilliant software engineer. Unlike Richard, Ben didn't grow up surrounded by wealth and family connections. His path was more pragmatic, hard work in public schools and an academic scholarship to a top public university to study computer science and engineering. These EECS, as they were called, were pursued by the power companies in Silicon Valley, recruited almost as soon as they were admitted to school and followed until they graduated, with summer internships along the way. Starting work two weeks after graduation for \$140k, Ben launched a successful career in a short time. Ben didn't take his good fortune as fate. He had compartmentalized his life into boxes, boxes for education, for work, for hobbies and even for people. He even grouped his friends and family into an online program showing their relationships so he could understand his social world.

David had been born to teachers in a small New England town outside Boston. He lived comfortably but not lavishly. He didn't have Richard's family connections or Ben's engineering mind, but David was given freedom to follow his own path. He took this freedom seriously, excelling in school and playing town soccer, without the anxiety or expectations of other parents. This allowed David to find his way, in spite of his parent's divorce when he was 14. His inner strength persisted through a trip across country to live with his father, leaving his mother on the East coast. This made his journey even more remarkable and admirable than either Richard or Ben's life. David could have put his considerable intellect and personality into making money, but he had an idealistic, almost hippy like temperament for public service.

Although Richard used ladders and Ben used boxes, they both had one thing in common. They were both about to fall in love with Hannah.

All four of them met one evening at a benefit fundraiser for homeless healthcare in the Bay Area. Richard was there looking for West coast financial connections. Ben was there representing one of the tech companies, meeting investors. David was there as a member of the coalition that distributed funds to free clinics in Oakland and San Francisco. And Hannah. Hannah was with the catering group, although she was as lovely and educated as any of the junior league women who organized these charitable benefits, there to find a wealthy husband for their continued lifestyle of leisure. They too were ladder climbers, although their ultimate goal wasn't the working world, but as the proper social family director, raising good children to continue the legacy.

If you observed carefully, you could tell what line of work people were in. Ben was dressed in a sports jacket, button down blue shirt, matching tie and khaki pants so typical of tech managers. Richard had an Amos suit, Eton shirt, Ferragamo tie, platinum cuff links, and Italian shoes, easily a \$5000 outfit. No secret who the women were tracking, Richard, not Ben. David was virtually invisible, looking more like a graduate student than a key figure at the benefit.

But Hannah noticed him. "Who is that?" she asked her boss.

"That's David Wilson. He's the project manager for the company distributing funds to the free clinics."

"Are you sure? He isn't dressed up, just a casual shirt and pants."

"That's his way Hannah. Very understated. Look him up on Google and you'll see."

"I might just do that."

"But if you want rich, there are plenty here to choose from. But don't get engaged too soon. I've lost too many staff at these events already."

Hannah laughed. "I'm not here to find a husband. Just here to make some money while I figure out what to do with a degree in English literature."

“That’s not very reassuring dear,” said her boss. “My last two girls were liberal arts major seeking their destiny and now they live in Atherton. You will remember to have me cater your events when you get there, won’t you?”

“Too isolated for me. I’m more of a Berkeley girl,” said Hannah.

“Yes, and the two girls in Atherton both went to Cal.”

Ben was the first to notice Hannah in her white chef jacket. “Excuse me. Do you have any more of these shrimp puffs?”

Hannah looked up. “Sorry, I don’t know. I’ll go into the kitchen and check.”

“No wait” he said awkwardly. “I don’t really want the shrimp puffs.”

Hannah looked confused. “All right. Some other pastry perhaps?”

Ben blushed. “I just wanted to meet you. I’m Ben.”

“Thank you Ben, but I really shouldn’t be socializing with the guests. May I ask why you wanted to talk to me?”

Ben wiped away sweat from his brow, realizing this wasn’t going well. “These charity women aren’t my type. I’m more comfortable with regular people.”

“Regular people?” said Hannah.

“That’s not derogatory. I’ve been analyzing relationships and it says that I would be suited with someone in the restaurant or catering field.” Ben realized how lame that sounded.

“A program told you to find a relationship with someone in the food industry?”

“Actually, it was my own program. I have these groups and assign everyone I meet into them, like boxes. Seems the people I’m interested in all work in restaurants.”

“You put people in boxes?” Hannah put her tray in front of her body as she took a step back.

“No, I don’t put people in boxes. I put their traits, their qualities, aspects of their personality into boxes, then I quantify which ones would appeal to me most.”

“So you put people in boxes?”

Ben was crestfallen. “Yes, I suppose so. But it works for most parts of my life; shouldn’t it work for relationships?”

“It was nice to meet you Ben. I have to get back to work.” Hannah made a beeline for the kitchen when Richard blocked her path.

“Hi.”

“May I help you sir?”

“Call me Richard.”

“All right Richard. What would you like?”

“I don’t usually do this but I couldn’t help notice how beautiful you are.”

“I’m flattered Richard, but I am afraid you’re not my type. Besides I have to work. Sorry.” She turned to walk away.

“Not her type,” he muttered to himself. “A common shop girl. I don’t understand.” As he walked away, several of the junior league girls went to consol him.

Hannah came back from the kitchen and set out more food. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder. “Oh no...which one of these two is it now?” She sighed and turned around.

“Miss. I just wanted to thank you. Your service and professionalism has helped make this fundraiser a success. Please thank the others for me.” He turned to leave.

“Wait. You’re David Wilson. Can you tell me more about your organization?”

“Well, would you really like to know? Don’t you have to work?”

Hannah turned to see her boss, gesturing to her to go ahead. “It’s my break. Why don’t we go out on the balcony?”

Hannah finished packing her belongings into the boxes. Everything was ready to go, except for some things above the closet, under the high ceiling. She couldn’t reach them from a chair. “Honey, can you get these up here?”

David looked at Hannah. “Looks like we’re going to need a ladder.”

Hannah smiled and put a finger to her cheek. “I don’t have one, do you?”

David smiled back at his new fiancé. “Nope, never had the need for one.”

A Good Marriage

A great donut (yes, this is how I spell it) is like a great marriage. Really. Let me explain. The best donuts have two components, not that a basic donut isn't wonderful. Donuts should be filled with fruit, cream or other sweet ingredients. The outside of the donut is the protector, the guardian or in our analogy, the groom. The inside is the essence of the donut. Raspberry, cream and apple fillings make the donut come alive, leave a lasting impression on the palate and provide the love, or the bride. The groom is a wonderful man, but most of the attention on the wedding day is paid to the bride. When you love a donut, it's the filling that you remember, not the dough, as indispensable as it is.

There are two major donut franchises in the U.S., one great one you can find in 49 states and one not so great one in California (don't ask me why you can't get the best donuts in California, that's another rant); back to our comparison between great donuts and great marriages.

My best friend from New Jersey invited me to his son's wedding and it was a chance to celebrate their happiness as well as revisit one of my first loves, that donut (you know the name). My wife and I left the hotel to attend the rehearsal dinner. On our way we had to pass that donut shop (with a drive-thru lane now). "We're stopping there for dessert," I said to my wife.

"They will probably be serving dessert tonight" my California wife said, obviously unaware of the importance of first loves, be they soft and feminine or named Boston Kreme.

"I haven't had one of these donuts in twenty years. We're stopping."

My best friend is Asian and so were most of the guests. I hadn't seen his son since he was a child and now he had just graduated dental school. He was a solid professional, a protector. His fiancé was his perfect complement, a lovely young Asian professional woman, smart and practical, the sweet filling to his outer coating. I have no doubt that this couple, like a perfect donut, will endure and bring happiness to everyone they touch.

I expected a Chinese banquet but the rehearsal dinner was an Italian feast. "This is great," I said to my wife.

"Really, wonderful" she said. "And so many choices. Did you try the eggplant?"

"Yes, but I'm going back for more of this chicken first."

At this point I can tell you that the company was as wonderful as the food. To see my friend's family, from all over the country who were also well suited to each other (I'll have to corner the Californians and tell them about the donut). Husbands and wives, happily married, like the newlyweds-to-be. And the single friends, including my son, showing great promise for being happily married someday too. Thank goodness they invited a poor kid from Jersey to this event. After stuffing ourselves over three hours, I was ready to get my treat and head back to the hotel hot tub.

"Ready to go dear?" I said to my wife.

"You're not still planning on getting a donut after that raspberry, ricotta cheesecake and the chocolate cannoli (yes, the singular of cannoli), are you?"

"Of course."

"I can't believe you have any room left."

"Twenty years sweetheart. I'll make room." I told my son we would be back to pick him up as he was enjoying new friendships here.

My wife and I headed down the street and pulled into the drive-thru behind a half-dozen cars. This time of night, it wasn't unusual to see a line; late night donuts are a favorite snack everywhere, and particularly in New Jersey. Passing the right side of the shop, I saw dozens of donuts neatly positioned in their cubicles behind the counter, romantically illuminated, like a bride on her wedding day. "It won't be long now," I said.

When it was my turn to order, I spoke clearly and concisely into the speaker. "Two Boston Kreme donuts please." My mouth was watering. I was a minute away from that sweet taste I had been away from for so long.

"No donuts" came the reply from the speaker.

I stared at the speaker then to my wife. Surely they didn't understand. "Two Boston Kreme donuts please."

"No donuts" repeated the speaker. Have I crossed over to the Twilight Zone? This is what the shop is famous for. It's called Dunkin Donuts for Pete's sake (who is Pete anyway?). This line of cars can't be here just for coffee at this time of night. I pulled out of the line and returned to the party. My best friend met me at the door.

"Hey, where did you go?"

"I went to get a couple of donuts to end this perfect meal, but they didn't have any."

"What? Are you sure?"

“I swear to you. They actually said *No donuts.*”

“Maybe they didn’t understand you.”

“I ordered twice. Same response. *No donuts.* I could see them in the case as we drove in. I saw the donuts.”

I felt like a groom being left at the altar. They can’t tarnish this perfect night. Thinking I may have indeed crossed into some surreal dimension, I decided to return to try once more. My son and wife in the car, we pulled into the drive-thru lane, again behind a half-dozen cars and waited patiently as each one was served. Then I found myself in front of that speaker, now ominously looking back at me.

“Two Boston Kreme donuts please.”

“No donuts” came the reply from the speaker.

My wife shook her head. My son was stunned; his mouth was open as if to say *WTF*, a common phrase from his generation. I thought I should give it one more try.

“Two Boston Kreme donuts please.”

“No donuts” came the reply from the speaker one more time. No explanation, no regret, just a matter-of-fact denial.

I drove back to the hotel, not entirely convinced that this wasn’t some evil omen for the couple’s wedding day. On a night when my wife and I should have been celebrating our love, I could only go straight to sleep, apologizing, but she understood.

“I’m sorry dear. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Argh.”

On the wedding day, I woke up early, knocked on the door where my son stayed and waited. He opened the door. “What’s up Dad?”

“We have to get a donut.” He understood. I had taken him to New Jersey on road trips when he was a little boy. He knew White Castle hamburgers, pizza from the Jersey shore and these donuts.

We drove to the shop. I decided to park and go inside. If I wasn’t going to get donuts, I wanted to know why.

“Two Boston Kreme donuts please.” I had my fingers crossed behind my back.

“Right away sir.” The girl at the counter put two donuts into a bag and handed them to me. Order was restored to the universe. The wedding would go on and the couple would live happily ever after.

Anything but Indian Food

Sid (short for Siddhartha, his given name) sat across from Kelly in the romantic Italian restaurant, in the university town where they were seniors. In spite of his parent's arranging an engagement for him with a suitable Indian girl in Mumbai, the second-generation college student only had eyes for Kelly, quite possibly the antithesis of everything his parents had planned. Kelly was protestant, preppy and the only daughter of a good, upper middle class family from Boston.

“Why don't we ever go to Indian restaurants Sid? Don't you like Indian food?”

Sid took a bite of his risotto, smiled and looked into Kelly's eyes. “No, I don't. Cumin and curry are disgusting and every Indian dish has them to excess. Look at Italian food. Elegant, delicate and romantic, like you.” Kelly blushed. “America is my home. I have no desire to visit India, much less marry someone my parents have arranged.”

Kelly squeezed his hand. “Sid, you know how I feel about you, but what will your parents say?”

Sid's expression told Kelly she had nothing to worry about. “They will see in you what I do, the light of my life.”

A violinist played an Italian aria accompanied by a heavysset waiter in a tuxedo, serenading the patrons as they ate in a restaurant Kelly had always wanted to visit. “This is so romantic. What a perfect night.” Kelly was in love with Sid. He was smart, athletic and handsome. They had been together for a year now. Their relationship had taken off, since she first saw him on the football field. But Kelly loved his mind as much as his body; with a 3.85 GPA in Economics, Sid made college look easy. She took another look at the menu. “Sid, this is so expensive; we could go to four dinners for what this is going to cost.” Sid appreciated Kelly's watching the budget, but this was a special night.

The violin player came over to their table as the tenor began ‘O Sole Mio. “Do you know what the words mean in English Kelly?”

She shook her head. “No, but it's beautiful.”

Sid translated. “It's about a man who sees the sun come out after a storm, then tells his lover that her face is even more beautiful than the sun. That's how I feel when I see you. I love you Kelly!”

Kelly leaned over and kissed him. “I love you too Sid.” They could feel the moment, smell the food and were at peace. It was one of those times that don't come along very often, when everything is in sync.

Sid pulled out his chair, kneeled down next to Kelly and looked deep into her eyes. “Kelly Ann Caverly, you are my sun.” Suddenly, everyone around them was listening. “When I wake up, you are what I want to see. At sundown, you will be the light that keeps shining. With you by my side, I will always have the warmth and light I need. Please do me the honor of lighting up my life. Kelly, will you marry me?”

Kelly began to cry. She reached out for Sid, nearly knocking him over. “Of course I will. You are my sunshine too.” The tenor hit his high note, the other diners clapped and the couple was now engaged. The owner put the Tarantella CD on and for the rest of the night, Sid and Kelly had an engagement party. There were cannoli for everyone and a cake the restaurant reserved for special occasions.

The last year of college went by quickly. Sid and Kelly were planning their futures and their wedding. Kelly had an internship at Deaconess hospital and Sid had offers from several banks. On a warm afternoon in May, they walked hand in hand in Kenmore Square, to see a Red Sox game. Outside the stadium, they stopped for a steak and cheese sub, smothered with onions, peppers, mushrooms and grease. Just as smoothly as their life was going, so were the Red Sox, coming off their first world series win in 86 years.

The next week, Kelly was planning on meeting Sid for lunch when she got a call on her cell phone. Sid had been taken to the hospital and Kelly rushed to the emergency room. Waiting for an hour, she began to cry, not knowing what had happened.

Finally a doctor came out to see her. “Kelly Caverly?”

She quickly got up. “Yes, I’m Kelly.”

The doctor took her into a treatment room. “Sid had an acute attack in his intestines. We’re running tests now. We’ve sedated him, but you can wait here with him.” Kelly thanked the doctor and sat next to Sid, holding his hand as he slept.

When Sid woke up, Kelly told him what the doctor said. “I’m so glad you’re here, not out on the street somewhere. What do you think happened?”

Sid groaned and rubbed his stomach, still in pain. “Maybe something I ate, but nothing unusual in the last few days.” The blood tests were done quickly at the emergency room. A beautiful young Asian doctor came into his room and gave him a tablespoon of medicine and told him to rest. Sid’s face turned sour. “Argh. This is terrible.”

Thirty minutes later, she returned to his room. “How are you feeling now, Mr. Patel?” With Kelly by his side, he looked exhausted but relieved.

“I feel a little better now. Am I going to be all right?”

The doctor smiled and reassured him. “Yes, you had a parasite; just take a tablespoon of this every six hours for the next week.”

Sid grimaced. “A week! It tastes awful doc.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, I know. It’s the cumin, but it kills the worms faster than anything else.”

Unhappy Endings

The Bridge Game

Hannah and Jim were bridge partners. They knew each other's moves and had an instinct for finessing. No matter what the situation, they were able to adapt and play the right card. Bridge wasn't just a game for them; the deception and gambits were part of their personality. Their best friends, Kate and John, were experienced players, but they didn't have deception in their nature.

Hannah secretly wanted to make John her partner, but not in bridge. She decided she could use Kate to bridge her way to John, if she played her cards right. Not that she didn't care for Jim; she just wanted a little change, if only for a night.

"Would you excuse us gentlemen?" said Hannah. Jim and John rose out of their seats chivalrously while the women went to the ladies room. The two couples had been friends since college, the boys playing on the same soccer team while Hannah and Kate both played field hockey. Athletes make such beautiful mates but sometimes have trouble with commitment.

Hannah examined her makeup in the mirror. "Kate, isn't John's birthday coming up?"

Kate brushed out her chestnut brown hair. "Of course Han, it's this Saturday. I'm planning a surprise trip to a B&B in Maine."

Hannah feigned interest. "And have you picked out a gift yet?"

Kate looked at her good friend suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

Hannah took out her lipstick. "Just curious. Jim's birthday is coming up too. I'm looking for ideas."

Kate relaxed. "Well ok then. I found this lobsterman that will take you out when he gets his traps to choose two choice lobsters. Then when you get back to shore, their restaurant will cook them for you as you sit beside a fireplace listening to jazz, all of John's favorite things."

Hannah held her long, blond hair back and pulled it through red velvet scrunchy. "Well, that will certainly set the mood; did you also get something new to wear?"

Kate winked and held out her phone. "Soma's new chemise, black satin and lace."

Hannah reapplied her lipstick. "Very nice. That should do the trick."

"What about you and Jim? Do you guys have plans?" said Kate.

“I have an idea. You’re going up Saturday morning, right?”

“Yes” said Kate, now intrigued.

“Well, I’ll get Jim to take me there too. We can have the boys to ourselves all of Saturday, then get together for a surprise Sunday brunch and spend the afternoon together.” She gave Kate an encouraging smile.

“OK. That sounds like fun, as long as you don’t expect us too early on Sunday.” She gave Hannah a knowing wink. “And just make sure you don’t run into us on Friday night by accident.”

Hannah reassured her. “Don’t worry. Just tell me where you’re staying and what restaurant you’re going to.”

Kate was playing right into Hannah’s plan.

Jim was well aware of his friend’s upcoming birthday. “So John, your 25th is coming up, right?”

John smiled. “Yeah, Kate has some special surprise planned involving a 2-hour drive. I have to wear a blindfold; good thing I have an audible book to listen to.”

Jim laughed. “Well, I hope she doesn’t kidnap you until you propose.”

John smiled at Jim like he had just discovered something.

Jim’s mouth opened. “You are going to propose! Good for you my friend. You two are perfect together.”

John pulled out the ring. “What do you think?”

Jim pretended to be blinded by the sparkle. “Nice. Will it be a surprise?”

“Yeah. Completely. And since it will be on my birthday, I won’t forget the anniversary date.”

“Smart, now if you can set the wedding date for a year later, you won’t forget any of those dates women want us to remember.” Jim and John high-fived. “Just like when we would take the lead with a few minutes left, keep it simple, score, and then play defense.”

Driving into Freeport, Hannah put her plan into action. “Jim, dear. Here’s what I’d like to do today. Let’s check in, make love, then do some shopping. Bean’s has the new season’s clothing in and you need a new jacket.”

“OK. And what about tonight?”

“I have a surprise for you. The Celtics are playing the Bulls. You go have bar food and watch the game and then come back to the room at 9pm for dessert.” She gave Jim that wink.

“And what are you getting for dessert?” said Jim.

“There’s a gourmet cupcake store next to a Victoria’s Secret. I’ll find something you like.”

Chocolate cupcakes and Hannah were two of Jim’s favorite meals. “Maybe I should skip the game?”

Hannah shook her head and reminded Jim of post game celebrations in college. “No, you were always hungrier after soccer games” and she leaned over to kiss his neck. “Besides, I want to have an elegant lobster dinner by myself after shopping, not burgers and beer.”

Meanwhile, Kate and John dropped off their bags at the B&B, and then joined the captain on his boat to get the lobsters. The salty air and romantic scenery might be the place for John to propose, but he thought he should wait until dinner. He wouldn’t want some bounce from a wave to send the ring into the Atlantic. They returned to the restaurant and were seated for dinner, next to a fireplace with jazz music playing, just as Kate had planned.

Kate and John had an intimate dinner, taking their time. John was waiting for the right moment to propose. “During dessert would be perfect” he thought. But when Kate finished her lobster, she got up and motioned John to stay seated.

“Sweetheart, we’re going to have dessert and your birthday present upstairs, ok? I’ll text you when I’m ready. Relax and enjoy the fireplace.”

Kate walked out of the restaurant to their B&B across the street. When she reached the entrance, she saw Hannah. “Han! You’re not staying here too, are you?”

“No, Kate. I was just going to meet Jim for dinner. He’s watching the Celts at the bar over there” pointing down the street. “Do you have time for a drink?”

Kate looked her watch. “Sure, a quick one. John is still in the restaurant but I told him that I would let him know when to come up. Come, I want to show you this beautiful room we have on the second floor.” They quickly walked up the stairway to the corner room overlooking the marina.

“Han, pour us a glass of wine, while I get ready.” Hannah nodded as Kate went into the bathroom.

Hannah poured out two glasses, then added a hypnotic to Kate’s glass. Hannah knew that the drug would only make her fall asleep for an hour or so, without any memory of what happened.

Kate returned with the sexy new lingerie on. “What do you think?”

“Wow, he’s going to be taking that off you really fast. Hope he doesn’t tear it.” Kate smiled at her best friend’s suggestion. Hannah toasted Kate with the wine. “Here’s to a great night for both of us. Then we’ll see you again for brunch tomorrow at 11.”

As they talked, Kate began to sway, and then fell over on the bed. Hannah tucked her in, took Kate’s cell phone and texted John.

Your present is waiting in room 3B; get the key and hurry.

Hannah made sure to clear the history of texts from Kate’s phone after it was sent. Then she rushed over to her room and got ready for John.

John read the text, left his after dinner drink half-finished, a hundred dollar bill on the check and hurried to the innkeeper. “Room 3B please?”

The man smiled at John, gave him the key and sighed. “Bostonians.”

When he got to the door, he found a darkened room, with soft, flickering light from candles and moonlight from the window. Jazz music was playing from a phone on the dresser. The air had a slight scent of Kate’s perfume. He undressed quietly, got under the covers, then unknowingly began making love to Hannah; his caresses were received with soft moaning.

“Mmm, John. Don’t stop.” When John reached her face and kissed her, he realized that this wasn’t Kate at all. Hannah smiled sweetly and whispered “happy birthday, sweetie.”

“Hannah?” Thinking that Kate must have set this up as his present, John enthusiastically continued making love with the blond schemer.

Meanwhile Kate was sleeping in her room.

After an hour, John was tired but wondering what was next. “Ready to go again?” he asked her.

“Sorry handsome. Time for you to go.” Hannah stroked his face. “Wish you could stay. Maybe we can do this again sometime.”

John gave her one more kiss, realizing this might be the last woman he would sleep with before getting married to Kate. “Thanks Hannah. You know I’ve been wanting to do that since college.”

Hannah gave him a goodbye hug. “Me too lover. Now back to your room, 2D. Kate's waiting for you.”

John found Kate asleep under the covers. He undressed and cuddled up next to her. He began stroking her hair when Kate regained consciousness.

“John, hi. Guess I fell asleep. Happy birthday sweetheart.”

“You shouldn’t have Kate. This was the best birthday ever and I want to make it even better.” He took the ring out. “You are the one I want to spend my life with. Please marry me.”

Kate perked up. “Yes, of course I will.” Then the newly engaged couple made love and slept until morning. Kate never remembered seeing Hannah or being drugged.

Back in room 3D, Hannah had to clean up before Jim returned from the bar. She arranged the cupcakes along with champagne on a table. She took a quick shower, brushed her teeth and hair, and then changed into the new lingerie from VS. She was careful not to leave any clues of her deception. Then she heard a knock on the door, noticed that it was 9 o’clock and answered sweetly. “Come in.”

Jim came in and quickly undressed. “Perfect.”

“Would you like some champagne and cupcakes, sweetheart?”

“Those can wait, I’m ready for dessert first.” Jim and Hannah were very good together and Jim never realized what had happened earlier that night. They made love, had champagne and cupcakes and then made love once more. Then they both slept in.

Hannah got up first, showered, dressed, then woke up Jim. “I found a great place for brunch. We have a reservation for 11. You get ready. I’m going out to get some last minute things at Beans.”

Jim gave Hannah a hug and kiss. “OK, dear. I’ll wait for you downstairs at 10:45.”

Hannah left the B&B quietly, before John and Kate would be leaving for brunch. She got in her car and headed for L.L. Bean, about a mile away. As she drove, she remembered her night with John, how she finally got to make love with him and wondered how life would have been different if she had been with him. One night was not enough for her; she was considering a longer affair, something she would have to keep from Kate. She decided to send John a text. But it would have to be innocent enough to keep Kate from getting suspicious.

Happy Birthday John! I hope I can find something special for you when you get back to Boston.

After hitting 'send', she looked up and realized her car was heading straight for a canal, as the winding roads in Maine will do. She turned the wheel just in time to avoid the water, but hit the bridge hard. The air bag deployed and she lay there unconscious.

First Love

March 17th, 1978 (New Brunswick, N.J.) - Tony packed his green duffel bag and headed to Newark airport. His dreams of a journalism career on hold, he decided to pursue, for the last time, one Pamela Jean Johnson, formerly of North Augusta, South Carolina. Even though he was leaving college three months before graduation, he was of a singular mindset, to have the love of his life, his first love, the best love he had ever known. Nothing else seemed to matter. It all started eight years ago.

November, 1969 (East Orange, N.J.) – Pam is visiting Laura. Red and orange leaves were blowing around the high school soccer field; the air was a cool 50 degrees. John, Laura’s boyfriend, and Tony were moving the ball downfield on attack. When Laura’s slow walk passed across John’s line of sight, he missed a pass from Tony, turning the ball over.

Tony glanced at John and carped, “How did you miss that?” Then he saw Laura and her cousin Pam, dressed in cotton sweaters, plaid wool skirts, navy blue tights and clogs. They were both 5’9” tall, athletic, with clear, slightly olive skin tones. They each had long, straight hair, cut evenly eight inches below the shoulder; Laura’s was dark brown, while Pam’s shade was light brown, like stained oak, the same color as her tortoise style, semi-round eyeglasses.

“Never mind” said Tony as he recognized the source of his friend’s distraction.

“Who is that with Laura?”

John moved closer so other players couldn’t hear his answer. “Her cousin Pam, visiting for Thanksgiving break,” said John. Laura and Pam were sharing thoughts that Tony only hoped he was a part of. Pam adjusted her eyeglasses, stroked her hair and whispered something in Laura’s ear.

“Double date” Tony said, more like a command than a question, to John as they returned their attention to the game.

On the way off the field after a win, the crowd applauding, Tony and John stopped for a moment to meet the girls. “Pam, this is my friend Tony.”

Pam held out her hand. “Hi,” her southern accent apparent even in this one syllable.

“Hi,” said Tony, the poor kid from Jersey.

John tried to close this favor for his friend. “Laura, maybe Pam and Tony can join us at the movie tonight?”

Laura didn’t even confer her cousin replying, “That’s just what we were thinking. Pick us up at 7.”

As John and Tony left the field for the locker room, Tony turned back for one more look at Pam; framed in the autumn dusk, a long shadow trailing behind, she held Laura's arm and giggled.

Tony slapped John on the back. "John, I'm going to marry that girl."

John laughed. "It's only a first date Romeo. Take some time to get to know her."

Tony and Pam held hands in the theater and whispered to each other, their connection not unnoticed by Laura. "Look" she said to John.

John just smiled. "You'll never guess what Tony said to me earlier" but he didn't tell Laura even as she coaxed him. Later that night getting pizza, the two girls sitting opposite of the boys, you could see that Tony and Pam were becoming closer.

Pam was a proper 17-year-old Christian girl, so anything more than petting was out of the question, even in the era of free love. But Tony was so enamored that he would wait, a long time as it turns out. After spending the week together, Pam returned home. They talked on the phone for the next six months. "Pam, can you come back this summer, stay with Laura?"

At this point, Pam was trying to work this out with her parents. "If I can Tony. My parents want me to work this summer."

Tony had an idea. "*Bond's Ice Cream* is looking for help. We could both work there." Both Tony and Pam were going to be seniors, planning for college and the future.

July, 1970 (East Orange, N.J.) – Although Pam was able to come back North, working with Tony didn't happen. Tony worked at *Bonds*, pushing ice cream, while Pam and Laura worked at the new clothing store for teenagers, *The Gap*. Pam had done some modeling for a local store in South Carolina; both she and Laura loved to use their paycheck to buy the latest fashions from San Francisco, the epicenter for this generation. "Oh Pam, you must try this on; it goes perfectly with your eyes."

Laura held the cornflower hippie dress up to her neck. "With crème color knee socks?" said Pam. "Tony will love it!"

Most summer nights, the four had dinner together and listened to music. The Beatles (of course), Three Dog Night, Simon and Garfunkel, Chicago and Rare Earth were putting out new songs while the classics of the 1960s were still popular. MASH and Catch 22 were playing at the movies and poor kids were heading to Vietnam. Richard Nixon was in the White House. The country was splitting up and taking sides.

At the pizza shop, Edwin Starr was pumping out 'War'. "I'm not going to Vietnam," said John. "I'll be in college."

Pam and Laura stopped in mid bite. “John is applying to Rutgers and I’m applying to Douglas,” said his girlfriend. Tony knew his family didn’t have money for college. “What about you Tony?” said Pam, holding his hand. ‘*Bridge over Troubled Waters*’ started to play.

Tony hadn’t thought about this before and didn’t know what Pam’s plans were. “I’m not sure, maybe RU” looking at her. “What about you Pam?” said John.

Laura nudged her boyfriend, gesturing to be quiet. “Laura wants me to join her at Douglas, but my parents want me to go to a church college closer to home.” The jukebox blared ‘*Give Me Just a Little More Time*’, the plea Tony was thinking about.

It was late August and Pam was going home the next day. Making out in the back seat of Tony’s Dodge Dart, on a hill overlooking the skyline of Manhattan, Pam leaned back and asked him the question he had been avoiding. “What about college Tony? Do you think you could go to school in the South?”

Tony knew that out of state tuition, even at a state school, was out of his reach. He would be lucky to get loans to cover Rutgers. “I could do that,” he lied “as long as we could be together.” Pam smiled and kissed Tony. She seemed satisfied with the possibility for now.

Starting their senior year, Tony and Pam kept in touch in writing or on the phone. It was Tony and John’s last year on the soccer team and they enjoyed a championship season. But as John went off with Laura to celebrate after games, Tony could only call Pam, telling her how much he missed her. While time flew by for John and Laura, it seemed like a year until Christmas for Tony. He sent Pam a music box that played Serenade #12 by Mozart. She decided to come up to New Jersey for a week.

January, 1971 (East Orange, N.J.) – It was a week of bliss. Tony and Pam spent most of their time together by themselves, away from their family and friends. Fortunately, college admissions letters hadn’t come back yet, saving a discussion Tony dreaded. “I got an early admission to Presbyterian College and I’m still waiting to hear from Douglas” said Pam.

“I’m still waiting to hear from both schools,” Tony said. He had applied to Rutgers, but not the private school Pam’s parents wanted her to attend.

“So I guess we’re still not settled” as she squeezed his hand.

“It will work out,” said Tony. She was so beautiful and was wearing the same kind of outfit she had on that afternoon of the soccer game, triggering a love flashback memory. Tony hadn’t dated anyone else since they had met, feeling they were destined to be together.

April 14th, 1971. Tony’s birthday. Pam had sent him a gift and called him that night. “Happy birthday Tony. I miss you.”

Tony had a feeling the college discussion was going to come up. “I miss you too, sweetheart.”

A pause. “My parents want me to go to Presbyterian. Did you get in?”

Tony had to modify his lie. “No, sorry,” only a half truth” since he never applied. “But there’s some bad news. I was drafted, number 28. I’ll be heading off to the Army.”

Pam began to cry. “No. You’ll be sent to Vietnam. What about the college deferment?”

Tony used the political situation to get out of his predicament. “College deferments ended this month. Only a serious medical condition will get you out of the draft.”

Pam continued to cry. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Tony had planned for this. Realizing he didn’t have the money for college, he had decided to enlist in the Air Force, avoiding direct combat in Vietnam and giving him money for college. “It’s OK, Pam. I’m going to join the Air Force. I won’t be going to Vietnam. We can be together after that.”

Pam sobbed a little less now. “How long will that be?”

Now Tony choked up a little. “Four years.” Tony and Pam spent the next hours remembering the time they spent together and promising to continue their relationship, though it would have to be long-distance.

November, 1971 (Takhli Royal Air Force Base, Thailand) – In the middle of the jungle, Tony was writing his weekly letter.

Dear Pam,

I miss you so much. Even though it’s late November, it’s very hot, 90s during the day and not much cooler at night. There’s no air conditioning, just large fans in the tents we live in. I’m hoping to get stationed at Shaw Air Force Base in Charleston when we leave here. We could see each other again.

All my love,

Tony

Pam and Tony continued to write each other every week, making small talk and expressions of love. After a year in Thailand, Tony was stationed in California, far from his girlfriend. Later, he was sent back to South East Asia, for another year of duty. Toward the end of his third year, the frequency of letters diminished. Then his orders came through, Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida panhandle. It was a nine hour drive to Columbia, S.C. but infinitely closer than he had been since high school graduation. He was eager to write the good news when he opened a letter from her.

Dear Tony,

I am so sorry. It's been so long since we have been together and I have been lonely. I met someone here at college. He's going to be a pastor and he asked me to marry him. I didn't want to say anything before it became serious. I'm going to say yes.

I wish I could have waited for you. I will never forget the time we had together. I hope you find someone as good as you are.

Love,

Pam

Tony knew that Pam had made a difficult decision, one that she wouldn't change. He decided that he would spare them both more pain by not responding to her letter, not writing her anymore or calling her when he returned to the states.

Tony had been taking college courses while he was in the Air Force, to take his mind off the loneliness and to get ahead on his education. Now that he and Pam were finished, he could go to Rutgers on the G.I. Bill and still have money for living expenses.

September, 1975 (New Brunswick, N.J.) – Tony entered Rutgers as a sophomore, having accumulated 36 college credits during his time in the military. John was a senior now and engaged to Laura who went to Douglass, the women's college at Rutgers. Tony and John still hung out together. One day at *Patti's Pizza*, John saw his good friend looking sad. "You still miss her, don't you?" said John.

"Of course I do. She was the best thing that ever happened to me."

John was curious. "Why don't you try to get her back?"

Tony shrugged. "She's engaged. I don't want to ruin that. Even if I wanted to, I'm in school here now and she's graduating."

December, 1977 (New Brunswick, N.J.) - Tony dated many women during college but never found one that made him feel like Pam did. John wanted to cheer him up and invited him to an engagement/Christmas party at Laura's house. Not being attached, Tony decided to go. He arrived with a bottle of wine and an engagement present for the couple. John met him at the door and took the presents. "Hey buddy, thanks. I have a present for you too." Tony looked confused. "Guess who is here?"

Tony's heart began to race. "Pam?" John opened the door and there she was. They rushed to each other and hugged. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be with your fiancé?"

Pam took his hand quickly to a room away from the guests. Her smile turned to sadness and she began to cry. "We broke up last week. He was cheating on me." She hugged him tightly.

"I'm sorry dear, I'm really sorry," said Tony with genuine empathy. Then he took her head gently, pulled it towards him and kissed her. Pam responded and suddenly they were both reminded how much they meant to each other.

"Laura said I could move in with her this summer, to help her plan the wedding." Tony's world had turned around. This miraculous ending must mean they were meant to be together.

March 10th, 1978. Pam called Tony for their nightly talk. "Tony, my ex has been pursuing me again, begging me to take him back. I don't know what to do." Tony was floored, but tried to remain composed.

"I thought you loved me. I thought we were going to be together again."

Pam began to cry. "I know. I thought so too. I told him I had to think about it and give him an answer at the end of the semester."

Tony didn't want to pressure Pam into her ex fiancée's arms, but need reassurance. "I love you Pam. I will do anything to be with you. It has to be your decision." It was time for a grand gesture, but what?

Spring break had just ended. If he had gone down South during this time, maybe he could have prevented this. But he was busy completing his writing portfolio for graduate school and had a reference from a former professor at Columbia School of Journalism. The next week was torture for Tony and graduate school seemed less important as each day passed.

March 18th, 1978 (Columbia, S.C.) – Tony's plane landed and he rented a car. He found an apartment and put down two month's cash toward the lease. Then he headed to the office of the *Columbia S.C. News*. His writing and photography portfolio in hand, he met with the editor who appreciated this veteran's enthusiasm and gave him a position. Now he had a job and a place to live. It was time to find Pam.

He showed up at her apartment and rang the bell. Pam opened the door. “Tony! What are you doing here?” They kissed. “I was going crazy, waiting to hear from you. I came down and already have an apartment and a job. Pam, will you marry me?”

Pam was in shock. “Tony, I don’t know what to say.” Tony and Pam made love that night for the first time. Tony knew that it would be magical. Pam thought it would be too, but it wasn’t.

She felt so guilty and confused. “Tony, I need more time to think about it.” But Tony realized that it wasn’t meant to be.

He packed up, returned the rental car and flew back to New Jersey. He finished his senior year but did poorly on his final exams, his heart still broken.

Software Bugs

Joseph had a successful insurance business out of his home, a wonderful son and a marriage that had become more platonic than romantic, the only real frustration in his life. He had been tempted before in his 15-year marriage. Sales trips for a computer company and out of town trade shows provided plenty of easy opportunities for infidelity, but he stayed true to his marriage vows.

He gave up technology to work at home, to spend more time with his son. He coached him in soccer and helped him with homework after school. The upper middle class soccer moms smiled at him as they dropped off and picked up their boys for practice and games. But Joseph stayed true to his marriage vows, satisfied with fantasizing about the thirty-something lovelies in his small New England town north of Boston.

In his work, he needed an insurance agency management system, but didn't want to spend the thousands of dollars it cost. Having that technology background, he wrote his own program and soon found that other small agencies would buy it. After a few hundred mail order sales, he started to get calls for training local agents in using insurance technology.

Joseph answered the phone and heard a pleasant female voice. "Is this Mr. Mariani, the person who wrote the agency manager?"

Joseph thought this might be another \$250 sale, so he prepared to give his sales pitch over the phone. "Yes, I wrote the agency manager. May I send you a demo copy?"

"I was hoping you could come by and show us your software? We're in Malden."

Joseph knew that taking time from work for a small sale wasn't cost effective, but was curious about the inquiry. "Well, I'd like to, but I'm also an agent and have my own work to do here. Most agents just try the demo and order the program."

"We need more than the program. We need computers and a network too."

Joseph tried to contain his enthusiasm, so after a pause, said. "Yes, I'll be glad to visit to give you a quote." He realized this could be a big sale, a couple thousand in profit and he was quite capable of setting up a network of computers. He made the appointment for the next day.

When he arrived, the owner greeted him at the door. "Mr. Mariani, thank you for coming. My name is Maria Pantone."

"Call me Joseph, Ms. Pantone."

"Well, call me Maria. Let me show you around."

Maria was professionally dressed in a black skirt with ruffled top, clearly Italian, perhaps in her early 40s. He followed around as she described her office.

“We have six people in house and two producers. We have been getting by on a couple of computers for rating and quotes, but we’re falling behind on service. I got a quote from that group in Chicago, but it was over \$60,000. I don’t think we need that much of a system.”

Joseph took some notes and suggested they sit down. They went into her office in the back, a desk as cluttered as the room itself, the blizzard of paperwork an insurance agency accumulates.

“I can see why you’re ready to automate. I think we can put together a system for a reasonable price that will hold you until you need the big system.”

Maria adjusted her glasses. “About how much?”

Joseph tapped out some numbers on his calculator. “This is just an estimate, but I think we can put in four network computers, a couple printers and my software for about \$11,000. Three computers for the staff and one for your office. The producers can share with the customer service people here when they are in the office.”

“I thought so. They were trying to sell me eight computers, the network and \$30,000 for their agency management system.”

“Like I said, you might need that someday, but not for a while. With technology, it’s always good to just get what you need, not overspend.”

Maria liked what she heard. “And you can put in a network so everyone can share information and printers?”

“Yes, that’s not difficult.”

Maria stood up, smiled and shook Joseph’s hand. “Then I look forward to your quote.”

As she was showing him out, Joseph noticed the wedding ring on her right hand; one of those oversized ones you sometimes see. He turned at the door and smiled, taking her hand once more. “I’ll be back with a firm quote and my software to demo next week.”

“How about Saturday afternoon? About noon? You can show it to the staff before we close.”

“Sure, I can do that. See you then.”

Maria accepted the quote and Joseph began bringing in the hardware, network and software, installing on a Saturday after closing so he wouldn't disturb her customers. Maria was there.

"Can I get you a sandwich and a drink? You've been here a couple hours and it looks like you're going to be here a while."

Joseph noticed that she had changed into jeans and a casual blouse. "Sure, anything, yes I'll be another couple hours."

Maria went across the street. Joseph realized he was alone with this woman, just about ten years older than him, but still quite attractive. He remembered his vows, his wife and his son, but fantasized a bit about Maria. "*No problem with fantasizing*" he thought.

As he worked, Maria pattered around the office, doing paperwork and looking over the new computers. Joseph continued the setup while glancing at Maria whenever she passed by. They were all alone, a perfect opportunity to make a move, but he left his passion in his head.

"We're all done. I should come back later and train the staff, but I can show you the basics."

Maria smiled and sat down at her computer. "OK, what do I do?"

Joseph sat down next to Maria and explained how to use the programs. He smelled her perfume and could see her shape through the jeans and blouse. "*What am I doing? I'm married,*" he thought. He was able to control his behavior but not his excitement. Maria noticed as he shifted in his chair.

"I usually spend Sunday afternoon here catching up on paperwork. Would you like to come by then? It would be easier to show the staff when the office is closed."

Joseph knew he was better off around Maria with others in the room. "Fine, I can be here at 1:00."

Maria led him out to the door. Joseph continued to fantasize while watching her in front of him. "See you Sunday."

"Look forward to it" she said with her hand on her belt, perhaps an unconscious signal to him.

Over the next few weeks, Joseph came by to check on his major account, making friends with the staff and continuing the training to people unused to using computers, all the while a romance story played in his head.

But Maria's staff was making minor complaints about using the system, mostly user errors that he could correct. Maria was always there and Joseph started to make his visits toward closing time, hoping he might be alone with her. Their conversations had gone from professional to personally friendly. His fantasies, however, had gone far beyond that. He thought about ripping her clothes off when they were alone in her office and ravishing her on the black leather couch. Maria seemed friendly but stopped short of flirting, until one day.

"Joseph you need to come by. Several of my staff are having trouble using the programs and don't know how to fix it." She was curt, but not angry. Joseph agreed to come by toward closing time.

Well, user errors turned to software bugs he hadn't anticipated. Several visits later did not correct the problems. Maria's staff was getting frustrated and so was Maria. After four calls with a resolution, Maria asked Joseph to meet with him after work.

"If you can't fix these bugs, I'm going to have to ask you to take back the system." Joseph knew he couldn't afford to do that. His profit margin was being diminished by all this time away from his own agency. In his mind, he felt fear and passion for Maria at the same time.

But even under this pressure, he thought he could make it right by settling Maria down. As she sat in her chair, he thought about standing behind her and giving her a neck massage, leading to relaxation and passionate lovemaking on that couch. He thought about soothing her stress with the shoulder rub, then leaning down to kiss her neck, then unbuttoning her blouse and finally kneeling in front of her for more ecstatic maneuvers. He imagined that if he did that, Maria could relax and give him more time to fix the problems. He wanted to do it. Maria looked angry. But it would be worse if his advances were met with a charge of sexual assault and decided he better just make his exit, never knowing if his fantasy would be reciprocated. At least he had kept his marriage vows, at least physically.

A week later he received a legal notice. Maria was suing him for breach of contract. Seeing her in the courtroom, he wished he had tried to win her over with a passionate affair.

The judge banged his gavel. "I find for the plaintiff in the amount of \$5000. Please pay the bailiff."

College Love Stories

Apple Sauce

Julie walked in with her laptop case over her shoulder. Her long brown hair pulled through a crimson velvet scrunchy, draped behind her blue blazer, over the cranberry cardigan sweater, over the white oxford, accented by the Harvard tie which went with the plaid, pleated skirt that highlighted the knee socks which sat atop the cordovan clogs. In short, she was the dream girl of every code savvy programmer in Cambridge. “Hi, my name is Julie Bowen.”

“Hi Julie, I’m Zach” said the college sophomore in jeans and t-shirt. Zach was one of those code savvy programmers, working a part time job in the hopes of meeting girls like Julie. He wasn’t a bad looking guy, just not in the same league as Julie, sort of like your company softball team versus the Red Sox.

“Hi Zach.” At this point, Zach could feel his heart beating. Not that this was the first time he talked with such a vision. In fact, beautiful women were lining up to meet with him on a daily basis.

“How can I help you Julie?” Zach could smell the expensive perfume Julie was wearing, light but classy, just like her.

“There’s something wrong with my mail program. It works on my phone, but not on my laptop.” She smiled at Zach in that way beautiful women do, not encouraging anything more than friendship, but genuinely grateful.

“Well, let’s see what we can do.” Julie put her laptop on the counter, turned it on, entered the password and passed it to Zach. “This doesn’t sound too serious.” He quickly and deftly checked the mail program, the settings and tested the incoming server. “Yes, I see the problem. But I know how to fix it.” Within minutes, her program was working again.

“What was wrong?” she said while flicking her bangs to the side.

“Sometimes the other company servers hiccup and it changes the settings. I just reset it. No problem.” Zach, always the professional, and hoping to prolong the encounter, offered his parting phrase. “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“I guess not. Thanks very much Zach.” She packed up her laptop, and then offered her hand. “You’re welcome,” said Zach. “Have a good day.” Julie turned slowly, giving Zach one more friendly smile. Julie glided gracefully toward the big glass door, and then looked back once more. Zach waved, sighing to himself. “I love my job.”

Later, at another bar, this one on Dunster Street, Zach and his friends were having a beer and watching the Celtics. “Looks like they’re ready for the playoffs” he said. “Yeah, and the Bruins too. Makes the cold Boston winter bearable. It must be tough for places like Toronto, stuck inside watching two lousy teams. Must be why they drink so much up there.”

Then he saw three Harvard coeds coming in, shaking off snow from their UGGs and taking off scarves and wool caps. Zach thought he recognized one of them. The girls sat down at a booth. “Excuse me,” said Zach to his buddies, as he tried to walk nonchalantly to the rest room.

“Hey, Zach” Julie said as he passed by while Julie’s friends looked up. Zach did his best to act surprised, even though he had smelled her perfume.

“Hi. It’s Julie, right?” Zach paused long enough to be polite, without acting too eager. “Mail problem?”

“Email, yes. This is Debbie and Karen. Zach fixed my computer last week. He’s a genius.”

“Small G, Julie, small G.”

“We’re just having drinks and some bar food. Want to join us?”

“Well, I’m with a couple friends” pointing to the bar, “watching the game.”

“That’s ok, we can go to that big table.” Zach called for the waitress to set them up. “Can we get six here please?”

Over the next hour, the six talked about living and working in Bean town, the sports teams, life at Harvard. Then Karen excused herself. “Well, I have an early class and a paper to finish. Sorry but I’ll have to go.” Julie and Debbie nodded that they should go to.

“May I walk you back?” said Zach.

“I’d like that thanks,” said Karen. As the girls left, Karen whispered something into Julie’s ear, gave her a hug and headed out with Zach.

As they walked out, Zach turned and looked back at Julie, smiling. Julie gave him a little wave and sighed to herself.

The DJ

October 23rd, 1976 (New Brunswick, NJ) - Tony finished his set at WRSU around 7pm. He would grab a quick dinner, then head over to the dorm for his gig as DJ to their party. Playing for college dances was better than being on the air; you don't have much interaction when you're alone in the radio booth. Here he could see coeds dancing and if he was lucky pick up a date.

"Are you the DJ?" said the house manager as he extended his hand.

"Hi, yes, I'm Tony, from the radio station. Good to meet you."

"You too. I'm George. You can set up on that small stage; we use the dining area for dancing."

"OK George. We're going to start around 8?"

"8 is good Tony. The music will signal people to come down from their rooms. But you're going until midnight, right?"

"Yes, usually, unless the crowd disappears."

Most of the sororities and fraternities would be partying tonight, especially after the football team won. Tony knew everyone would be in a good mood. After setting up his equipment, records and speakers, he ran a sound test and found a comfortable stool. By 8 o'clock he was setting the mood with music from the early 70s. *Sly and the Family Stone, The Hollies, Elton John and Three Dog Night*. Just hits.

A brunette with frayed, bell-bottom jeans and a tie-dyed shirt came over to him. "You're gonna play some Clapton, aren't ya?"

"Derek and the Dominos or Cream?" said Tony.

"Do you have Layla?"

"You got it next."

The girl smiled and skipped away as residents started to fill the room. It was a coed dorm, not part of the Greek system, so this was pleasant company, not the drunken frat boys around the corner. Within an hour, the dance floor was filled; beers were everywhere and the usual pairing off had begun.

"Wow. 9 o'clock and we already have couples leaving for the rooms upstairs. *This might be an early night,*" Tony said to himself. Then he saw her, a cheerleader still in uniform with some friends coming through the kitchen. He knew her name, Karen, but she didn't know him. Back then all the guys knew the cheerleaders by name, even though they never met.

Tony knew what he had to do. *K.C. and the Sunshine Band, Earth, Wind and Fire and The Doobie Brothers.* Dance music will get her on the floor. As *Get Down Tonight* started, Tony pushed the volume up until it ended all normal conversations. Sure enough, Karen and her friends started to dance.

“Hmm. Her boyfriend’s not here. All the cheerleaders had boyfriends, maybe a lineman from the team. But they were probably partying at the football frat; surely Karen would be there if she wanted to be. Maybe he’ll show up here or she’ll leave.” Tony would just have to wait and see.

A coed came over to him with some chicken wings and French fries. She was pretty enough, but Tony was otherwise occupied. “You must be getting hungry; I made you a plate.”

“Oh, thanks” he said to the cute girl in a red Danskin and corduroy pants. As she walked away, she turned to smile at Tony. He gave her a wave and a more genuine smile, then his attention returned to Karen. But he didn’t see her.

“Damn.” Tony scanned the dance floor. *“What if she stepped out? I should have talked to her.”* Before long, it was 11:00pm and the crowd was thinning out, couples off for the night and singles leaving, only about 30 people left now. He lowered the volume of the music and made an announcement.

“You’ve been a great audience tonight. We’re going to wrap it up in about ten minutes.” Some mild disappointment from the crowd, so he decided to end the night with some power songs. *Boogie Wonderland* by Earth Wind and Fire, *That’s the Way I Like It* by KC and the Sunshine Band and *Play That Funky Music White Boy* by Wild Cherry. He turned the music up.

“Excuse me.” A lyrical voice called him, accompanied by a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Karen. Suddenly his whole night was back in synch. She was smiling. “I love these songs. Too bad you have to stop.”

“I can stay a little longer. My name’s Tony.”

“I’m Karen.”

“Nice to meet you Karen. So you came right from the game?”

“Yeah, my girlfriends took me out to dinner for my birthday, then brought me here.”

Tony had a clue. *“She should be with her boyfriend on her birthday. Maybe she broke up with him.”*

“Well, happy birthday. Tell you what. I’ll play as long as you like.” Tony thought that was a smooth line.

“Oh, thank you” Karen said and gave him a little hug. She walked back to the dance floor with her friends. Tony watched her dance for the next hour. That cheerleading uniform was more than he could resist. He just hoped she would stick around after and talk to him. His head in the clouds, it was midnight before he realized.

“Well, that’s it folks. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. Well, unless you live here.” Tony tried to make a joke, but it bombed. He started packing up the equipment. Karen walked over to him.

“Thank you so much. I was feeling a little down tonight. Will you be here long?”

Tony was hoping for the best. “No, I just have to secure this in that closet. The techs will bring it back to the station tomorrow. Do you need a ride home?”

“That would be nice” and she smiled. Tony wasn’t expecting this, but recovered quickly.

“I’ll take you. Just give me ten minutes.”

“OK. I’ll tell my friends goodbye.”

“Wow. She’s leaving her friends to be with me. I must have played the right notes tonight.”

Karen was quiet on their ride back to her dorm, but you could sense the conversation between them, going on in their heads.

Tony: I wish we were heading to my apartment instead of her dorm.

Karen: I wish he would ask me to his apartment instead of taking me home.

Tony: What do I say?

Karen: I wish he would say something, anything.

“So, you made my night a little brighter too Karen. I didn’t expect a pretty cheerleader to even notice me.”

Karen slid over to Tony’s side and held his hand. “You’re not so bad looking yourself. Did you think dating a cheerleader was out of your league?”

Tony’s life quickly passed through his brain. *“She said dating a cheerleader!”* It’s a dream come true, unless she is already with a player from the football team. It’s worse than having an affair. If he found out, he could punish you on a regular basis. You couldn’t just disappear, especially once they got your class schedule and address. Worse yet, he had 60 or 70 teammates you could run into, literally!

“Tell you the truth. No, I never considered it a possibility.” Tony hoped Karen would give him one more sign to proceed. At the stop sign in front of her dorm, she leaned over and kissed him. “My roommate went home for the weekend. Aren’t you going to come in?” and she closed the door and ran to the door.

That was the sign. Tony parked quickly and ran to catch up with her. They made love for the next hours, aided by some champagne she just happened to have in her fridge. Low lights and soft music from her stereo intensified the mood. Tony gave her a massage while he recovered, hoping the night would never end.

Then there was a knock on the door, a pounding! Karen looked at him, threw on her robe and went to look out the security hole to see who was there. Tony’s heart and imagination were racing to what could be an ignominious finish of a glorious night. He could make out some muffled sound from the door.

“Oh.” She turned to Tony. “It’s only my roommate; she forgot her house key.”

Mashed Potatoes and Marinara Sauce

They say opposites attract. Well, not in all situations. Sometimes people from diverse backgrounds are attracted to each other, only to find their differences leading to incompatibility. It's like foods. Mashed potatoes and marinara sauce are great ingredients, but together they just don't mix.

Kelly Johnson grew up in the Midwest on a farm. Yes, she was a farmer's daughter, but she left that life behind for college in Boston. Kelly and some of her girlfriends were in the North End for lunch one Saturday.

"Oh Kelly, you have to try the pizza here, like nothing you ever had in Wisconsin" said her best friend Angela.

"I'm ready. We have the good cheese, just not the sauce. I guess the sauce makes all the difference" Kelly replied. The young waiter walked toward their table as the foursome looked up.

"Just like men" said Angela. The girls giggled.

"Posso aiutarvi belle signore. May I help you beautiful ladies?"

They all noticed Kelly locked on to the waiter's eyes. Angela smiled and whispered to Susan. "I think Kelly just fell in love."

"My friends tell me we have to try the pizza," said Kelly. "What do you think?"

"Very good choice. We won 'Best in Boston' the last three years," said Vincent.

"Well, then bring us the best one you have and a bottle of Chianti. And what is your name?"

"My name is Vincent. I'll be back with your drinks *presto*, shortly."

Susan and Angela answered together. "Thanks Vincent" and then looked at Kelly.

"What?" as she gave them a look.

"We saw you looking at him. No one like that in the heartland?"

Susan walked over to the jukebox and made a choice. The song filled the air. *"When the moon hits your eye, like a big pizza pie, that's Amore."* The girls laughed while pointing to Kelly.

"All right. Let's not get carried away. I think he's nice, that's all."

"Yeah, nice. We know what that means." The girls kidded Kelly for the next half hour as they ate. Eventually, they let her off the hook. "OK, Kelly we know you're only discovering something they didn't have back home, a genuine Italian boy."

“Be nice or I’ll marry him just to spite you. And you’ll have bridesmaid dresses that look like that.” She pointed to the green, white and red Italian flag in the corner next to a soccer team picture.

Vincent put the check on the table, smiling at Kelly, and thanked them for their business. “*una splendida giornata*, Have a wonderful day.”

Kelly took the check, insisting she pay for everyone. “You opened my eyes to wonderful Italian food. Let me pay this time.” There was no argument from her friends, college students living on a budget. They didn’t even notice when Kelly wrote her name and phone number on the bill.

That night Vincent called Kelly. She suggested a night at the Faneuil Hall Marketplace across from the North End. They quickly got acquainted, this town boy and the preppy coed from the heartland. By the end of the night, they were walking hand in hand and talking about their next date.

Unknown to her friends, Kelly started seeing Vincent on weekends after he got off from work. She knew they were an odd couple, but it was a nice diversion from the grind of papers and lecture halls, something to get through sophomore year with. She had time to find a suitable husband next year. For now, she just wanted to have fun. It had been months of meeting him in Boston when Vincent arranged an alternative place for dinner.

He met Kelly at the Harvard Square red line stop. They walked past the Harvard Coop and the famous newsstand. “Where are we going?” she said.

“I know a place on Dunster Street, around the corner. You’ll like it.” They walked up to a large yellow house with a crest and signet ring surrounding a nettle.

“This isn’t a restaurant Vincent. It’s some sort of Frat house.” Kelly was puzzled.

“Actually, it’s a coed final club. This is where I live.” Vincent saw Kelly’s face change from confusion to adoration.

“You go to Harvard? You never told me you went to Harvard.”

“Well, I wanted to make sure you liked me for the right reasons, not because my family owned a restaurant in Boston.”

It wasn’t until the wedding after graduation that Vincent found out her family owned the company that supplied pizza dough to his parent’s restaurant.

“Oops,” Kelly said to Vincent when he found out.

They lived happily ever after.

Love Interrupted Stories

The Love Beads

Joey jogged in from warm-ups to meet with the coach, his Beatles haircut bobbing in the breeze. His high school girlfriend Linda smiled as he came to the sideline. Parents and students started chanting for their undefeated varsity soccer team.

“Hey” said Linda, proudly standing there, still in her blue plaid Catholic school uniform, knee socks and blue and white shoes.

“Hi sweetheart” said Joey; he touched the tiny red and white beaded necklace she had given him, matching his school colors and soccer uniform. Nearby, Joey caught a glimpse of his father, who often made time to come to his games.

In 1969, it was common to see boys wearing beads. But his father was from another generation and thought the necklace was feminine, or queer as they called it in the 50s. “Take those off,” he said to Joey.

Joey was puzzled and a little embarrassed. He quietly came back. “What for? Coach has no problem with this.”

But his old-school father wasn't arguing. “Take them off.” Joey knew any more talk would draw attention from the others, so he pulled them off and threw them to his father. Seething, he returned to the field to start the game.

Linda saw this and frowned. Joey had promised to wear it during the game, displaying his affections in public. He looked back at her with an apologetic wave of the hand. “After the game” he said.

“OK” Linda said, still puzzled but supportive.

His father left after the game, giving Joey time to explain to Linda. “I'm sorry. My dad doesn't understand. Where can I get another one?”

Linda, relieved now, gave him a hug. “For my star winger. I'll make you one tonight.”

Joey kissed her; seeing this, his Latino teammates gave out some mock hoots in Spanish. “I'll pick you up at 7:00,” Joey said, and then jogged back to the locker room, punching his friend in the arm. “Who else is going to get you the ball Jorge?” They laughed as they left the field, still hearing the cheers from the crowd.

At dinner, his father ignored the earlier incident. Not wanting to get into this in front of his mother, Joey avoided the subject too, but his glare made it clear to his father what his feelings were. “Did you win today Joey?” said his mom.

“Yeah, 3 nothing; I had two assists. Dad was there.”

His mom smiled. “My star player, following in his Dad’s footsteps?” But his father was an all-state football player and now grossly overweight.

Joey forced a smile. “Something like that, I guess. I’m going to the movies with Linda” as he brought his empty plate to the kitchen and took off.

Linda bounced into Joey’s car, a 1969 Dodge Dart, not the Charger he wanted, but at least it was new. Joey stroked her long, dark hair, took her hand and kissed her. “I’m so sorry Linda.”

Linda gently pulled his face back to her, clearly indicating she had forgiven him. “Look what I have.” She pulled out another red and white beaded necklace and fit the elastic around his neck. “How’s that feel?” They went to the drive-in and continued their reconciliation.

On the drive home, Joey asked Linda. “Are you coming to our game with Nutley?”

Linda looked disappointed. “Sorry dear, I have a community service requirement for graduation. Did you make up with your dad?”

Joey shook his head. “Not yet.” He put his arm around Linda’s waist. “Besides, I have the perfect girl.”

Linda leaned into Joey and pouted. “Oh, now you’re making me sad that I’ll miss your game.”

But Joey’s father was there. Joey saw that his father was having difficulty standing. At half time, he went over to his father. “You all right dad?” Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, even in the cool November afternoon. “Maybe you should go sit in the car or have some water.”

His father shook his head. “I’m fine. I just want to ask you one thing son. Are you queer?”

Joey couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Why would you say that? You know I have a girlfriend.”

His father hesitated. “The beads, not what a guy should wear.” Joey gave him a disgusted look and headed back to the field.

But this affected his play in the second half. His concentration was broken and he misplayed several passes. Jorge hollered at him. “Torpe. Watch what you’re doing.”

Joey tried to run through his angst, giving Jorge a stopped hand signal. “I’m ok, just run your pattern.” On the next attack, Joey floated a ball over a defender, right in front of Jorge, who made one of his moves and punched it into the net.

“Goal,” came the chant from the crowd. Then there was a scream. Everyone turned to the sideline. Joey’s father was lying on the ground, clutching his chest.

Fortunately there was an ambulance on site. Joey’s father looked up at the EMT, gasping for air and holding his arm. “Don’t worry sir, you’re going to be all right. We’re just going to stabilize you and bring you to the hospital for follow-up.” The EMT was wearing a blue jumpsuit, white high converse and a utility belt with stethoscope, scissors and other first aid equipment. Joey’s father pointed at the EMT and tried to speak, but he couldn’t make out the words. The EMT interrupted. “Relax sir. Don’t try to speak; are you pointing to my necklace. My fiancé gave it to me to remind me of her when I’m at work. Sort of like an engagement ring for guys.”

In the Mood

Annie and her husband Jeff were holding hands and looking at the boats in the marina. "I've never been on a sailboat before," said Annie.

Jeff smiled. "It's not like the big tourist boats. It's quiet and peaceful." Now in their late 50s, the local couple came to San Francisco for a relaxing day trip on the holiday weekend. Ninety minutes around the San Francisco Bay and a romantic lunch was just what Jeff had planned to get Annie into the mood.

Thousands of tourists from all over the world gathered at Pier 39, Fisherman's Wharf and Ghirardelli Square, making this multi-cultural city even more diverse.

The director of the sailing tour, in her blue polo shirt, white shorts and topsiders, smiled and spoke to the passengers. "Everyone going on the 12:30 sailing cruise gather around me and listen please. We're going to walk down to dock F, then I'll be handing out drink tickets."

Annie and Jeff could smell the salty air combining with the seafood odors from the adjacent restaurants. "I'm glad we're going to sail before lunch. I don't want to get sea sick."

Jeff reassured his wife. "Just a little slow rolling from side to side, nothing that would upset your tummy."

Many of the thirty passengers were on the heavy side, massive men and their wives, even some overweight children. Looking at the others from the back of the line, Jeff, who was 225 pounds, actually felt thin. He winked at Annie. "Maybe a little more gentle rolling than I thought."

This made the process of getting on the boat a little awkward. "Just hold onto the lines and walk around to fill in all the spaces," said the captain, a sea worn man with a scruffy beard and white cap on his head. After everyone had settled on the deck of the boat, one more family rushed on. You could hear screams from a baby on the floating dock.

"Oh please let them be on a different boat," said Annie.

Not so. Unlike the others, this family was thin and overdressed, like some newcomers to America. Two parents, three other adults, a little girl and a boy toddler, no more than two years old walked onboard and sat in the only remaining spaces, next to Jeff. He leaned over and whispered to his wife. "Well, I guess we'll have to bunch up here." Jeff moved to give the family more room. He squeezed himself behind Annie, between two metal lines, the main sail boom and straddled his legs around a winch. He looked like some criminal Spiderman caught in his web.

The toddler's screams increased in volume. Jeff, Annie and the other passengers watched the family without staring. Annie stated the obvious. "The little boy doesn't want to be here. His parents will calm him down or get off before we leave, don't you think?"

Not so. The boy screamed louder and louder, drowning out the captain as he was giving safety instructions. Instead of leaving the boat, the parents just held the child and spoke quietly to him. The other passengers were getting annoyed now. "Really?" said the twenty something woman to her boyfriend shaking his head. The sailboat pulled out of the harbor and into the open bay toward Alcatraz Island. It was too late to get off now.

The first mate took the drink orders and served everyone. In addition to soda, there was champagne and beer. This didn't alter the mood of the passengers; in fact, it may have increased the tension. The thin family ordered regular soda and gave some to the crying boy, thinking it would calm him down. Not so. Annie nudged Jeff and said "Jeff, I can't believe they're giving him soda." Jeff shook his head. This romantic cruise was going downhill fast.

An hour later, you could see the frustration on everyone, except the boy's parents of course, still clueless and talking to the toddler. Everyone felt helpless. Jeff looked at the other passengers wondering what they were thinking.

'Why don't they give the boy a pacifier?'
'Don't they know how to quiet an unruly child?'
'Why didn't they just stay and ask for a refund?'
'Maybe they'll fall over the side.'

Jeff caught himself imagining the toddler going over the side of the boat.

Annie tugged at Jeff's sleeve. "What are you thinking dear?"

Coming out of his thoughts, Jeff replied. "You know, he's probably a Silicon Valley engineer making \$150,000 a year. You would think basic child care would be easy."

Annie tried to maintain a positive attitude. "Well, we're over halfway through the cruise. Maybe the child will cry himself out." Not so. It was ninety minutes of crying, screaming and very little parenting. By the time the sailboat returned to port, more than a few passengers were giving the family dirty looks.

Annie and Jeff made their way to the nearest restaurant, a little pricey, but they needed to change the mood quickly. "I know this is expensive honey, but you were so patient on that boat" said Jeff. Annie calmed Jeff down, while looking at the menu posted outside. "Umm! A nice seafood salad would be perfect. You'll feel better too." They remembered the great Louie salads they had the last time they were in town, so they went inside.

Jeff tried to regain his sense of control. “Two glasses of chardonnay, the crab cakes appetizer and two Louie salads, one with shrimp and one with crab.” His plans could be salvaged with a romantic lunch on the bay. But when the food arrived, he was disappointed again.

Two tiny crab cakes, not much bigger than a silver dollar, providing no more than a couple of bites. The Louie salads were mostly pale iceberg lettuce, with one mini slice of tomato, two olives and a small wedge of artichoke. No greens, no hard-boiled egg and just a sprinkling of shrimp and crab to boot. Annie pursed her lips. “It’s ok.”

Jeff was angry now. “No, it’s not.”

Annie stroked his arm. “Let’s just finish our meal and get home. I don’t want to get into a thing here with the waiter. At least we have a nice view.” Jeff grumbled but had to agree. The Golden Gate Bridge, marina and bay water was a beautiful sight.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jeff saw the hostess bringing over another party. It was the clueless family from the cruise. “Oh no” Annie said under her breath, her eyes opening wide. The hostess sat the family behind Jeff and Annie. Then it happened again. The two year old began crying.

Jeff did a slow burn turn around and stared at the child. “Unbelievable.”

Annie shook her head. “There are hundreds of restaurants and they came here. Next to our table!”

The waiter brought the check. \$84.78! That was the final insult. Jeff paid the bill and they walked out of the restaurant. As they were leaving, they noticed the child had stopped crying. A diner next to them had provided a pacifier and that’s all he needed.

Squeezing past the crowd, Jeff knew all his plans for a romantic date were in vain. “I’m sorry Annie. I wanted this day to be romantic for us. Instead it’s been a disaster.”

Annie pulled Jeff’s face near hers and whispered in his ear. “Not so.” then she winked, took his hand and they went home.

Respectable Sinners

Peter came out of the gas station store with two bottles of Hawaiian water, handing one to Maria as she filled her tank. “You’re an angel, showing me heaven today” he said, stroking her hair slowly and whispering into her ear.

Maria smiled, nuzzled under his neck and held Peter’s hand. “You’re too good to me Peter. When will I see you again?”

“Soon sweetheart. You know I can’t live without you. I’m on a business trip this Wednesday. You can meet me in Carmel. I have a suite on the ocean for three days. I’ll make sure you have the days off.”

Maria closed her eyes and sighed. “I can’t wait. I should get back now, laundry to do.” She kissed him and finished filling her Honda Civic. Peter got into his Land Rover. They talked on their cell phones as they pulled out, smiling furtively.

Bob couldn’t hear what they were saying, but it was clear that Peter, married and Maria, who wasn’t, were having an affair. Peter was in his late fifties; Maria couldn’t be more than twenty-two. Also, Maria was Peter’s housekeeper. This was a rare glimpse into the private lives of Bob’s congregation, although he suspected this was a common situation. He headed back to the church.

Bob’s flock wore tailored clothing, drove luxury cars and ate fine food. They sent their children to the best schools. They took politically correct positions on the issues and voted for whatever candidate would maintain the status quo. They give to charity, volunteered occasionally and attended fund-raising dinners for socially approved causes. They had so many diversions to fill their lives that they hardly ever had time to think of the big picture.

It was one of those small, exclusive towns where only the fortunate few lived, where old money and new money lived comfortably side by side in homes with ocean views, nannies and housekeepers. A sophisticated system of surveillance cameras and a vigilant police force kept the residents safe; safe enough where children could play outside and walk to school alone.

But this was no Peyton Place; adults kept their affairs discreet and gossip was unheard of; in fact, talking about indiscretions would make you an outcast. Everyone was very happy to maintain a facade of respectability, not only for the children but also for their own peace of mind. After all, sin is only sin if it’s out in the open and there is always time to repent before your life is finished.

So Bob had difficulty discovering the sins of his flock. The members gave generously for services rendered, mission requests and other charitable causes he brought to their attention. No, there wasn’t any dysfunction at First Presbyterian, just a utopian community of privilege. He entered his office to see his junior pastor, Scott, preparing for a youth sermon.

“Scott, tell me something. How are the kids doing?”

“Fine pastor. I’ve never seen a better-adjusted group of kids. They seem to live an idyllic life without stress. Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been wandering around town the last few weeks and I’ve noticed some more disturbing behavior. Corruption, deceit and adultery topping the list, all from our congregation.”

“Another affair. Hmmm. That’s seven this week. Who may I ask is it this time?”

“Peter Robinson and his housekeeper Maria. I saw them at the Shell station. They didn’t notice me, but anyone could have seen them and they didn’t seem to care.”

“Well, Peter’s wife Joan is sleeping with the tennis pro at the club, often *at the club!*”

“You have confirmation of this?”

“Yes sir. The cameras are working perfectly. It’s all in our database.” Scott had managed to intercept the town’s security cameras, as well as place his own mini cameras in more private spaces indoors.

“Scott, this is the first church I’ve seen where sin is so rampant and yet discreetly hidden from others. Maybe that’s why the children seem so healthy. Usually, you’ll find the men at the club bragging about their conquests and women chatting about it in the spa or cafés, but not here.”

“I’m going out tonight to install more cameras. Four more restaurants, the new yoga center and the street artists.”

“Those musicians, jugglers and magicians in the town square? What do you hope to catch there?”

“I’ve seen some unusually large tips landing in the hats lately, along with notes folded around them and flirting, especially between the women and the magician and a disturbing flirtation between a cougar and a guitar player. And the time when they take their breaks is corresponding to these tips. Something is going on all right.”

“And how many of these people have we confirmed now, Scott?”

“One hundred and ninety three pastor, all from our congregation.”

“None from the synagogue?”

“No sir, not one. It’s all on us.”

“Well, it’s a good thing Rabbi Goldman doesn’t know about it. He would give me hell.”

“Yes sir.”

“Which brings us back to our problem. We have a congregation full of deceitful, deceptive sinners, all quietly leading very comfortable lives, making millions of dollars, both legally and illegally and sleeping with each other. But no blow-ups, no filing for divorce, no drama at all. How is this possible?”

“It’s a New Age Sodom and Gomorrah, pastor. And we’re responsible for cleaning it up. But I’ve been thinking and may have an answer.”

“Anything Scott, let’s hear it.”

“Well, preaching to them isn’t working. They don’t consider sin a problem. They think life is what you make it and the afterlife is an after thought, or no thought at all.”

“Right.”

“I’ve created aliases, anonymous characters with an untraceable email address. I call them Tom or Nancy, depending on whom I’m addressing. They send an email each day to someone in our congregation detailing their sins and hints that they are compiling evidence to deliver to the wronged individual or business. But not a threat so much as an opportunity to repent.”

“Yikes. A bit radical, don’t you think?”

“As long as we maintain our ignorance of what’s happening, I think we’ll be all right. We’ve tried to gently nudge them in the right direction on Sundays, but the sermons seem to be providing more ideas for sinning than for correcting the sinners.”

“OK Scott. Go ahead and start the emails, but don’t mass email yet, just ten a day.”

“Any particular sin we should start with? We seem to have an overlap between adulterers and business people, especially women.”

“All right. Start with those people who are committing multiple sins. Put Peter Robinson and his wife Joan on top of the list. They have three children.”

“Right. That family is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“And keep me updated on those street artists. That’s too conspicuous.”

“Is there any difference between public and private sins pastor?”

“Good question. Public sins can influence others more directly, but I think private sins are more insidious because the sinners think that there are no consequences.”

Scott broke into the new yoga center that night, the first time his military background was put to use after seminary. He placed mini cameras in the locker rooms and in the main workout center, cleverly inserted into the fragrant fresh plants that were already in place. From there he headed to the town square to rig up some trees focusing on the area where the street artists performed. Finally at 3:00am, he broke into four restaurants and again placed mini cameras in plants facing quiet corner booths.

Scott's scheme went into effect the next day. Emails were sent out to the first group, detailing, with video clips, the transgressions he had recorded earlier. He even sent an email to a local politician whose campaign was corrupted by the opposition. Then he tracked the recipients to see if their behavior changed.

A lunch business meeting between a banker and financial advisor at one of those restaurants provided immediate results. Although neither wanted to admit to seeing compromising video of their corruption, both knew they had to adjust their methods.

"John. The reason I thought we should hold meetings here is that I'm concerned about electronic bugging at the office. This looks more like a casual lunch instead of the culmination of our Machiavellian plan to bilk investors."

"That makes sense Bill. No paper or electronic trail, just friendly talk among financial professionals. We could even say we were planning a community fundraiser for the poor."

Bill replied with a sly smile. "You mean those making less than one million dollars a year?"

John twirled the swizzle stick in his glass of Scotch. "Yes, those poor bastards. Now where is lunch? Ah, here it comes, my twenty-four-inch porterhouse, onion rings, avocado and Hollandaise sauce."

"John. Didn't your doctor tell you to lose weight?"

John wiped some sauce from his lip. "Hey, I'm having fruits and vegetables here. Besides, you only live once gentlemen. I intend to enjoy it."

A nursery deliveryman rang the doorbell of the Robinson house. Maria answered it. "Yes, what is this?"

"Plants for the home, courtesy of the club."

"Oh, they're lovely. How many are there?"

"Sixteen, one for each room. Mrs. Robinson admired them the other day. I can put them in the rooms for you."

"Thank you. Let's start upstairs and finish here."

Meanwhile, Linda Fleming, who lost the recent election for mayor, was meeting with her staff to figure out how they could go from a ten-point lead in the polls to losing on election day. “Where did our supporters go? Sally Johnson did something to turn our voters. She’s just a realtor. She doesn’t have any experience in office. How did she do it?”

Her aide looked over a clipboard. “She made some promises to homeowner associations and some deals with the bank for favorable refinancing. She was able to turn a thousand voters at the last minute. We just got proof of it from an anonymous source.”

“Well, we’re going to strike back. If they can use technology to steal an election, then we can use it to smear her reputation. Get me that intern, Segretti’s grandson.”

One of the reasons that Fleming lost the election was her pollster. Instead of checking with voters before and after the vote, she was taking a nap in the adjacent building. If she had been doing her job, Fleming would have had some notice before the election was over and may have been able to counter her opponent’s strategy in time. Sometimes sin takes the form of inaction.

At the yoga center, the pampered wives took their morning exercise before heading to the cafés. Scott monitored the feed from the mini cameras. One of the women passed a note to the instructor, an Italian fitness model, inside of a small towel; she discreetly opened it up, and then smiled. As she walked about the class, she paused to whisper something to her amante and touched her back. Scott had to review the digital tape in slow motion to catch the proof but the intentions between the pair were clear in any language.

That evening, people strolled the town square window-shopping the boutiques. Husbands and wives held hands while children carried ice cream cones. The salty summer air blew in from the ocean. At the entrance to the park, the street artists were displaying their skills. Jugglers, magicians and musicians performed to the crowds, while a hat for tips filled up with change and bills. Every so often, a note would drop in. A bearded guitar player winked at the fifty-something fit woman leaving her message of an upcoming rendezvous. But Scott caught it all. As the guitar player read the note, Scott’s mini camera zoomed in and snapped a picture. He then relayed it to the woman’s husband, the principal of the elementary school, who coincidentally was at the time doing some professional development with the new second grade teacher who just so happened to be married to the guitar player.

“What a mess” Scott said to himself. “No one would believe this if it was one of those trashy novels the women read on the beach.”

The next day Scott checked the cameras he delivered in the houseplants at the Robinson home. He couldn’t have hoped, or dreaded, what he discovered.

Peter cornered Maria in the bedroom cleaning up. “I need you now lover.”

“Oh!” Maria said. “Peter, we’ve never done this here.”

“Sorry. This can’t wait.” Peter ripped off Maria’s clothing, threw her on the bed and had his way with her for the next hour.

The tennis pro dropped Joan off at her house following their lesson. “Thanks for the ride Jason. Why don’t you come in for a cold drink?”

As soon as they were in the kitchen, Joan pulled Jason to her, grinding her hips onto his. Jason was excited but worried. “Joan, we don’t do this here.”

“We do today Jason.” Both couples miraculously finished their lovemaking without running into each other. Jason went back to the club. Peter slipped out the back and went to the office. Joan took off for the spa. That night Peter and Joan had a quiet and friendly dinner with the children.

But Scott had it all on tape. He sent the compromising video clips to Peter, Joan, Maria and Jason.

The next day, Pastor Bob got his morning coffee from the pretty barista, and then sat down to read his paper. Rabbi Goldman saw his friend and sat next to him. “Bob, how are things going?”

“You know David. I’ve discovered that you have to save the congregation one at a time.”

“Mazel Bob. Me ken dem yam mit a kendel nit ois’shepen.

“Sorry David, I don’t know that one.”

“The ocean cannot be emptied with a can.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears David.”

Surprise Endings

Pie or Die

Tony was sautéing onion, peppers and mushrooms slowly while considering how his life had changed. What was once important now seemed trivial. He wondered why he thought chasing money would make him happy. What have I done that matters? Tony's transformation to a better life had begun.

"Tony, what are you cooking?" said his wife Angela.

"A little veal with sauce and vegetables dear" he replied.

"With penne?"

Tony stirred the red sauce into the pan. "No, linguine" he said, "I'm hungry." Cooking is meaningful. Creating food seems a noble and honest activity. To watch Tony cook, you might not realize he had made a small fortune in the business world climbing over numerous competitors and colleagues on his way to the top. But his competitive nature had nearly ruined his health with the long hours, rich foods, alcohol, business trip affairs and liaisons so connected to his career.

Tony didn't give thoughts to making money anymore. He didn't worry about dressing to impress, preferring casual jogging pants and cotton sweaters. There was nothing he had to do or even wanted to do. He was depressed. Tony was only 48. With a wife twelve years his junior and the children heading off to college, he was suddenly a man without a purpose.

Even though Tony was bored with his new life, he was relieved to leave behind the stress, corruption, sexual scandals and financial improprieties. He now had a chance to start over. "Angela, what do you think I should do?"

Angela paused a moment. "Have you thought about taking cooking lessons, gourmet cooking with one of those fancy schools?"

Tony smiled. "How about in Italy or France, after the kids start college this fall?"

"Your choice, but I would prefer France dear" Angela said.

"Something to think about. I'll check it out."

After lunch, Tony wandered down to town, a seaside upper class haven for those with money and visitors curious about those with money. There were also the disaffected youth. Those lost boys and girls too old to be in school and too young to care. Most young people were self-absorbed with their looks, dating and partying. Whether they were working or in school, their world was confined to the present. They spent a majority of their time on smart phones in their virtual reality. Personal communications has been replaced by texting, emails and videos.

A small shop on the boardwalk was vacant with a *For Lease* sign. He checked the neighboring stores. T-shirts, beach clothing, coffee franchises and frozen yogurt shops. The nearest pizza was 30 yards in either direction. Doesn't seem like much, but this spot was right near the entrance to the beach from the parking lot, generating quite a bit of walking traffic. So Tony decided to open a pizza shop and get some of these disaffected youth to work in it, even run it.

Soon there was a line of 16 to 21 year olds waiting for work. I know you're thinking he named the store *Tony's*, but he thought *Pie or Die* had a more youthful appeal. Instead of Sinatra and Pavarotti, the music inside reflected this new generation of the kids who worked there.

It was a diverse group of employees, working class kids without work. He hired someone to teach them how to make pizza, run deliveries and manage cash with customers. He hired younger kids to hand out coupons to people on the beach and place them on car windshields. Most importantly, he let the kids run the business, offering advice when needed. Within a month, *Pie or Die* was doing steady business from noon until midnight and just before the summer season. Timing couldn't be better.

Because Tony gave his staff a lot of freedom, they worked hard. Weeks went by without any incidents. Rapid growth led to some turnover. There wasn't time to do background checks on applicants. Students on summer break looking to work part-time meant more employees working fewer hours.

Unknown to Tony, some of these temporary workers were skimming money. A few were using drugs in the back and several were making out when they were supposed to be delivering pies. His successful new business was evolving into a microcosm of his old life. Even in a small pizza shop on the beach, corruption and scandal had taken hold.

Stopping in before closing to check on inventory, Tony watched as the night crew cleaned up. Jenny, a waitress, made a final count and handed Tony the money. "Here you go Tony. \$575.00 for the last few hours."

"Thanks Jenny, hey you better get home."

Jenny put up her apron. "It's not a long walk."

Tony showed concern. "Walking at this time of night. No, you better let me give you a ride." Jenny smiled and nodded, following Tony to his car.

Jenny gave him directions down the beach road to a clearing, over a mile away. "Pull over here, by that palm tree."

Tony noticed the bungalows common to the area, usually shared by students. "OK, here you go," he said.

Jenny smiled, took his hand and leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"Really, what about your roommates?"

Jenny whispered again "they're in L.A. for a concert, won't be home until real late."

Tony joined Jenny inside, the sound of waves coming from the beach and a smell of Jasmine incense inside. After an hour Tony left, Jenny happily concluding her night as she had planned. Tony felt alive and happy again, planning on continuing this affair.

Back in the store, there was a new rumor. "Did you hear about Jenny," said one of the girls. "Her dad is buying her a BMW for her 17th birthday."

"Really" said one of the guys, "she sure looks a lot older than that."

Arriving home, Tony's wife Angela greeted him at the door. "So you finally found a hobby!" and gave Tony a warm, passionate kiss.

"Yes dear" and they went up to the bedroom.

Overdue

The library was always a place of peace and happiness for Angelo. He remembered his boyhood days on a Saturday morning with Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle and Maurice Sendak. Later, when he was twelve, he would immerse himself in the Hardy Boys mysteries; that was the year he first noticed the high school girl working there. The library formed his love for reading and his reading for love. But the best part of the library was that they let you borrow any book and return it for free, no obligation, just an occasional overdue fine.

Angelo eventually became a teacher and a writer, a natural destination for someone who loved reading. Teaching gave him time off to write; he would often spend his afternoons in cafes grading papers and writing with a cup of tea and a pastry. Around 5pm, he would leave to make dinner for his wife, Julia, a banker. Angelo and Julia were hanging in, in spite of the economy. But nearly all of those in the 99% had lost jobs, savings and the value of their home in the 21st century. Locked into that huge middle class without equity in their home and competing with younger people for employment, Angelo and Julia lapsed into a loving, but stressful middle age.

“What do we have for dinner, sweetheart” said Julia as she came home.

“Chicken cacciatore with vegetables and a little rigatoni” said Angelo. Julia poured herself a glass of wine. “Stressful day?” said Angelo as he made the plates.

“Just the usual, not enough time in the day. How was school?”

Angelo took a sip of wine. “You know my kids are great, but today a couple of them were really off, seems like they were struggling with something at home. You’re so lucky to work with adults all the time.”

Julia nodded. “Yes, thank goodness for that” and she kissed him on the cheek. After dinner, they settled into their routine, watching television on the couch and going to bed early.

As the years went by, he spent more time writing and less teaching. With writing he felt continual progress while teaching was a year of moving kids forward, then having to start over again with another class, correcting the ones with behavioral problems and inspiring those who were there to learn. Eventually he switched to substitute teaching; no more grading or preparing lessons, but much less income. His assignments took him to many schools, with different grades and subjects to teach. The variety kept things interesting and assured him that no one difficult assignment would last very long. One day, he found himself teaching first grade, something he found extremely stressful.

That lunchtime, Angelo went into the library to see if there were any video stories he might use. “Excuse me, do you have any reading stories. My little ones and I need some calm this afternoon.”

The librarian, Anna pointed to the filing cabinet. “Right over there.”

Angelo picked out a storybook video, knowing he could mesmerize them for a while that afternoon. “Thanks, you’re a life saver. I’ll bring this back later today.”

That night, Anna was fixing dinner for her husband Roger. “Anna, I’m home.”

Anna gave him a hug and kiss, then took his overcoat. “Relax dear, dinner’s almost ready.”

Roger put down his briefcase and sat down to read the paper. “How was school today?”

Anna began fixing plates. “Oh, you know. Same old librarian stuff, nothing that exciting.”

Later that week, Angelo was at his café writing when an attractive woman interrupted him. “Angelo, hi! It’s me, Anna from the library.”

Angelo looked up at Anna, holding a cup of tea. “Anna, hi. Please join me.”

Anna noticed the book next to Angelo’s computer with his byline. “Did you write this?”

Angelo signed one of his books and gave it to Anna. “Here you go. Who better to read my book than a librarian?” Angelo and Anna discovered they had much in common, along with chemistry neither of them anticipated. Within the hour they were holding hands and planning to meet the next day.

The affair lasted once a week each Friday for about six months. Neither Anna nor Angelo wanted anything complicated, no talk about family or friends, just a couple hours of passion in an otherwise long and stressful week. In fact, the affair reenergized them for their spouses and invigorated love making at home.

Then one day Angelo got a text from Anna, asking to meet him that Tuesday at the café. “This is a nice surprise,” said Angelo. “Is your husband away on business?”

Anna took him to a corner booth for some privacy. “I was reading your book last night when Roger asked me about it.”

Angelo didn’t seem concerned. “So, you can let him read it.”

Anna touched Angelo’s forearm. “You don’t understand. He’s a banker.”

Angelo leaned forward. “What a coincidence, my wife is a banker too.”

Anna's eyes widened. "Angelo, he saw your last name on the book. Your wife works for Roger!" Angelo suddenly panicked and wiped some sweat from his forehead.

"Angelo, Roger arranged for the four of us to have dinner Friday night." Angelo realized this development was long overdue.

Roger and Anna waited in the lobby for Angelo and Julia. When the door opened, Julia greeted her boss and shook hands with Anna. Then Roger extended his hand to Angelo. "It's nice to meet you. Anna loves your book. I even read a few stories myself."

Julia added. "How amazing is it that I work for Roger and you have been teaching with Angelo?" Angelo and Anna tried to hide their uneasiness. The hostess showed them to their table.

"We'll take a bottle of champagne," said Roger. When it arrived, he made a toast. Here's to making new friends. It's been a while since we have been out on a double date. Let's do this again soon."

Julia raised her glass, smiled and agreed. "Yes, same for us. We needed a change and new people in our life."

One Prius, Two Prius, Pink Prius, Blue Prius

There is no actual proof that there are more white Prius cars than any other model in California. Some estimates put the number at over two million. The hybrid car became so popular that Toyota began making personalized versions to match owner's particular interests. There were models to match your college colors, cars with artwork laminate and even a baby blue and pink model to celebrate newborns.

Tony and Barbara sat in the first table at the wedding of their son Jim. You might remember Jim from the time he took his shotgun trying to excavate that pesky rooster from his parents home. Now, he was betrothed to Dianne, the girl he first met in Sunday school, fifteen years earlier. They were a striking couple, Jim's rugged good looks and Dianne's classic beauty like the French statue she was named for. Surely the children would be just as handsome or beautiful as they were.

"It won't be long before you're a grandmother dear" said Tony to his wife.

"Oh, I can't wait. I've already started picking out patterns for baby clothing and blankets."

"Baby blue?"

"Probably. You know Jim. He'll want a boy"

"I'm going to say they'll have a girl, so better buy some pink too."

It was a flawless wedding. No drama or problems. All the couple's friends and family were there and the youngsters partied long into the night.

Jim was a type A force while Dianne was more reserved, but together they blended well. Like many young couples, they spent a lot of time out, visiting wineries, going camping and having friends over for dinner. Most of their friends were married the same year they were, so there were a lot of weddings to attend. Dianne's sorority sisters were all ready to set up families of their own.

A short year later, Jim was able to buy out the motorcycle shop he worked for. After another year, they had saved enough money to make a down payment on a house. At the housewarming party, many expected this couple to announce the third grand surprise, a baby.

"Tony, you still driving that antique car?" Jim loved to make fun of Tony's Prius.

"Yes, still getting 50 miles to a gallon too. How about that truck of yours? You'll have to get rid of it when you have a family. Need a good four door with good mileage."

"Tony, did you hear that Toyota is recalling the Prius with a brake problem? But don't worry, Prius cars don't go fast enough to need brakes."

“Good one Jim. Remind me that when you’re paying \$80 to fill your tank.” Tony and Jim had this sort of friendly joking about Jim’s high-powered truck and motorcycles and Tony’s practical hybrid car. Dianne even chimed in. “Jim was having a nightmare and I could distinctly hear him say, *no, not another Prius.*” Tony and Barbara enjoyed this ribbing.

Barbara took Tony aside and asked in a whisper. “How long before you think Dianne will be pregnant?” she said.

“Actually, she looks quite content today. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was already there. Did you notice she hasn’t had any wine today?”

“You’re right. I didn’t catch that.”

So Tony asked Dianne’s father what he thought. “Say you’re right. She usually has had a glass of wine by now. Should we start a pool on the birth date?”

Tony’s prediction was confirmed the following week when the couple visited them on a Sunday afternoon. Dianne gave Barbara a card with a picture of two motorcycles and three helmets, one obviously too small. The caption read:

Looks like we’re going to need that sidecar!

“But the helmet is blue” said Barbara to Jim. Do you know that it’s a boy?”

Jim and Dianne shook their heads. “No, but we have a good feeling; we’re not going to find out until the birth.”

“A surprise is nice,” said Barbara. “So long as the baby is healthy.”

“All our friends think it’s going to be a boy.”

“Then plan on a girl” said Tony. “That’s just the way life works.”

Dianne went into labor two weeks early. Jim was stuck at work helping one of his employees who was injured by an exhaust pipe. By the time he got the phone call, there was a pileup on 880 from an accident. He tried to keep Dianne calm on the cell phone.

“Don’t worry honey, I’ll be there in time to help you. Are your parents there?”

“Only Barbara and Tony. My parents should be here soon though. Jim, I love you.”

“I love you too sweetheart. I’ll get there as soon as possible.”

The pain got so strong that the doctors gave Dianne something to relax her, and then rushed her into the delivery room. As Dianne relaxed, she mumbled something to the nurse.

“OK, I got it. You just relax mom. We’re going to do a C-section.”

Jim rushed into the hospital in time to see the nurse gently placing his new daughter into one of the cribs in the nursery room. He was overcome with emotion, shedding more than a few tears. He motioned to the nurse to bring her over to the glass divider.

“Can you bring her over to me?”

The nurse carried the pink bundle over to her new father. She had blue eyes, blonde hair and an adorable button nose. This was the greatest moment of his life, even trumping his wedding day. He had so many plans for her; to give her everything she needed until the day he would walk her down the aisle at her wedding. Jim stood there smiling and crying at the same time. Then he noticed the little ankle tag around her leg.

Prius Elizabeth Mariani, 6 lbs. 4 oz., born on April 15, 2013 at 4:24pm.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO” he screamed and ran to his wife’s recovery room.

Destiny Stories

Love, Luck and Fate

Joseph Bosco looked down at the sidewalk, after hearing the bird whistle in the tree overhead. That's when he saw the worn, twenty-dollar bill caught in the stray roots breaking through the sidewalk. "Hmm. How about that?" and he put the bill in his pocket. Joe learned one important lesson growing up. He didn't believe in luck but whenever fortune passed his way, he would say 'it was God's will' and accept it. In fact, Joe attributed everything that happened to him to God's will, good or bad. "Much less stress" he used to say, "much less disappointment too."

Most everyone accepted Joe's philosophy of life. His friends liked the fact that he was so even tempered, never too high or too low. At holiday gatherings, he could be counted on to balance out the histrionics and emotional outbursts of his Sicilian family. At work, he would be the voice of reason when an argument ensued. His matter of fact personality worked just about everywhere, except when he was dating.

When Joe was a boy back in 1995, he had his first crush on Sorana Antonelli, a pretty eighth grader in his English class. They were sitting in the movie theater, sharing a box of popcorn. Sorana, like Joe, was from the poor side of town, but that doesn't matter.

"I like your dress Sorana."

"Thanks Joe." Sorana blushed. "I like your shirt."

Joe and Sorana's first date was everything it should have been. Their infatuation continued for two years, until Sorana's parents moved out of state. As it is with young love, both of them were heartbroken. They tried to keep in touch but high school pressures and other interests gradually pulled them apart. Later in life, he wished he had been more persistent and not just accepted their breakup.

"Thank Senator." George took the papers from him and filed them into the briefcase. "We have a vote coming up at 2:00pm, so I will pick you up after lunch."

"Get me something at the deli George. I'd like to do some reading. I'll be in my office."

"Corned beef on rye?"

"You know it George."

Senator Joseph Bosco sat in his office reading the paper and eating his lunch when his secretary interrupted him.

“Excuse me senator. You have a visitor.”

“Who is it, Hannah?”

“Her name is Sorana Antonelli. She says she’s an old friend.”

Joe stood up, smiled and gestured her to let Sorana in. He got up to greet her at the door. As Sorana entered, she saw Joe with open arms.

“Senator Bosco, do you remember me?”

“Sorana, you’re not allowed to call me senator. How are you?” He gave her a long hug, and then pushed her back while holding on to look at her. “I can’t believe it. What’s going on with you now?”

“My parents are retired down the shore. The Midwest winters were too much for them now. I came back to visit.”

“But they’re in good health?”

“Oh, they’re fine. Just spending their days walking on the boardwalk and nights watching TV.”

“Sit down please. Hannah, get us some snacks and soft drinks please.”

“Right away senator. Fruit and vegetable plate and iced tea?” Joe glanced at Sorana for approval, and then gave Hannah the thumbs up. They sat at the round table in the private room adjoining his office.

They each noticed the other’s ring finger, naked, providing an answer to one question. “The life of a senator; don’t you have anyone special in your life?”

“I was married for a few years, but she died from cancer in 2009.”

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No Sorana. I’m glad you did. It’s time I moved on.”

“So you didn’t have any children?”

“No, that was a mixed blessing. I wanted a family. What about you?”

“Well, I was engaged for two years, but he cheated on me so we called it off. At least I didn’t marry someone who would be unfaithful. But at our age, I’m wondering if I’ll ever find love.”

“Our age? You’re only 31 dear. I’m sure any man would be lucky to have a beautiful and intelligent woman like you.”

Sorana blushed. “Well, several have made offers, but after the engagement, I’m hesitant to trust.”

Joe took Sorana’s hand and looked at her with a gentle smile. “You could always trust me.” Sorana put her other hand on top of Joe’s, more than just flirting.

“Yes. You were my first and best love.”

Hannah noticed the intimate moment and knocked gently on the door. “May I bring this in now?” The senator took his hands away and gestured her in. “Thank you Hannah. That looks perfect.” Sorana agreed. Hannah closed the door behind her as she left. Joe and Sorana had an intimate and joyful lunch together.

George knocked on the door. “Senator, it’s time for that vote.” Joe looked at his watch.

“Thank you George. Is that the only vote this afternoon?”

“Yes senator. You have a rare afternoon off.”

“Perfect. Sorana. I have to be away for about an hour, then I’d love to spend the rest of the day with you. Are you free?”

Sorana made a tongue in cheek pretense of propriety. “Yes, senator Bosco. I would like that very much” and shook his hand. Joe rolled his eyes.

“It’s Joe, dear, remember? Hannah, would you please help Sorana for the next hour and I’ll meet her back here at 3:00.”

“Of course senator. Sorana, would you like to go to the Smithsonian for a bit. I can have the senator meet you there.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely. Is that OK?”

Joe gave Hannah thumbs up, and then said to Sorana. “Of course, much better. Now you know why I hired Hannah. Have my driver bring her to the museum and I’ll meet her there at 3:00.”

“Very good senator.” Hannah nodded to Joe, then whispered to Sorana. “Sometimes these votes go longer so don’t worry if he’s a little late.”

Joe and George hurried out to make the vote.

Sorana walked leisurely through the museum, admiring the marvels of flight, from daVinci's flying machine to the space shuttle. She was every bit as lovely as Joe had thought when they were kids, but now she was a striking, mature woman. Her pleated grey skirt over cranberry knee socks, L.L. Bean blouse and cardigan indicated her New England education. She had gone to Boston College, just a few miles from Harvard where Joe went to school. But they never ran into each other there.

Several men made extended glances at her while she walked; Sorana smiled back at them but didn't encourage any more. She was secretly glad that Joe was ready and able for a relationship and she still felt that initial chemistry they had as youngsters.

The senator found her at the museum. He came up behind her and gave her a friendly hug and kiss on the cheek; others noticed this public display of affection. "Isn't that senator Bosco?" said a man who was admiring Sorana.

"I'm afraid so, Bob" said his friend. "Women like that aren't available very long. Looks like the senator has a new love or a mistress."

"Oh, Joe. You made it on time."

Joe took her hand and walked her away from the others. "So, what would you like to do now?"

Sorana squeezed his hand, acknowledging his gesture. "I like the museum but maybe we could go somewhere a little quieter to talk."

As a senator in Washington, D.C., Joe knew all the best places for quiet conversation, whether it was for behind the scenes deal making or for greeting a constituent visiting from New Jersey. They went to one of his favorite cafés and found a table for a glass of wine. They sat in a corner booth, but not completely in private; several people noticed their body language but couldn't hear their conversation. He was not ashamed to be seen in public with a beautiful woman.

"I didn't think I would see you again. Thank you for coming to visit me."

"To be honest, I was hoping it would turn out this way. I have been so blessed except for having someone to share with. That's when I remembered how happy we were as kids. I guess that sounds a little desperate." She lowered her head.

Joe held her hand. "Sorana. You know what I always say. Everything happens for a reason. We were meant to meet again. You are not desperate; you need the right person in your life. So do I. Maybe that's why I haven't moved on."

Sorana felt relaxed and gave Joe a smile that let him know how happy she was. "Is it a problem if we spend time together? I wouldn't want to complicate your public image."

“My image will probably improve being seen with you. My colleagues are always trying to set me up with a lawyer clerking at the court or one of their staff interns. That’s not what I’m looking for.”

“Well, I’ll let you decide how much time you can give me. What hotel would you recommend here?” Her coy question suggested a lot more than a recommendation. Both of them knew where this was going.

“A hotel? Nonsense. You can stay at my townhouse in Georgetown. Where is your baggage?”

“At Union Station in a locker. I took the train from New Jersey.”

Joe confirmed his feelings with a hand on Sorana’s arm. “That’s fine. After our drink, I’ll call my driver and we can pick it up. Then we can go freshen up before dinner.”

They went to Union Station. Joe went inside while Sorana stayed in the limo. A bird whistled in a tree just outside the entrance. A homeless man sat near the lockers holding a sign that read ‘*can you spare some love?*’ Joe reached into his pocket and took out the twenty-dollar bill he had found that morning.

“Here you go friend.”

The circle was completed. It wasn’t luck, just the way it was supposed to be.

The Angry Vegetarian

Sam didn't start out angry. He didn't start out as a vegetarian. This was the culmination of repeated frustration over a long period of time. It wasn't even Sam's fault; virtually all of the conditions he had were genetically passed on from his father. You can't pick your name or your genetics. But no one would have guessed how he would react when faced with the final, insurmountable obstacle.

After school, Sam would work in the diner that his father had bought back in the 1950s. Burgers, fries, sandwiches, blue-plate specials and the coldest, thickest, most delicious milk shake in town, nicknamed, the iceberg. If a customer could drink one with a straw, the shake was free. At the end of the day, Sam would sit with his father in a corner booth; his pop would challenge him to drink a strawberry shake with a straw. One day, this ritual was interrupted when a lovely teenage girl came over to them and questioned Sam's father.

"Excuse me sir, do you need any waitresses after school?" Sam kept one eye on her while continuing his milk shake, hoping to impress this angel and praying that his pop would give her a job. Her name was Veronica (very popular back then). She was 5'9" with long, light brown hair, horned rimmed glasses and a beautiful smile. It was the 15-year old Sam's first crush.

They worked together for two years until Sam left for college upstate. Veronica went to a local college and continued to work part time in the diner; Sam would come back to the diner every holiday and break, in order to see her. For the next three years, he tried to maintain a connection with her. Then just before Thanksgiving, Sam's world changed; his father died.

He left college and returned to run the diner. College life seemed like a vacation now compared to 12-hour days, 7 days a week. At least Veronica was still working there. He vowed to find the right time to ask for a date.

It was an unusually busy morning. Veronica was scurrying around, trying to keep up. "Sam, we need more pastries out front. They're selling like hotcakes. And table three just ordered four servings of hotcakes" she said smiling at him.

He warmed up now to the object of his affection. "Right away Ronnie. Joe, get more pastry from the back and give them to Ronnie." Meanwhile Sam hurriedly made more batter.

Since he had taken over, business had increased. He could tell from the inventory and receipts. But what was the reason? He had maintained his father's menu, cooking techniques and advertising, even the staff was largely the same. Could it be that his presence gave customers the feeling that the business was continuing? His father was well liked, but people could tell he was slowing down before the heart attack. Such little things can effect people's perceptions. Maybe this was a sign that he should finally pursue his feelings for Veronica?

On a cold day in February, Sam gave her more attention than usual; Veronica flirted back. Could all the stars be aligned? Sam knew that if he was going to ask her out, it should be now. As they were closing down that night, he made sure to let the rest of the staff off first.

He made two milk shakes and set them in a corner booth, and then went back to wash his hands. “Ronnie, why don’t you join me for an iceberg?” She winked, took Sam’s hand and walked him back to the booth. Sam knew what he had to do now. “What is this?” he said, seeing a candle in a heart shaped muffin between the milk shakes.

“It’s Valentines Day Sam. Don’t you know that I’ve wanted you to ask me out for years.”

Sam couldn’t believe it. “I’ve felt the same way. I was always too scared.” Holding hands in the booth, this was the beginning of a lifetime of happiness for both of them. They were married in the summer; Veronica finished college and then joined Sam full time in the diner.

But years of diner food took its toll as Sam developed the same ailments that his father had succumbed to: high cholesterol at 40, diabetes at 50 and a kidney stone at 60. Each diagnosis meant another restriction on his diet. First cut out fat, then sugar and finally protein. Sam had become the angry vegetarian.

Sam thanked God that Ronnie never had such health problems. Although she picked up the slack when Sam’s health declined, keeping up with supply purchases was always difficult.

It was Valentines Day again. Ronnie put out two milk shakes and a heart shaped muffin with candle, just as she had done each year for 40 years. She took Sam’s hand and led him to the booth, kissed him on the cheek and sat him down. She could tell something was wrong. “Make a wish sweetheart. Anything you want.”

He boiled over like Yosemite Sam would when confronted with Bugs Bunny. A slow burn is putting it mildly. “What would I like? I’ll tell you what I’d like. I’d like some food, plain old American food. Nothing fancy, nothing extreme. Just some wholesome, everyday food.” Sam thought about how his father died.

Trying to cheer him up, Veronica pushed the cold, thick strawberry milk shake in front of Sam. He looked down. “Sweetheart. This is dirty. Would you mind getting me another one please?”

Veronica gave her best pouty face, put her hand on Sam’s shoulder and gave him the bad news. “I’m so sorry dear. That was the last straw.” Sam laughed.

The Lighthouse

(Seal Cove, CA – 1969) The air was moist and salty. The sky was blue with cumulus clouds floating slowly from West to East. A lighthouse peered out towards the Pacific Ocean waiting for her nightly shift. Tim lived within walking distance in a small, pale grey Cape Cod home with red shutters. He was the light keeper and resident artist in the sleepy town of Seal Cove.

The lighthouse had a wide bottom with enough room for hostel travelers going to San Francisco. There was a stained, oak plaque, engraved with the name 'Wentworth' in the center of the door. A cowbell with a rope cord was affixed to the left, Tim's doorbell.

A boy and a girl, dressed in baggy clothes, walked up to the cottage and pulled the heavy rope back and forth to ring the bell. "Hello. Is anyone home?"

Tim answered. "Yes, hello. Are you looking for the hostel?"

The girl spoke first. "How much is it for the night?"

"Eight dollars a person each night and that includes breakfast." Tim could tell that even eight dollars might be a lot. "But tonight it's eight dollars for a couple."

The two smiled and reached into their jeans to find the money. The boy pulled out three ones and some change and the girl found a five dollar bill. "Here you go sir" as she handed the wrinkled bills to Tim. "Is there a place to wash up?"

"There's a shower in the house," Tim said pointing behind him. "And there are two bathrooms in the lighthouse. My name is Tim."

"I'm Hannah and this is my boyfriend Eric. We're coming down from Oregon."

"Welcome. Let me show you the lighthouse." The couple followed Tim, holding hands. Tim pulled open the heavy metal door with a creaking sound you would expect, gesturing for them to enter first. The floor was rectangular with a black iron, spiral staircase in the middle. Along the sides were green army cots, at least 10 and more space for people with blankets and sleeping bags. The floor was clean and there were no signs of bugs. "Well, here is where you sleep. On the next landing up, there are two bathrooms and a sink. There's also a small fridge with bottled water."

Eric pointed to the huge windows surrounding them. "There aren't any shades?"

"Sorry" said Tim. "It is a lighthouse" and he gave a little chuckle at his joke.

"Don't worry, folks get pretty tired by dark and sleep soundly. It's the salt air and ocean breeze. Hear that whistling. That's the wind blowing through."

“There’s no heat?” said Hannah.

Tim pointed up. “Not regular heat, but when the lamp starts spinning, it radiates heat down here, sort of like sleeping near a campfire. You’ll be fine in your bags.”

Hannah and Eric put their backpacks and sleeping bags on two of the cots, facing the ocean. “How many people are here tonight?”

“Only two now, but two more have called in to reserve a spot. The two over there are your age, another couple. From Arizona I think. Susan and Jim. Nice kids. They went into town to get something to eat at the diner. You just walk down that street about a half mile and you can’t miss it.”

“Thanks Tim. If it’s OK with you, we’ll use the shower and then go into town.” Eric nodded his agreement.

“Sure enough. Just walk in the back door. There are towels, soap and shampoo. Breakfast is from 7 to 9, bacon, eggs, pancakes and juice. Oh, and coffee and tea of course. You could walk to the diner if you want something more, but you have to pay.”

“I’m sure your breakfast will be fine Tim. Besides we want to get an early start; we’re trying to make the music festival in Berkeley by Saturday.” Eric pointed to his mandolin case and Hannah’s flute.

“Well, isn’t that wonderful. Maybe you’ll play something for me later.”

“We will Tim.” Tim walked back to the house. Eric and Hannah realized how tired they were and collapsed on the cots. They woke up at four, in time for that shower and walk to town for dinner.

As they were walking into town, they saw another couple. “That must be Susan and Jim.” When they met, Hannah introduced herself. “Hi. Are you staying at the lighthouse too?”

Susan spoke first. “Hi, yes, I’m Susan and this is Jim. We’ve been there for a week.”

Jim shook hands with Eric. “Hi, Eric and Hannah.”

Eric was wondering why they had been here so long. “Been here a week, huh?”

“Yeah, we just love it here. The fresh air, the beach and that lighthouse.” Susan gave Jim an affectionate hug. “We have the wildest dreams in there.”

Eric and Hannah looked a little surprised. “Dreams? What do you mean wild?”

Jim and Susan just giggled. “You’ll see,” and they continued walking back to the lighthouse.

Eric and Hannah found a booth at the diner, ordered dinner, then asked the waitress. “You know anything about the lighthouse?”

The waitress smiled. “This is your first night, kids. Well, I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise” and she walked back to the kitchen.

Eric stopped her. “Wait. Could you bring us some water too?”

The waitress giggled and nodded. “Sure thing hon.”

Hannah rubbed her forehead. “Sounds like an adventure. Wonder why Tim didn’t say anything.”

“Beats me. Maybe the place is haunted.”

“Eric. You don’t believe in ghosts, do you?”

“I don’t know what I believe until I see it. But nobody’s said it was scary, just smiled and laughed about it.”

“Maybe even sensual” as Hannah slid her foot under Eric’s jeans.

“Hmm.”

When Eric and Hannah arrived back at the lighthouse, they saw Jim and Susan sitting outside behind the railing, watching the sun set over the ocean. “Hey guys. You seem to have found the perfect place.”

“This is like heaven. If you watch carefully, you can see seals out in the cove chasing dinner. There’s one now” said Susan as she pointed it out.

“Oh yeah. Cool. Mind if we join you?”

“Not at all. Would you like some wine?”

“Great, thanks.”

Susan poured some sangria into plastic cups and handed them to Eric.

“Thanks Susan. Hey, let me get my music.”

“Bring my flute honey.”

“OK, be right back.”

“A concert on the ocean?”

“No, just a little music to go with the view. Eric and I are renaissance musicians. We’re supposed to play at the Berkeley festival on Saturday.”

“Right on. Hope you get there in time.”

“We have four days. We should be able to hitch there by then.”

“Oh, getting a ride isn’t the problem. We thought we would leave after one night.”

Hannah gave Susan a quizzical look. “The wild dreams?”

“The wildest girl, the wildest.”

Eric returned with the mandolin and handed the flute to Hannah. “OK, any requests from the sixteen hundreds?” and he laughed.

“Fraid not. Just do your thing.”

Hannah began with the flute and Eric joined in. It was a lyrical song, just as you would imagine from 17th century England. “I can almost smell the roasting pig now” Jim said.

“Don’t forget the jousting and bow and arrow competitions” said Eric.

“And ladies in corsets tied up to their breasts” said Susan, smiling at them.

“M’lady, I think they are flirting with us,” said Eric.

“I think you’re right, kind sir,” said Hannah.

The four of them talked and played and danced, finishing two bottles of wine. The sun was almost set now and it was getting dark. They could see Tim approaching with a flashlight.

“Time to light the lamp,” he said.

Jim and Susan stood and applauded. Eric and Hannah just looked on, perplexed. Tim walked up the spiral staircase and turned on the lamp. Then he set the motor for rotation. A loud whirring sound turned into a low hum as a bright beacon lit up around them.

“OK, time for bed,” said Jim.

“But it’s only 8:30?” said Hannah.

“You’ll see.” Jim took Susan’s hand and they ran inside giggling.

Tim saw the other couple. “Better get inside. The wind will kick up and blow you right onto those rocks down there. Remember, there’s water in the cooler on the second level.”

When they got in, they saw Jim and Susan already making out in their sleeping bags, with their clothing tossed out on the wooden floor. Susan started to make sounds of excitement, unabashedly in front of them.

Hannah put her hand to the floor. “Oh, I see why they haven’t left. The floor vibrates from the lamp turning.”

“Sounds good to me” and he took his clothes off and jumped into the sleeping bag.

Susan saw Eric. “Wait, you don’t have your water” as she pointed up the staircase.

“Water. I’m not thirsty.”

“You will be hon. Trust me.”

“I’ll get it Eric.” Hannah scurried up the staircase and returned with two bottles of water. By this time, Susan was in her second round of ecstasy.

Hannah gave a bottle to Eric, they clicked the plastic as if they were glass bottles, and then they took a long gulp. “Cheers.” She got into the sleeping bag and took off her clothing.

“Hannah. Is the room spinning?”

“No, Eric. That’s the lamp spinning above us. It’s making a shadow spin around the room. Wait. I feel it now too.”

Susan and Jim continued their lovemaking, the empty bottles of water lying beside them. Eric noticed this and said to Hannah. “Have more water.” They both finished their bottle, and then realized what was happening.

“It’s the water,” said Hannah. “I can feel the spinning now and some..ooh..oh...”

“Come here Hannah,” said Eric and they too lost their inhibitions, now oblivious to Susan and Jim. After a couple hours, all four of them fell asleep. That’s when the dreams started.

Susan dreamed of flying on the light beam from the lighthouse toward the moon. She laughed and danced among the clouds.

Jim saw animals in a multi-colored jungle. He stalked around like a leopard, chasing his prey. Then he became the leopard and ate a rabbit.

Eric was back in the 1600s, jousting against an evil giant. Riding at full gallop, he thrust his lance into the giant, who fell to the ground with a large thud.

Hannah, well Hannah had the most exquisite dream of all. She was a princess at a ball, dancing with a handsome man, not a prince, but a commoner. No one else seemed surprised by this and Hannah fell back as her companion dipped her to kiss. Then he picked Hannah up and carried her off.

But all the dreams were interrupted by a loud noise, the heavy door banging. Then they saw a light coming in at their eyes, blinding them. “Who’s there?” said Eric.

“Sorry to wake everyone. It’s just Tim with some latecomers. Everyone, this is Rachel and Dan.”

Everyone exchanged obligatory pleasantries in spite of being woken up out of their dreams of ecstasy.

As Tim turned to leave, Hannah called out. “More water please.”

Author's Favorites

The Tightrope

In America today, there are many towns adjacent to each other with extreme differences in culture, wealth and education. There is a specific dividing line between these towns, but you don't need any signs to tell when you have crossed over. It makes you wonder if one town is blessed and the other one is cursed. Or maybe both towns are cursed.

Some people, like Juan, lived in both worlds. Each morning, he drives his pick up truck into town, past manicured lawns and fruit trees, to a construction site downtown. Oak Park's town council decided to makeover Main Street with gas lamps, cobblestones, benches and topiary, resembling something out of 19th century England. While he was working, Juan was accepted here, although not seen. Once the Sun went down, when those fortunate few were assembling for dinner, he lit up like one of those new gas lamps.

Justin, one of the fortunate few, walked into the French restaurant with his girlfriend, Karen, the kind of girl you want to be seen with. Karen had the right looks, the right education and the right family. She dressed classically, sporting a blue skirt, white ruffled top and camel hair blazer. Her hair was straight, shoulder length and blonde, which only brought attention to her blue eyes and perfect skin. She worked as a junior associate in a local law firm, the same one where Justin was applying. Justin wasn't dating Karen to help get the job, but it wouldn't hurt, so long as he was discreet about it. Justin and Karen had one thing in common, a comfortable life, neither having had experienced the struggles that people like Juan had overcome.

Juan put his tools into the lock box of his truck and headed home. It was only three miles away but East Oak Park seemed more like one of those cities you see on the news, where some gang banger killed an innocent child. Driving past graffiti-filled walls, a 24-hour convenience store and a run down elementary school, Juan was quickly reminded of his world, one where the night brought out drug dealers, prostitutes and the people addicted to them. In Oak Park, strollers would be listening to the chamber music softly playing from the rock gardens he had helped create; here, anyone walking would hear the loud and vulgar sounds of boom boxes and cars with heavy bass accents, cruising slowly while their passengers watched for prey. Turning the corner, he saw his church. "Maybe I should stop in and say a prayer," he thought. But he was hungry and decided to go home.

Justin examined Karen while she read the menu. What did she see in him? Karen could have anyone she wanted. It wouldn't surprise him if someone at the firm were propositioning her. Maybe one of the senior partners, ready to exchange their first wife for a trophy or one of the rich clients she saw daily.

“I’ll have the Waldorf salad, Salmon with truffles and Pommes de Terre au gratin” she said in fluent French.

“Shrimp salad and the steak Bordelaise, medium” said Justin, trying to keep up.

Juan’s wife Ines was putting dinner on the table; rice, beans, cheese and vegetables melted in a casserole dish. He could hear his seven-year old son Manny and ten-year old daughter Dania playing in the other room.

“Dania, take Manny to wash hands and come to dinner...Daddy’s home.” Juan hung up his jacket and kissed Ines on the cheek. “How was your day?” he said. Ines worked part-time in the school cafeteria, serving free breakfasts to kids who wouldn’t get anything at home.

“That school,” she sighed. “Even the young ones are acting like punks now, flashing gang signs and wearing their pants down to here” as she gestured to her upper thigh. “At lunch, some fifth grader made a gun sign with his hand when I told him he couldn’t have seconds.”

Juan shook his head and thought about the kids in Oak Park, dropped off from their parent’s BMW’s, Mercedes’ and SUV’s. “Two public schools but you would never know it,” he thought. “But no trouble for Manny and Dania?”

“No, they’re fine, I keep an eye out for them.”

The waiter brought a shrimp salad to Justin and the Waldorf to Karen. They sipped their wine, ignoring the waiter. “So, how’s the real world of law?” Justin asked.

Karen responded without looking up from her salad. “We had a deposition today for a man accused of embezzling from his family business. It’s pretty clear that he did it.”

Justin indicated that he was listening. “Oh, so what’s your strategy?”

Karen smiled. “We’ll get him off. His father was sleeping with the secretary and will settle once we show him the pictures.” Karen looked up and touched Justin’s hand. “Did you hear from the bar yet?” Justin had failed the bar exam the first time he took it.

Dating him was Karen’s way of slumming it. “Should be online any day now; I’m pretty sure I nailed it this time.”

Karen winked. “Did you check it today?” knowing that the results had been posted. “Go ahead, check.”

Justin pulled out his phone, entered the web address and signed in. “Hey! I passed,” showing the screen to Karen. He leaned over and kissed her.

Karen replied, “Good, I had planned a little celebration for tonight.”

Ines, Dania and Manny bowed their heads while Juan said grace. “Lord, thank you for this meal and for our children. Please care for us and for those less fortunate that do not have food tonight. We pray this in your name. Amen.”

Ines filled the children’s plates first. “Is there another job after you finish this one?” she asked.

Juan nodded his head as he ate some vegetables. “I think so. My boss said Oak Park wants to extend the project to the town hall and courthouse. That should take another six months at least.” This news came as a relief to Ines who was worried about Christmas presents and utility bills. Ines paid the bills each month, taking some stress off of Juan. He didn’t realize how some past due notices had come because Ines was very good at juggling their paychecks and credit.

“God bless those poor people! What would they do without cobblestone streets and gas lamps?” said Ines.

“Don’t forget the benches and Japanese gardens with the music playing” said Juan.

“Well, their good fortune means work for you Juan, don’t forget that.”

Juan smiled and agreed. “Yes, where would I be without the fortunate few?”

Justin was looking down at his steak. “Look at this. I said medium and this is medium well.”

Karen looked up from her salmon and examined his steak. “Yes, you’re right. You should send it back.” She gestured to the waiter and gave him instructions. “I want tonight to be special for you!”

Justin wondered what other surprises Karen had for him. “Won’t we be late for....” when Karen interrupted.

“For what? You don’t know what I have planned?” Justin rolled his wine around the glass and caught Karen’s expression. “You’ll see,” and this time her expression confirmed the fantasy he had already started. Justin tried to contain his enthusiasm, tried to play it cool. He was dating up here and both of them knew it.

The children were watching some game show on television while Juan helped Ines clean up. He pulled a small box from his pocket. “I bought you this,” and handed it to her. Her first thought was the money. His first thought was making her happy.

“Juan, I’ve told you not to buy me things. Save money for the children.” Juan watched Ines’ expression as she opened the box and saw the charm bracelet. Ines drew her breath in and hugged Juan. “Thank you dear, it’s so beautiful.” Two of the charms had the names of their children and one the name of Ines’ mom who had passed away in the summer. When she saw that, Ines started to cry.

“Now, now, no crying” as he took out his handkerchief and wiped off the tears. “This should be a celebration!”

This time Justin’s steak was cooked perfectly. He ate quickly enough to finish without Karen noticing. “So, can you give me a hint?” hoping to encourage her to end the suspense.

“OK, but it’s not here” her voice and head gesturing that it was close.

“So it’s in town?” he said as he took the last sip from his wine glass.

Karen was enjoying the torture now. “Finish your steak dear” while she patted her mouth with her napkin. “We have a few more minutes before it will be ready.”

Juan put the leftovers in the refrigerator and thought about lunch tomorrow. There was cold chicken he could slice up for a sandwich, some cheese, an apple and some cereal. Juan liked to snack on cereal on his breaks. It was better than junk food.

“I’ll drive” said Karen and motioned Justin to the passenger side of her BMW. Justin’s imagination was flickering like one of those jump cut commercials that only show you a split second of a hundred scenes. When Karen said, “close your eyes and lean toward me,” he expected a tender kiss. But Karen put one of those dark sleeping masks on him; the kind people wear to keep out the light. “OK, sit back, we’ll be there soon,” and she laughed a little.

At this point, the scenes in Justin’s commercial had taken another turn and he could feel his pulse quicken. It might be the adrenalin flowing when he said, “should I be scared?” still trying to play it cool.

“You should be if you take off that mask, mister.” But taking off the mask was the last thing Justin was going to do. He was enjoying this too much and wasn’t going to blow his surprise.

“Bedtime Manny, bedtime Dania. Go brush your teeth now” Ines said in her firm but loving mom voice. The kids scurried obediently. After they finished the dishes, they could hear mumbling from the bedroom.

“I’ll tuck them in, you sit and relax” said Juan. Manny and Dania were under the covers in the small room they shared, just big enough for a bunk bed, toys and stuffed animals. “Did you say your prayers?”

“Yes Daddy” they said, almost in unison. “We prayed for you and mommy too.”

Juan realized what a blessing his children were, not like those punks at their school. “I love you” as he kissed each of them. “Have a good dream.”

Oak Park was one of those upper class towns that drew money and attention far exceeding the population size. There were investment firms, law and professional offices everywhere. They were only a mile from a world-class university, hospital and venture capital buildings. They even had their own hotel, reserved for business meetings and people accustomed to paying \$300/night. Karen parked, surprised Justin with a kiss and said, “We’re here, but leave that mask on.”

Justin obeyed this gentle command hoping that wasn’t the last order she gave him. She took his hand, walked into the lobby and stopped. Justin could feel a thick rug under his feet and the sound of people snickering at him. “Could this be someone’s house? Is it a surprise party of some kind? Maybe something kinkier?” Or at least his mind went there.

“Thank you” said Karen and she walked him into an elevator.

Justin tried to count the floors, 1, 2, 3 and 4. “We must be in a hotel. She’s planned something really hot and wants it to be a surprise.”

Ines was visibly relaxed, grateful to have such a good man by her side. Juan never strayed and he always put her and the children before his own needs. They sat on the couch watching television. Ines would put her legs on top of Juan’s lap and he would massage them. After a long day on her feet at school, she looked forward to this mini-spa from her husband. It wasn’t long before her eyes started to close and Juan found himself watching the show alone.

Karen quietly opened the door, led him over to a bed and sat him down.

Justin thought about taking off his jacket and tie, but resisted. “Maybe she wants me blindfolded the whole time? That would be intense.”

Karen put her hands gently on his lapels and said, “Just give me five minutes, ok?” Then touched his cheek.

“It’s been five minutes Karen,” Justin called out, thinking she was in the bathroom changing. He heard her walking back toward him.

“OK, take off the mask!” Justin heart was pounding a mile a minute now. This was the sexiest rendezvous he had ever had. Now he had to perform up to her expectations. The lights came on and he heard several voices.

“Surprise!” and Justin saw the partners from Karen’s firm there, holding champagne glasses and smiling broadly.

“Welcome to the firm Justin” said the senior partner. “We’ve been holding this room waiting for you to pass the bar. It was starting to get expensive.”

Even though Justin knew he was kidding, he was more than a little disappointed in what had happened. A job with the firm was what he wanted, but not what he had been thinking about. He put on his most sincere face and thanked his new boss. “An honor to work for you sir. I won’t let you down.” He would be working with Karen. He wanted to keep seeing her. “Would that be appropriate now that they worked together?”

A table with fancy desserts, coffee, tea and more champagne beckoned them. Karen, now less personal with Justin, suggested they have dessert and make small talk. “Never too soon to make points at work” she said.

Her change of demeanor hit Justin. “Would this good fortune mean the end of him and Karen?”

Juan and Ines had a great night, as much out of deep love and commitment as passion. It was due in part to the sense of security Juan had, knowing that he had another solid work project to get them through until summer when he had other work he could do. He decided to leave home early tomorrow, stop at church and offer a prayer of thanks for this blessing.

An hour later, the partners pulled out cigars and hard liquor and sat down to play some cards. Karen whispered something to one of them and he acknowledged. He came up to Justin and shook his hand. “See you tomorrow, son. 8:00am sharp you know.”

Justin smiled “I’ll be there. Thanks again.” He and Karen left the room, more like business colleagues than lovers. “Now I understand,” said Justin forcing a smile. “You certainly had me guessing. I was thinking.”

Karen interrupted “I know what you were thinking” and she led him up the staircase to the fifth floor, stopping at room 502 and opening the door.

“Weren’t we just in room 402?”

Karen pushed Justin in and closed the door. “Maybe. I didn’t notice” and she started to undress.

“And wouldn’t the firm frown on such a thing?”

“Oh, yes” Karen said, “one of us would be fired. But don’t worry. They don’t know we’re in this room.” Apparently the danger made Karen even more excited and she didn’t hold back any physical or verbal feelings. Justin had the best (and for him at least) the quietest sex ever.

Juan was setting up to move on to the next location, the town hall and courthouse, when he noticed his boss talking to a man in a suit. The man handed him a paper and explained something that his boss was upset about. His boss walked back toward the crew with a dejected expression, tightly gripping the paper.

That morning, Justin got in his car and drove to the firm. His life was better than it was yesterday. No more stress about the bar or getting a job. He passed the Presbyterian Church without noticing. He wasn’t sure how he and Karen would turn out but the thought of continuing their relationship in secret created a new challenge. “How do you hide an inappropriate relationship from lawyers who are experts at reading people?”

Karen greeted him when he walked in. “Well, how did your first assignment go?” She said in her most professional tone. Justin patted his attaché case.

“Good, easier than I thought. I gave those workers the injunction and notice of legal action. What idiot wanted to put cobblestones out there anyway?”

The Grand Poobah

“Give me a megabucks ticket,” said Joey.

“Only one” said the kid behind the counter.

“You only need one” Joey said “and a pack of lights” motioning to the cigarette picture on the counter. “3, 7, 10, 19, 58 and 83. Good numbers,” he thought as he pushed the ticket into his wallet and lit up before he got to the car. Joey’s life had been reduced to hoping he could win the lottery, after decades of wasted opportunities and bad decisions.

Joey’s parents came from Italy during the great wave of immigrants in the 1920s, opening a grocery store in Newark. Good Catholic boys, they attended Mass twice a week. Joey did whatever his parents asked and did well in school. He was a happy and bright boy. But his father favored Nick, the first-born. “Poppa, why does Nickie get a new suit for church?” he asked.

Joey’s father smiled and patted him on the head. “Nickie needs a new suit because he’s going to be an altar boy. You’ll be one in a few years and then we’ll get you a new suit.”

But Joey knew it was more than that. Nick got better toys at Christmas and more attention from his parents. Even though he was a better student, Joey would be criticized if he didn’t get all ‘A’s’. Nick would be praised for getting ‘B’s’.

“Fourth grade is harder than first grade Joey,” his father explained. “We’ll see how you do then.”

Now in his late 50s, Joey looked like Ernest Borgnine, another first generation Italian-American, but without his talent or work ethic. His life more closely resembled Ralph Kramden, the poor bus driver on *The Honeymooners*, wearing a raccoon hat at the lodge. He walked into the Italian-American club and sat down at the card table. “Ciao, come stai,” said Joey.

“Bene, bene” replied the other players.

“Give me \$300” pulling most of the cash from his wallet and taking his chips.

“Feeling lucky today Joey?” said Mike.

“I gotta believe, Mike, you know that,” gambling now his religion.

Joey and his brother Nick worked at the grocery. Nick would be at the cash register while Joey bagged food. One time a tomato slipped from the top of the bag to the bottom, breaking when the customer put it in his car. He returned to complain. His father stared at Joey. "Tomatoes go on top. Give the man a new one and it's coming out of your allowance."

He had joined the Masonic order to make connections for sales. In 1983, the church had reiterated their denouncement of Freemasonry. Rejected by his faith, Joey believed that he was in a state of grave sin, thus justifying the downward spiral his life had taken. His younger son was brain damaged at birth and given up to an institution for life, a common practice in the 1950s; his other son had a compromised pulmonary system, probably related to the smoking addiction he and his wife shared.

"Poppa, I made this for you in art class." Joey handed his father the watercolor with a picture of them both standing in front of the store.

"Where's Nickie and your mother?" his father said. "This is just me and you." *Just.* Joey held back tears.

Eventually, Joey stopped trying to please his father. This led to his smoking, gambling and eating addictions.

Joey thumbed his cards, a 4, 7, jack, queen and king. He looked around the table. "Two cards" he said, then took another cigarette out. In high school, Joey was an all-state lineman. But today, at 5'10" and 300 pounds, Joey was closer to a heart attack than a running attack. "C'mon, give me picture cards" he thought to himself as he looked at his hand. Catching an ace and ten, he now held a straight. "I raise" and he threw \$40 in the pot.

Two players threw in their cards, "not with this hand" said one.

Mike glanced over his hand to Joey. "All right. I'll play" and he raised him to \$100.

Joey blew some smoke out, looked at his chips; realizing most of his paycheck was on the table. "All in" and he pushed \$300 in chips into the middle.

Mike looked at his cards again, checked his wallet, and then gave Joey a smile. "Call." Joey smiled back, laid down his cards and reached for the pot.

A natural talker, Joey had passed up an offer to become the first salesman for a new business venture, frozen orange juice. His gambling addiction and progressive depression kept his wife and son in poverty, even losing a house that his father had bought him years before.

"All hearts" said Mike as he laid down his flush.

A little embarrassed now, Joey finished his cigarette, strained to push away from the table and turned to walk out. “You beat me again Mike.”

Walking back to his car, his legs were knocked under him. A punk kid held a knife to his back and took his wallet. “Move and I’ll stick you, old man.” *Old man*. The youth disappeared down an alley. Trembling, Joey got in his car and drove home.

His wife could tell something was wrong when he came into the kitchen. “What happened?” She said.

“I was mugged. They got my paycheck for the week.” Dejected from the theft but glad that he didn’t have to tell her about the loss at cards, Joey sat quietly and ate his pasta, then left to watch television. His wife came in from the kitchen. Joey fell asleep, partly from his smoking, obesity and depression, partly from the trauma of being held up. His wife changed the channel, as her show was about to come on when she saw the blonde model reading the numbers for the night.

“3, 7, 10, 19, 58 and 83.”

The Devil's Orchestra

"No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks."
– Mary Shelley

After trying to finesse God for years, Tony finally realized he had been playing in The Devil's Orchestra. The worst part was that he was about to drag his family down with him. Shopping for groceries was now a painful reminder of how much he had lost, but he still spent most of his food money on his daughter.

Unlike his father, who kept him and his mother in poverty by gambling, Tony measured his decisions carefully, knowing his family depended on him for so much. "That will be \$38.45 sir." Tony wiped his face and saw that he had \$40 left in his wallet as a flush of anxiety ran through him. He tried to hide his concern and handed the cashier the twenty-dollar bills. Walking past the lottery machine, he resisted the temptation of wasting a dollar.

"Is that you Tony?" said his wife greeting him in the kitchen. "Yes dear. There were good prices on fruit, so I got extra. Where's Kelly?" Kelly runs in and hugs her Dad. "There's my princess" as Tony hugs her back and puts on a smile. "How about a snack?" Kelly looked at the bag. "Did you get bananas and grapes?" Her father took out items one at a time. "Hmm, we have lettuce...broccoli...tomatoes...carrots." Kelly stood on her toes trying to peek inside the bag, her smile fading. "peas...cauliflower...string beans." Kelly was pouting now, as her father pulled out the food. "and..oops, here are three bananas and two kinds of grapes!" The ten-year old girl gave a hop and grabbed her favorite foods. "Thanks Daddy," and sat down at the kitchen table. "OK, I'm off to work," said Tony as he kissed them goodbye.

Tony's mind wandered as he drove to the restaurant. His second job helped him keep up with expenses and some food to bring home. He thought if he could just hold on, God would provide some relief. When times were good, he felt blessed; now that his family was struggling, he thought God had turned away from him. "I will do anything," he prayed to himself. "anything to keep my family healthy." Once there was money in the bank, but medical expenses for Kelly drained that quickly after he lost his insurance coverage. At least he had two jobs and his wife's salary as a bookkeeper. Even though they lived frugally, monthly expenses out paced income, making each month a challenge to juggle bills. A comfortable life had been replaced by daily anxiety and stress. There must be a reason.

Sixty-hour weeks were putting a strain on Tony; at 56 he was tired when he came home and had less energy to relax with the family. Tony and his wife saw less of each other too, because of their schedules and child-care. It seemed as though he was slowly draining a gas tank, each week being tougher than the last.

He arrived at work and took his place in the kitchen; Tony's cooking skills kept him employed at two restaurants, though both were 30 hours weekly. He wasn't alone. Multiple part time jobs were common in the economy, allowing employers to avoid paying benefits. Walking out to get his apron, he bumped into Maria, a single mom waitress in her 40s. "Sorry Maria, I wasn't looking." Maria smiled and helped Tony with his apron. "No worries hon....we're all busy here." Tony couldn't help watch Maria as she left. Maria didn't usually flirt with him so this came as a surprise. Tony imagined spending time with her, but quickly snapped out of it, chastising himself for the thought. His wife was devoted and loving, although they had both been too tired and stressed for intimacy lately. As Tony prepared for the dinner rush, he caught Maria in passing watching him. He let out a small smile.

Friday nights were very busy with constant orders rushing in and out of the kitchen, not letting up until 10pm. Waiters and cooks only had time for quick bathroom and snack breaks and by closing only the clean up crew were left. Everyone else left for the night and returned home except for the younger staff that still had energy to go to bars, clubs or a late movie. Tony couldn't remember those days before he was married when you could get by on less money and responsibility. Was he a better person then? Why was life so easy then? Or did it only seem that way? Experience and wisdom should make life easier as you got older, but then there's a turning point where things go downhill, like a bell curve. He realized his best times were behind him.

When he got home, his wife and Kelly were asleep. He dropped into his chair to watch some TV, eat a snack and have a glass of wine. He wouldn't drink at work but a glass of Chianti before bed helped him sleep. He would have to be up early to get to his other restaurant, again missing time with family. Except for church on Sunday afternoon, there were few times when they were all together on the weekend. During the week, his wife worked during the day and Tony worked early morning and nights, leaving them passing by each other.

Tony checked the mail. Several bills were overdue, the worst a notice from the hospital for Kelly's treatments; he could bring the tip money he was saving to them on Monday, explaining that he will keep making small payments. "I didn't hear you come in," said his wife. "Are you coming to bed?" Tony replied with a nod meaning he would be right there. He was thankful for such a good wife, stoically standing by the family and not complaining.

4:30am comes quickly now. Tony takes a shower, kisses his sleeping wife and daughter and heads to his daytime restaurant; he turns on the grills and makes breakfast for himself. By 7am there would be a line waiting for the pancakes and scrambles he makes. He couldn't afford to take his family to this place but there were plenty of people who could and do every day. At least he can bring something home for them to reheat, although the boss kept an eye on how much food he took. His family deserved it. God will provide.

By 2:30 it was time to leave; he made a large scramble and three pancakes to take home. He glanced out to see if the boss noticed. No one was around. He would only have about an hour before he had to go to his other job and wanted to spend that time with family. "Tony, wait up a minute," said the boss. "You know I understand you're bringing that home, but I'm going to have to start charging you something. Food isn't free, you know." Tony felt a flush of panic. He immediately thought of losing this job. "How much," he asked. The boss worked it out in his head. "Well, you have two scrambles at \$10.95 each and three pancakes at \$8.95. Let's call it \$12.00." Tony knew the real cost of food wasn't even half that. Twelve dollars wasn't much to the crowd that ate here everyday, but it was significant to Tony. This weekend meal was a treat for his family and they looked forward to it. "OK" and he handed over a ten and two ones from his tip money. "And I expect you to show me when you take food next time, instead of sneaking out." Tony was really embarrassed now. "Won't happen again boss," putting on a contrite smile. Tony got in his car and drove home, still worried about how to choose between the money and the food he brought home.

Kelly and mom were sitting in the living room watching a kid's show. When Kelly heard her Dad come in, she rushed to the door. "Did you bring pancakes?" Tony smiled, "Don't I always?" knowing now that his decision had been made for him. His wife kissed him on the cheek, rubbed his back and put her head on his shoulder. "You always take care of us." Tony sat down and closed his eyes, taking a short nap while Kelly and mom shared the pancakes. Sleep wasn't restful now. He worried about the day job, finances and Kelly's health. He grimaced and shrugged in his sleep, then feeling someone pulling his arm. "Time to go to work dear" said his wife and he got up and left.

Saturday nights were the busiest here, twice the crowd during the week and more than Fridays or Sundays. This restaurant was so different than the daytime one. People dressed up, the meals were expensive and the dining room had large tables and intimate booths where candles flickered. In the morning, he saw young couples holding hands over pancakes. Here he saw older couples beginning the dance of romance. When was the last time he and his wife had such a treat? Love is for those with no cares or those with money. His life fell outside that circle of happiness, people with means and young lovers, living at home without the stresses that life may bring.

Miguel, his partner in cooking, was preparing sauces for the entrees. "Hey Tony, how's it going?" Tony liked Miguel. He was in his twenties, had plans for getting married and endless energy. Tony wondered if working side by side, the boss would compare them. But Tony was an excellent cook and Miguel complemented his work by getting the sauces and side dishes ready just in time to Tony's entrees so that food could be delivered quickly to patrons. "I'm good Miguel. How's that pretty fiancée of yours?" Miguel's face lit up. "Oh, you know Tony, I'm marrying an angel. After work tonight we're going dancing and even though the guys will be watching her, she's going home with me." Tony nodded. "Keep treating her right and she always will. When's the big day again?" Miguel stirred the three sauces on the stove. "Valentine's Day! It was Andrea's idea. Romantic, but it could be cold." Tony wondered where they could be going on their honeymoon. Miguel offered before he could ask "but Miami should be beautiful then, lots of warm ocean water, good food I don't have to cook and great clubs." Tony patted him on the arm. "Blessings to both of you and a long, happy life."

At least his boss here didn't mind him taking food home. Whatever meats had been around a while were fair for him to make a meal because they received fresh shipments every week, dated in the large refrigerator. His boss made a point of telling customers that they only used fresh ingredients. "Tony, you going to make magic for those people tonight?" said his boss, dressed in his blue suit, white shirt and red tie. "Absolutely, boss, Miguel and I are the magic makers." The boss relaxed. "Great, that's what keeps them coming back. You know we're thinking about expanding the dining room to next door. If we do, we'll need you for more hours. Is that good?" For the first time in days, Tony felt hope. "I'd love that boss. I can work every night if you need me." Tony felt a wave of energy as he continued to prepare the meat entrees for cooking. "And you'll have to do that sooner while Miguel is on the beach in South Florida next month." Miguel smiled. "Let's hope he makes time for the beach," said Tony. They all shared a laugh.

Once it got busy, Tony and Miguel concentrated on cooking, leaving little time for talk about Miguel's honeymoon or much else. They served over 150 people a night here and time went by quickly. The other cooks and kitchen staff looked up to them as they would a head chef in a fine European restaurant, even though this Italian-American bistro was much less pretentious and Tony and Miguel never thought of themselves as better than the others.

Most of the waiters and waitresses here were young, supplementing another job or still in college. Tony knew their time here was temporary and their future was bright. "Wouldn't it be great to start over?" he thought, although he wouldn't trade his wife and daughter for anything. Tony remembered the injustices he had suffered. He would have stayed away from the people who hurt him, politicking for no other reason that he wasn't a college graduate or because of his age. But it wasn't his to judge; everyone has ups and downs. Each person will have to account for his or her actions on Earth. We are only here a short time. Eternity belongs to those who are faithful.

Respect. That's what Tony liked about this restaurant. And if he increased his hours, then he knew he would get health insurance. More money, Kelly's medical expenses and finally, some security! Maybe he would even be able to drop his morning job, especially now that his boss was squeezing him for taking meals home. "I could spend the mornings with my wife, make breakfast for Kelly and take her to school." Tony's sense of hope made him excited and relaxed at the same time.

Tony walked back to the refrigerator to get meat for the first orders. It would take some time to prepare them for cooking, trimming and shaping the cuts and rubbing them with his blend of spices and marinades. Maria was there looking upset. "What's wrong Maria?" Maria turned toward him. "Oh, just a flat tire that I got on the way over. It will be too late to take care of it after work. I'll have to come back during the day on Sunday." Tony knew this meant she would have to take buses home late at night. "Would you like a ride home? It's on my way." Maria seemed relieved. "Oh, that would be great, thanks" and she touched his arm in appreciation. "No problem."

Tony was trimming the fat off the meats to make them just right for cooking. He couldn't help wonder if Maria was looking for more than a ride, remembering the glances she gave him the other night. Suddenly he was imagining dropping her off and Maria reaching over to give him a not so innocent kiss. "Ouch"...he let out as he cut his left thumb. "Serves me right for not paying attention" he thought, justice for thinking this imaginary infidelity.

After he cleaned up, Tony went back to preparing the cuts. He loved his wife. "Why would I even think of cheating on her?" he asked himself. "This is natural, all men think this way. I'm not going to do anything. That would be the real sin." But would it? Tony believed that it was a sin just to have these thoughts, so he felt guilty. "Do these thoughts come from me or from some evil source?" Tony believed in evil, in Satan and in Hell. "This must be him trying to bring me down." His life wasn't stressful enough; now he is being tempted to do something he knew was wrong. "But was it? How could just thinking about something be wrong? No one would know. No one would get hurt."

This was a question he wrestled with all his life. "Is it our thinking or actions that guide our destiny?" He could not identify any great transgressions he had committed; yet his life had gone from comfortable to this fragile state he and his family now endured. Kelly's medical problems certainly weren't her fault; she was an angel. His wife's suffering wasn't her fault; she did the best she could. No, it was when he lost his health insurance, because that company moved out of town, sending the jobs to some other country, which was to blame. Not that Tony thought those people were to blame; they would make a fraction of what they were paying Americans but that would be a blessing for them. "No, the evil is somewhere else, someone set this in motion."

The food was put away, the kitchen was clean and it was time to go home. Maria waited for Tony outside with her hands in her pockets to stay warm. Tony opened the door for her and they left the restaurant. "I really appreciate this Tony. This is no time to be outside waiting for buses." Tony glanced at Maria. "I told you, it's on my way home, no trouble at all." Tony remembered his earlier transgression and had decided that thinking about it wouldn't hurt anybody. "Well, it's more than my ex would do for me. He only cares about himself." Tony pulled up to Maria's apartment building and waited for her to get out. "Here you go, have a good night." Maria squeezed his hand and looked at Tony. "Thanks. I have to pay the babysitter and make sure mine is asleep." Tony wanted to lean over and kiss her. He thought Maria wanted the same thing. He waited, Maria still holding his hand. It seemed like minutes had gone by when it had only been seconds. Maria's eyes glanced downward. "OK, thanks again" and she left slowly and went inside her apartment. Tony could feel his body quivering. No harm done. Time to get home.

Everyone was asleep as usual when he came in. He cleaned up and got into bed. That night he dreamed about what he had secretly hoped would happen with Maria. He woke suddenly at 3am, upset that it had only been a dream. He hoped the dream would continue but it was replaced with a nightmare about losing his job at the restaurant. The next time he woke up, he was glad it was just a dream. It was 4:30am and time to get to his breakfast job.

All that day, Tony thought about Maria and the opportunity that might have been. He wished he had acted on his impulses. What a relief it would be to feel passion again and to be wanted, not just needed. "No, my wife wants me too. It's our life that has ruined our passion, not her, not me." Tony finished the shift, made his scrambles and pancakes and gave his boss the \$12. This time the boss didn't give him a dirty look.

Sunday nights were slower at the restaurant, especially in January. The post holiday crowd was always lighter, people spending some time at home or away to some warm vacation spot. Tony patted Miguel on the back. "Hey, young man, how are you today?" Miguel looked upset. "Not sure. I think Andrea may be cheating on me. I was looking at the cell phone bill and saw some calls to her old boyfriend." Tony listened. "It may be nothing. She loves you. Is there any other reason you are worrying?" Miguel paused, and then said "No, just the calls." Tony tried to reassure him. "It's better that you ask her about this. You'll make yourself crazy if you don't and there's probably an explanation for it." Miguel nodded and agreed. He would ask her tonight after work.

Tony worried about Miguel's situation and that it might be just a harmless misinterpretation of the facts. There could be an innocent explanation, or so he hoped. Miguel and Andrea seemed so perfect together. Tony silently prayed for them, believing that might help.

The night continued to go slowly and the boss told Tony and some others to leave early. When Tony got to his car, he saw Maria. "So you got your tire fixed?" Maria nodded. "Yes, luckily it could be patched, so I didn't need a new one." Tony felt himself quivering again and tried to steady his voice. "Yeah, those new tires sure run up a bill." Maria walked up to Tony and whispered in his ear. Tony could feel his heart pounding. "Really, what about your son?" Maria touched Tony on the shoulder. "He's at my mother's tonight" and she gave him a smile. "You remember where I live?" she said. Tony could barely get the words out "Yes, I'll follow you." The four-mile trip seemed to take forever. Tony's heart was pounding and he thought to himself. "What am I doing? This is wrong. I should just go home." But Tony didn't go home.

Walking toward the building, he saw Maria waiting for him. She took his hand and they went up to the second floor apartment. After they got in, Maria took off her coat and put her arms around Tony's neck, kissing him and leaving no doubt about her intentions. Tony was both excited and worried at the same time. What if his wife found out? But how could she? He wasn't expected home for hours and she always retired early with Kelly. With this expectation, he took full advantage of Maria, unbuttoning her blouse while she did the same with his shirt.

Tony drove home energized and excited but filled with guilt. "What have I done?" But knowing that his wife wouldn't find out, he decided that this was going to be the first night of many with Maria. "This is good for me," he thought. "No one gets hurt. It's no different than thinking about it." But Tony was having trouble convincing himself of that last point.

The breakfast restaurant was closed on Mondays, so Tony had breakfast with the family before Kelly had to leave for school and his wife go to work. "What did you guys do last night?" he asked. Kelly jumped in "We made play-doh houses and put people in them." His wife added "Yes, we made a little family like ours; we even had them sitting at the table eating breakfast together." For some reason this renewed Tony's guilt so he asked, "Great, what did your family have to eat?" "Pancakes of course Daddy!" said Kelly. "How was your night dear?" said his wife. Tony wondered if his wife knew he got off early. Realizing there was no up side in looking guilty, he put on his best false smile and said "No, same as usual, dinner for the fortunate few." Then Tony dropped his wife off at work and Kelly at school.

Monday he was off from both jobs, but he spent the day wishing he were going in to see Maria again. "Should I call her?" he wondered, not knowing the appropriate first post-affair task. "If I call her, she might think I'm too eager. But if I don't call her, she might think I don't care. Don't care? Do I care? In what way do I care? I'm not going to leave my wife for her, but I don't want to stop seeing her. Wait, I'm not sure if she feels the same about me. What if that was just a one time thing for her? What if she just wanted to see how it felt? Maybe she is feeling guilty too. But why? She's single, nothing to feel guilty about. Unless, she thinks my wife will find out. That would hurt everyone." Tony was realizing that this was becoming more complicated than he thought it would. But he couldn't wait until Tuesday night.

Tony decided not to call Maria. He didn't want to leave an answer on her machine that her son might hear. And he didn't know what to say. He got to the restaurant early, waiting outside for Maria. He had some flowers in his car. "Flowers? What am I doing now?" Maria pulled up beside him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Tony got the flowers and gave them to her. "These are lovely, thank you so much. Do you mind if I put them in my car?" Tony thought that would be best. "That would be fine," he said. "I wanted to call but didn't know if it was the right thing to do." Maria leaned up to him and whispered "I think it would be better if you didn't." Now Tony was confused again. "Was this the end of it? Did his failure to call end it?" Before he could go on, Maria continued, "We need to keep this our secret, ok?" and kissed him again. Tony wanted to take her right there, but knew someone might see them. He held back all his instincts and asked her if he could see her tonight. Maria gave a little pout and said "sorry love, my son is at home but he's going to be out tomorrow at a friend's house." It was clear that Maria wanted Tony as much as he wanted her, but she had the sense to do this in a way that no one found out. Tony was relieved, having imagined that Maria might tell his wife for some reason if things went south between them. "She's very careful. No one will know. No one will get hurt. I wouldn't want my wife to get hurt," thought Tony. Then they went into the restaurant using separate entrances.

"Women can control their passions more easily than men," Tony thought. He couldn't stand the thought of waiting another day, but Maria seemed perfectly at ease with it. Tony muddled through the night, his mind racing with thoughts he shouldn't have while holding sharp knives. He remembered his thumb incident the other day. "Look at her" he thought, seeing her taking orders and calmly talking with customers, "no different than any other night."

Miguel came in a little late, which surprised and worried Tony. Miguel was never late, though this was only 20 minutes. "Miguel, how are things?" he said. Miguel gave a sad look and said. "I took your advice Tony. I sat down with Andrea and asked her about the calls. She started to cry." Tony felt a sinking feeling that his friend's engagement was coming to an end. "But then she told me that the old boyfriend had asked her if he could hold a bachelor party for me...hard to believe, eh?" Tony wished that were the case. Tony prayed that was the case. Only time would tell. Tony decided he had helped enough.

Over the next month, Tony and Maria continued to see each other after work whenever Maria could arrange for her son to be out. Tony hoped this is how it would continue. No expectations, no one gets hurt. Maria felt the same way. "Tony, do your wife and daughter ever go away for the night?" Tony realized this was a golden opportunity. They could be together all night, not rushing out after an hour to cover his infidelity. He began thinking about how he might arrange for his wife and Kelly to be out of town. "Seeing relatives? Surprise mother and daughter trip to Disneyland? Think Tony, there has to be a way." Then he remembered. Kelly was due at the hospital in the city for cancer tests. It would be an overnight trip and mom always stayed with her. "My God, is this what it has come to? My daughter in the hospital with cancer and my using that as an excuse to be with Maria?" Yes, that would work. No one would know. No one would get hurt.

It worked better than expected. Maria arranged for her son to spend the weekend with a friend and even paid for a hotel room for her and Tony. When Tony heard the plan, he realized that his affair had now crossed over into the romantic domain. "What if Maria wanted more than a physical relationship?" But Maria was way ahead of Tony. Not only did she want more, but she had already bonded with him. Kelly and mom's trip to the hospital was on a Sunday after church and they wouldn't be back until late Monday. Sunday at work, Tony and Maria couldn't help giving each other glances. Both knew what the night had in store, all night and the next day too! After work, they took both cars to the hotel (Maria always the careful one), she checked in and set up the room with champagne, dessert and rose petals on the bed. A trip to Victoria Secret was not wasted on Maria, or Tony. He showed up at the room with two-dozen roses and a small silver bracelet in a gift box.

When she opened the door, Tony thought he would explode with passion. They made love, drank champagne, ate rich chocolates and made love some more. Maria seemed more like a woman in her 20s and Tony did his best to keep up. The adrenalin rush was helping. He forgot completely about his wife and daughter in the hospital. This was the relief he had been praying for; God had answered his prayers, just in a different way than he expected. Maria snuggled up close to Tony and whispered in his ear. "I love you!" Tony thought time (and his heart) had just stopped. "What do I say? There is only one right thing to do now and I'm not sure I can do it." He gave her a long, soulful kiss and said, "I love you too."

Tony and Maria decided it would be safe to use the hotel Jacuzzi. It was late and it was open to guests. They were all alone and holding each other, kissing and reiterating those words that Tony feared so much but were hard to resist once Maria had said them. Tony knew he wouldn't have to work in the morning so they stayed up all night, with just catnaps as breaks. Maria seemed very content with the relationship, even though her words implied wanting more. He had to know. But that could wait until tomorrow. No sense ruining the best night he had in the last ten years.

Around 4:00am they both fell asleep, but Maria had set the alarm for 7:30am, with breakfast ordered from room service. Tony was still asleep when it arrived. She quietly set it up in front of the bed, and then woke him up by snuggling close. Maria didn't want breakfast just yet. Realizing this, Tony took her again, Maria being equally passionate. When they finally got around to breakfast, Tony asked, "What time do we have to check out?" Maria told him she arranged for a late checkout, 1pm, while smiling devilishly. They spent that time in bed enjoying every minute. Tony decided to put off his question about her 'I love you'.

Tony had promised his wife he would call to find out about Kelly. He reached her at the hospital. His wife was crying. "Kelly's cancer is returning. She is in surgery now and could be here another week for treatment. I'm staying with her." Tony's heart stopped again, not in joy and passion, but in devastation for his darling little girl. He promised his wife he would make the trip to the hospital immediately and hung up.

Pulling himself together, tears in his eyes, he went to Maria. Maria thought Tony was in love with her and this was going to be a passionate plea to be with her. Tony took her in his arms and whispered, "I have some errands I promised my wife I would take care of before she gets back. Maybe we can get together later tonight?" Maria was excited about extending their time together. "I'll have my son stay with my mom in case you can come over," and she gave Tony a warm hug goodbye.

When Tony arrived at the hospital, Kelly was in the recovery room so he had to wait to see her. He went to the chapel, got down on his knees and prayed. "God, I don't know why this is happening to Kelly. You know she is a sweet and innocent girl. But if you save her, I'll do anything. If this is because of what I have done, I'll stop. Nothing matters except the life of that little girl. Please God, save her life."

Later in the hospital room, Tony and his wife sat with Kelly holding her hands trying to keep her from crying. "It's OK daddy, the doctor said I'm strong." Tony did everything he could to hold it together. "You are strong Kelly and I know you're going to be all right." The doctor came in, took Tony aside and gave him the news. "We think we got it out. Kelly is going to be all right." Tony's smile told his wife that it was good news and Kelly sensing the same, smiled up at her dad and the doctor.

Tony continued his affair with Maria, neither one expecting more than they had started. He kept this secret for the next five years. No one knew. No one got hurt.

Acknowledgments

Apple Juice was originally published by *Daily Love*.

Babybump.Com was originally published by *Hobo Pancakes*.

Double Sting was originally published in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine* and in the United States by *Shadow Fiction*.

UFO was originally published in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine*, in Canada by *Zouch Magazine and Miscellany* and reprinted by *Mouseprose* and *Daily Flash Fiction 2012*.

Under the Apple Tree was originally published by *The Scarlet Sound*.

Operation ICU was originally published by *The Scarlet Sound* and reprinted by *State of Imagination*.

The Music Man was originally published in this volume and reprinted by *The Piker Press*.

Coq a Doodle Do was originally published by *Bewildering Stories*.

Rooster Redux was originally published by *The Feathered Flounder*.

Practical Goldberg (A Love Story in 3 Parts) was originally published in the United States by *The Scarlet Sound* and in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine* and reprinted by *Daily Love*, *Larks Fiction Magazine* and *MediaVirus*. *Daily Flash Fiction 2012* will run the three parts in sequence next year.

TV All the Time was originally published by *Daily Love*.

The Duke of Yelp was originally published by *Daily Love* and reprinted in *Eskimo Pie*.

Poached was originally published by *Larks Fiction Magazine*.

The Waiting Room was originally published in the U.S. by *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine* and in Great Britain by *The Short Humour Site*. It also appears in print in *Daily Flash Fiction 2012*.

The Sonoma Murder Mystery originally appeared in *50 Italian Pastries*.

The Black Hole was originally published by *The Piker Press* and reprinted as a contest selection by *Watch Me Bounce*.

Trick or Treat was originally published in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine*.

The Thief was originally published in the United Kingdom by *Hackwriters Magazine*.

Preheat the Microwave.com was originally published by *Leaning House Press* and was reprinted by *Scissors and Spackle*.

Traffic Stop with Annie Kim was originally published by *Weirdyear* and reprinted by *Stanley the Whale*.

The Rich are Going to Hell was originally published by *Weirdyear*.

Like Father, Like Son was originally published by *The Rusty Nail*.

Unfaithful was originally published by *The Scarlet Sound*.

What's in a Name? was originally published by *The Piker Press*.

The Chess Table was originally published by *Twenty or Less Press* and is available separately on amazon.com.

The Road was originally published by *The Piker Press* and reprinted in Great Britain by *Alfie Dog Fiction*.

The Social Justice Experiment was originally published by *The Piker Press*.

It's a Lot of Work Being a Girl was originally published by *Linguistic Erosion*.

Who Stole Asbury Park was originally published by *The Piker Press*.

Now I Understand was originally published by *Linguistic Erosion*.

I am the writer; I speak for the programmers (with apologies to Dr. Seuss) was originally published by *The Stream Press*.

Mama Mia was originally published by *The Piker Press*.

Phone Booths and Mailboxes was originally published by *Linguistic Erosion*.

Boxes and Ladders was originally published by *Daily Love*.

A Good Marriage was originally published by *Daily Love*.

Anything but Indian Food was originally published by *Piker Press* and reprinted by *Larks Fiction Magazine*.

The Bridge Game was originally published in this volume and reprinted by *The Rusty Nail*.

First Love was originally published in Canada by *The Glass Coin* and in the United States by *Wherever It Pleases*.

Software Bugs was originally published by *Daily Love*.

Apple Sauce was originally published by *Daily Love*.

The DJ was originally published by *Daily Love*.

Mashed Potatoes and Marinara Sauce was originally published by *Daily Love*.

The Love Beads was originally published by *The Blotter Magazine* and will be reprinted in *The Stream Press*.

In the Mood was originally published by *The Piker Press*.

Respectable Sinners was originally published by *The Feathered Flounder*.

Pie or Die was originally published by *Writing Raw*.

Overdue was originally published by *Eskimo Pie*.

One Prius, Two Prius, Pink Prius, Blue Prius was originally published by *Daily Love*.

Love, Luck and Fate was originally published by *Daily Love*.

The Angry Vegetarian was originally published by *Larks Fiction Magazine* and reprinted by *Writing Raw*.

The Lighthouse was originally published in the United Kingdom by *Alfie Dog Fiction* and in the U.S. by *The Rusty Nail*.

The Tightrope was originally published in the United States by *Writing Raw*, in Canada by *Zouch Magazine and Miscellany* and in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine*. It was reprinted by *6 Tales, The Piker Press, The Legendary* and *Larks Fiction Magazine*.

The Grand Poobah was originally published in the United States by *Weirdyear* and in Australia by *The Fringe Magazine*.

The Devil's Orchestra was originally published and printed in *The Chaffey Review Literary Magazine*, in June, 2011.

Notes