

Cobbler's Nook

A Novel

By Bob Schaller

Jacket copy

The town of Cobbler's Nook is founded upon the legacy of a single parent, albeit suicidal pioneer Dolores "Peach" Cobbler. When Bob Lambert returns to be an editor at his hometown paper, he's thinking of picket fences and another child, or two. But two years of working overtime leaves little time for his relationship with his wife and their young son. After his wife leaves, Lambert finds himself a single parent. His decision to quit his job and become a full-time father doesn't make much financial sense; he eats what's leftover in his son's lunchbox for dinner. His choice of going online to find a date doesn't work out too well, as he accidentally checks "Male seeking Male." His two best friends – one a work-in-progress recovering racist, the other struggling to find his own way – provide moral support. And his son shapes Lambert into the man he always wanted to be. When his ex-wife announces her plans to marry and move to Brazil – taking their child with her – his world falls apart. Slowly it falls together. He gets his son back, sees his writing career start to show promise, and meets someone who has similar goals in life. However, when his ex-wife returns to Cobbler's Nook ready to be a wife and mother again, Lambert finds himself weighing his son's best interests against his own goals, until he finally realizes his ex-wife doesn't even know the man he has grown into since their divorce.

Chapter 1

This is still the best part of the day.

One waffle (toasted but not brown), a squeeze-tube of yogurt, a banana cut into bite-sized slices (and then into halves) and a glass of milk. I head back up the stairs and gaze at him from the door: His hair is thin and fine, and always a morning victim of the hair fairy, the peaks and valleys fitting since our home is nestled along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains.

"Breakfast ready?" he asks, standing up on his bed and hopping on my back. We head

piggyback downstairs, and the music from the kids' show "Arthur" on PBS catches his attention, forcing his tired eyes to open. He starts on breakfast. "Arthur" ends as I log onto my computer. Each morning we share an article from the newspaper on the doorstep or online. Sometimes it's about a current event – as long as it's not too gory or otherwise troublesome. Other times it's something light. Today it is a story about surgical equipment – retractors even the occasional scalpel – being left inside patients.

"Those things, they're metal – you know, steel?" my son asks me.

"Well, yes."

"Magnets, Dad," he says. "Get a powerful magnet and hold it up to the guy after surgery. If something in there is steel, it will move toward the magnet!"

Though it's lacking in practical application, we discuss his idea and other possible solutions. Since he showers the night before, the hair is a daily battle. But it's a fun fight, me against his soft locks. We play "barbershop" and in a faux accent I soak and comb forward, then finally part his hair.

It's just us two this morning, and if I am worried that these last 9 years – the marriage, the divorce, everything in between – have taken a toll on him, I am buoyed by his report card, straight A's and three out of four on the conduct scale, four being tops. The fact that he is happy – off the charts if they graded such a thing – continues to make me realize my calling in life is to do this, be a father, to love this child.

"I find that compassion is a sign of intelligence," Mrs. King, his teacher told me yesterday. "What I appreciate most about your son is that he's never too high and never low. You don't understand what that consistency means to a fourth-grade teacher."

She is smiling, and my heart is warm inside. Not just because I'm having my own, biased views of my son reinforced. But because she "gets" my son, as I do. But she can't know that up until about a year ago, my life had been in a state of transition. Or maybe confusion? Chaos? Maybe a little of all three. But that skinny little guy with the oversized brown eyes and long eyelashes was the constant. I had no job, no money, no hugs that didn't come from someone wearing Power Rangers or Scooby Doo underwear. She doesn't know that during the darkest days, his light was enough to brighten my world, my mood, my hopes and even my faith.

What she does know is that I drop off, and pick up, my son each morning and afternoon. She doesn't need to know that three years ago he offered the Christmas money his grandmother gave

him to help pay our utility bill after he heard me on the phone with General Power, pleading for another week and pointing out that we hadn't been above freezing for 10 days. Or that it was me who made sure he had a nutritious lunch to take to school each day, even if it meant I wouldn't eat more than his leftovers that day. She doesn't know that I've been as "involved" as any father at this school. In fact, before this year, Mrs. King didn't really know me. With good reason: I was 50 pounds heavier at one point, the bags under my eyes making me look like a man lacking direction, lacking a game plan.

We head out the door, and I drive him down a long, winding hill to school. We have our little pep talk that I'm sure must be getting old to him, and might even be extinct sometime this year, if not by the start of fifth grade next year.

"Who is going to make it a great day?" I ask.

His smile is wide. He was late losing his last few baby teeth, and his grin is the best it's ever been; incisors coming in on the top side, two permanent teeth already safely in place in the front center, along with an adorable gap that he un-adorably used as a squirt gun to wake me up last weekend.

"I'm going to make it a great day," he says. He zips his coat, pulls up his hood, and gets out with his backpack. He grins with his eyes as much as with his smile as he closes the car door. I watch him walk away, slinging one and then both straps of his backpack over his shoulder. I'm sure he knows I still sit and watch him walk all the way into school. But I doubt he knows how I still regularly get a lump in my throat, wondering how it is an oaf like me got blessed with such a wonderful little person in my life.

The bell rings and he disappears into the building. After checking my mirror and over my left shoulder, I carefully inch out onto the street as people with "real" jobs punch the accelerator as though it will really make up anytime to be one car ahead. I don't have that concern, and it shows in my caution to pull away from the curb and into the road again. I am going to be a few minutes late today to yoga and Pilates. Yes, yoga. Yes, Pilates. The time came and went when I competed for "alpha male" status with the other guys in the gym. I gave it my all, grunted and sweated – and endured several lower back and shoulder injuries – to be among the strongest guys there. The funny thing about the gym to me is this: Most of the women are always in the cardiovascular area, where I mostly reside, and if they have a big bottom or large thighs, they try to work the weight off through hard work and sweat. It warms my heart they care so much about

themselves, their boyfriends or husbands – whatever their motivation – that they try to get back in shape and drop any extra weight. Guys, on the other hand, develop barrel, gross stomachs that overhang their pants in front and repulsive love handles on the sides. Rather than lose that weight, the guys try and make their chests, shoulders and arms bigger, the justification I suppose being that if the proportions remain somewhat similar, the spare tire is out of mind, if not out of sight.

Among the guys, the stronger you were, the more accepted you were. “Want a spot?” or “What’s your max?” are the key questions to being in the “Guys Club.” The club members are still there in full force, and more than one of them looks down on me or scoffs as I go into the yoga room with 15 to 20 women and maybe, at the most, one other guy for morning class. Those who recognize me are still cordial; the others I’m not really concerned about anymore.

The gym had sort of been my social, physical and emotional rehabilitation center.

Six years earlier, I was on the exercise bike reading a women’s magazine – my honest intent was to get an idea of what they were looking for so I could pick-up some free-lance work – and I actually ended up getting into the stories. I was jotting down the names of the editors, phone numbers, faxes and email addresses when my eye drifted to the table of contents. “When he holds you so close that he’s holding you too tight.” That wasn’t me: I was actually holding on so loosely that I was letting go without knowing it – but that was also covered in the story. The woman sitting next to me on the bike was either reading over my shoulder or trying to read my mind as to why I was reading “Cosmo.”

“Trouble?” she asked quietly, pointing toward the large headline. I told her, in typical guy response, “Nah, just checking out the pictures.”

“On the same page for 15 minutes?” she asked with a smile. Without going into too much detail or revealing relevant fact, I told her my wife and I were about to have that bond rescinded, and that I really needed to find out what makes women tick.

“Or what makes you tick,” she said, pointing at me with her left hand that had a pretty big rock on it. “My husband and I went through it. And it saved our marriage.”

She was talking about counseling, therapy, getting help – whatever you want to call it. My marriage hadn’t just been tossed overboard, it was done bobbing and was on the ocean floor, a once promising union reduced to a lifeless, rusting hulk probably not unlike the Titanic.

Anyway, she told me she had a friend who counseled, gave me the office number, and I called.

Yes, it did help. And yes, the problem was really about “me” more than it was about “us,” or even “her.”

I saw that woman from the exercise bike again on this day as we headed into yoga. She wasn't there often, but when she was, I hoped my nod of the head and grin conveyed the gratitude she deserved for the tip.

But that was then. And this is now. I like now, better. Much.

As far as workouts go, I found that the “core” strength program from yoga and Pilates was what I needed. Actually, I needed a lot of work on my physical and emotional cores. My son nursed my emotional core through the toughest years. When I first set out to lose weight, I did most of it on the treadmill or bike – and those two remain my favorite pieces of equipment at the gym on days when I don't have this class. I remember a month ago when we were headed into class. A big, sweaty, tattooed man with several earrings – the most prominent in his nose and ears – saw a group including me heading into the yoga room and said, “Good morning,” then adding when he caught my eye, “Laaadies.”

The old me, the one with the hard physical but weak emotional core, would've offered to “take it outside” and, win or lose, defend my manhood. Even two, three years ago, I probably would've retorted with a clever, grating, emasculating comment about his jewelry, probably asking something along the lines of if the order maxed out his “Neiman-Marcus Platinum Pink credit card.”

No, this time I only look at him and smile. His brow furrows, the wheels – probably four-sided – are beginning to turn, albeit slowly.

“Problem?” he asks with no tone of query in his voice.

“No,” I say, keeping an honest, almost impish grin on my face. I notice behind me – across from him – is a mirror, which gives him a view of probably his favorite sight.

“You sure,” he says, more a statement than question.

“If you've got a problem,” I say, pointing toward the mirror and his reflection, “take it up with that guy.”

I didn't bother trying to explain to Mr. Musclehead that any problem that suddenly existed had everything to do with him and nothing to do with me. The thing is, down deep I know him. I was him, minus the body art. Yet I didn't think it right to pass along my counselor's number, not unless the lady from the exercise bike had handy the number of a skilled dentist.

We stretch to end the class. Breathe in. Breathe out. A song reminds us to “Put one foot in front of the other, take one day a time...” I feel for my pulse as the class ends and wonder if I’m counting heartbeats or the base line from the music. I smile and head for the door.

Today I am 40 years old. I feel better physically than I did at 30 or 20, and better emotionally than I ever remember feeling. My time in counseling taught me that the core of everything is the key; the core of the relationship with the woman you love, your friends, your family. Everything is built from the center out.

Wind has blown last night’s snow off of Cobbler’s Peak, but a few hundred feet down, the snow has gathered like a beard, the final thin line of snow stretching down toward the foothills where the sun is trickling ice into water. To the east about a mile, is the house in which I grew up. To the southwest about two miles is the house I lost in my divorce. To the north is our new place.

And I’m right where I need to be.

Seven years ago. I was adrift. Whatever I was looking for – it didn’t matter if I found it – because I’d have to find me, first.

“No, really, I think she’s your type.”

Ralph says that as he sits across from me at the “Cobbler’s Always Café,” a sort of Denny’s 24-hour spin-off that is unique to our town.

My type. Hmm. What exactly is that? Single? Single parent? Or single as in 45-records, which fill three boxes in my closet?

“Listen, this dating thing...” I stammered, the right words escaping me, which, as a full-time, free-lance writer was embarrassing since words are my specialty!

This same friend had two months earlier told me about this “unbelievable!” online dating service. You filled out who you were, what you wanted, and you ONLY heard from “your exact match.” And “exact match” took on a whole new meaning in that case. As in looking into a mirror.

But this time it was a real, live woman, my friend, Ralph was now describing. But I had just been on my seventh date, and it wasn’t Lucky 7, by any stretch.

“Two kids, ex is responsible, but all the way across town ... that’s what Lucy told me,” Ralph said, referring to his wife.

Ralph, Lucy. These, I imagine, are the last two people I will ever know named Ralph and Lucy unless I volunteer in a senior center – which, quite frankly, might improve my dating success rate. But, anyway, “Ralph” and “Lucy,” well, they aren’t exactly the names of the future. Kids today are Taylor, Nathan, Brittany, Hayley – my son has three Hayleys in his class this year, though all three have different spellings – so the Ralphs, Lucys, and for that matter, Roberts, Georges, Junes and Ellens, are gone. Like 45s. Gone. Forever.

These days, vinyl is something found only in cars, not something you put on the stereo, which, in this century, includes nothing resembling a turntable or needle.

But Ralph is speaking. And though the subject of dating is touchy, to say the least, I listen. Because he is my friend. And among the things that friends do, listening is on the list.

“Just lunch, we’ll double,” he said, throwing in the “double,” which he is fully aware is the singular requirement if I am going to meet a real woman on a date these days. “Come on now, just because dating hasn’t gone so great...”

Hasn’t gone that great, boy, was that an understatement. “Not this time, buddy,” I said. “Just not up to it, yet.”

“Just so you know, it was Lucy’s idea,” he said. “I’m no matchmaker. She just thought...”

“Tell her no thanks, but I really appreciate that she thought of me.”

Yet I haven’t given up on women or dating. I’m young enough to have the single “Bette Davis Eyes,” by Kim Carnes (yes, the 45, though my sister pointed out a year ago she got it for free, on Napster). I must’ve been “pissed,” she said, that I paid for it two decades ago. (I wasn’t, it was 99 cents.) I’m old enough to know every word in that song, but not old enough to actually name even three movies Bette Davis starred in during her era.

I’m young enough to have grown up watching “Gilligan’s Island” before it went to re-runs, but I’m old enough to wonder if the right debate has taken place, the one about “Ginger” or “Mary Ann” being the sexiest. I’m at a stage, at age 38, where I’m thinking Mrs. Howell wasn’t all that bad, and really did, in all honesty, have the cutest laugh. She wasn’t over the top sexy like Ginger, yet wasn’t as widely appealing as Mary Ann, so, yes, if I had my choice, when Thurston was out of the picture, the widow Howell and I might have...

Actually, I had planned to stay married. Forever. To the same woman. The mother of our child. I wanted several more kids. I was excited to upgrade to a bigger house. Problem is, she didn’t want more kids. And the only upgrade she wanted was up from what she had in me.

Ralph left two bucks for his roll and coffee. I tell him I want to finish reading the paper, since I am “self-employed” now and have time to do such things. After putting down the paper, I notice again an older couple that just ordered as Ralph left. When they came in, I noticed the elderly man had a rip in the side of his pants, his shirt well worn, his jacket either as old as he or second-hand. He treated his wife like a princess, pulling out the seat for her, taking a menu from the hostess and setting it gently into her hands. She smiled at him. As soon as the hostess was out of earshot, they pondered their order.

“I’m not going to get the Queen’s Day breakfast because I want bacon, and bacon is extra,” she says. She hushes when the waitress appears.

“Free refills on coffee still?” the man asks the waitress. She nods, yes.

“My bride, er, my wife,” he smiles across the table at her, she smiles back. “You’d figure after 55 years, I’d have this thing down by now... anyway, the Queen’s Day, can she get bacon with that instead of sausage – at no extra charge?”

He is told sorry, but no, the bacon would be extra.

“Even just to substitute it?” he asks. Again, the waitress says, no, she’s sorry though.

“Well, Mom, we go out twice a month, and I want you to have bacon,” he says, looking at his wife. “Go with the bacon. Even if it’s extra.”

They finish their order. He hands the waitress the menus, and I see a patch on the elbow of his perhaps 1950s era sport coat snag on the table.

“Remind me to sew that, Daddy, when we get home,” she says, pointing to it.

“Got it, Mommy,” he says. “Who’d have thought I’d be wearing this old thing 50 years after I bought it? I told you that day in Woolrich’s: ‘Mom, that sports coat will last me forever.’”

“Yes, Daddy, you were right,” she says, smiling with her eyes as she rearranges her fork to the right side of her place setting.

I can tell they are in their golden years, but living not on gold, but probably a fixed income. So I pull the waitress over after Ralph leaves.

“Their order – how much will it be?” I ask.

“Why?” the waitress answers.

“I just...they look sweet – ‘his bride,’ the Mommy-Daddy thing, all that, I found it touching,” I say. “I just want to buy their meal.”

“Why?” she asks again.

“I just do,” I say. She scribbles out a few things. The total is just \$8.20 – “his bride” was having a hearty meal, but he was obviously eating light, perhaps sacrificing for her to have bacon. I could feel a lump rising in my throat. This is the kind of love I dreamed of experiencing. Since mine became a nightmare, it touches my heart to see it in someone else.

“Here,” I say, handing her a ten and two ones, leaving just a five in my wallet. “That should do it.”

I couldn’t help myself, even though I was struggling to make ends meet, not unlike the elderly couple. Which is why Ralph had dropped a few dollars on the table a few minutes earlier when he got up to leave, because he knew the day I quit my job, I had nothing to go to – no steady check. But I had years to make it up, while the older couple was clearly in life’s twilight.

I didn’t want to tell the elderly couple that I had bought them lunch. But I didn’t want there to be some mistake and have them confused or end up paying or end up tipping. So I stopped by their booth on the way out.

“Hi, you don’t know me,” I say. They looked taken aback, so I decided to speak quickly. “Listen you are a sweet couple. I just covered your bill – tip and everything. So enjoy this meal on me.”

They both smiled at me. The woman blinked several times fighting back tears. They looked like they had won the lottery.

“Why, young man?” the older man asks me, smiling and extending his hand to shake mine.

“You remind me of my grandparents,” I say. “You look like kind, honest people – and a lovely couple. You take your bride out again this month with the money you saved today. How’s that?”

I was doing exactly what I didn’t want to do, making this a big production.

“I have to run,” I say. “Just have a terrific day and thanks – for making my day.”

“Thank you!” they say in unison.

As I walked toward the door, I could hear them talking.

“Can you believe that!” he beams to his bride. “I mean, can you honestly believe that!”

“I know, I know,” his bride says. “What a lovely young man. His wife must be very happy.”

At that point, I felt tears in my own eyes start to form. I opened the door, and the cold wind slapped me in the face. My wife...oh, my wife...

Speaking of which, the final therapy session covered by my insurance, which was about to run out, was starting in 20 minutes. (“You can call it counseling if you’d like, it sounds...less clinical,” said Dr. Anne Marie Young.) I drove out to the hospital annex and pulled my beat-up, little car alongside expensive SUV’s, a BMW and a Mercedes sedan – I always parked as far away as possible because a lot of handicapped or older people needed the closer spaces, I realized a session or so into it.

I was sort of sad to be at my last counseling session. I made a mental note to ask Dr. Young what it would cost me without insurance because I didn’t feel like I was ready to stop. It was going so well after a rocky start. Janet had suggested the idea when we were struggling to get to know each other. But after one session, she declared she didn’t need it (“I disagree; she needs it far more than you,” said Dr. Young, who might have been right or might’ve been saying that because she was offended Janet had dismissed her without much thought). Regardless, I had figured out that I needed some work. I kept going after my son was born and liked the direction I was heading. True, it didn’t help the very reason we started attending in the beginning – our marriage, our relationship – but it did help me, with me. And I thought a new me would help Janet and I rediscover what we once had. Only through counseling did I realize we had either lost whatever it was we had, forever, or never really had much in the first place.

For the first time in a long time, I mostly listened to Dr. Young. I definitely did most of the talking in our other sessions. I told her about how my father had always been working, that I hadn’t really known him before he died. I told her about my mother, who had mellowed through the years but was unbearably controlling (“I’d say borderline abusive, actually,” Dr. Young said.) when I was growing up. I learned that I was repeating the cycle by choosing someone like Janet, who was an admitted control freak but attacked every aspect of life with the very passion that drew me to her in the first place. I was also repeating the cycle of becoming an absentee father like my father had been. Without Dr. Young, I don’t know if I would have had the guts to quit my job (“I’m not telling you that you should,” she said, “but I am telling you that serious change can involve, well, drastic measures, though I’d encourage you to think it through first.”).

Another thing I realized was that I had to be nicer. Just nice for the sake of being nice. Because it’s the right thing to do. Not just sometimes, but always. Occasionally it was something like what happened today – picking up a small tab for seniors at the donut shop or the café. Sometimes it was shoveling the neighbors drive and walk when I got up in the morning to dig

Janet's car out. Sometimes it was just a really little thing – thanking the manager at the supermarket for her staff's helpfulness, donating to Salvation Army or Goodwill. Rushing to get a door for someone. Cutting someone a break in traffic. Small or large, it was the gesture itself. Though I know it brought smiles and warmed hearts, I can't believe it ever made them feel better than I felt doing it.

My employer at the time I met Janet, the *Cobbler's Nook Daily Herald*, was located in downtown (a.k.a. "Old Town"), a row of primarily historic buildings winding for four city blocks north-south and eight blocks east-west, in the heart of the city of Cobbler's Nook.

Cobbler's Nook is less than two hours south of Denver, one of a half dozen or so of Colorado's "Front Range" cities (scores of smaller towns dot the landscape) nestled against the east face of the Rocky Mountains.

The city is known for its geographical uniqueness: To the west less than a mile from downtown, is the base of the mountain, and 14,086 higher (it was 14,164 feet 20 years earlier) stands Cobbler's Peak.

The mountain was named in honor of Dolores "Peach" Cobbler, a renegade pioneer woman who was among the original settlers in the Upper Verde Valley of what, upon statehood years later, would be southern Colorado. Dolores was a colorful character, running a tavern downtown, all without the help of a man. Rumors of her lesbianism were rampant until she had a child out of wedlock, a baby girl. Everyone in town knew who the father was. When "Wild" Pete Lackey didn't make an "honest woman" of Dolores, she became more detached. When she was "with child" again by Pete about two years later, he said he would marry her only if she gave birth to the son he'd always wanted.

Birthday came for Emily Cobbler, and she was, obviously, not the son Pete had been awaiting. Dolores became more and more unstable, sold her business and moved just outside of town. Back then the town itself was referred to as "Southpoint," but wasn't an official city. Her mother and her sister (rumor has it there were two sisters) moved with Dolores to the small working ranch she was able to purchase.

History and romanticism often combine to form folktales. But what records were kept of Dolores's last few months and dramatic final hours, are sketchy, at best – fragmented history and wild tales never merge, only running parallel in the case of "Peach" Cobbler.

Distraught more than ever one night, Dolores loaded a shoulder pack, rode into town (not side-saddle either, legend has it), and found Lackey getting drunk in her old bar. He was offering one-night's fee to a local working girl for the very act he had committed, at least twice (we know that for sure) with Dolores, when none other than Dolores came walking in the door of the tavern. She proceeded to blacken one of Pete's eyes, knee him in the groin so hard that Doc Lavern would pronounce his child-fathering days likely over the following week, and then headed home.

At sunup the following morning, she packed a small meal and a full bottle of whiskey, then told only her sister that she was heading up the mountain, giving no reason. She was a tough woman, and by noon she had made it halfway up the mountain. Three quarters of the way up, she passed a Mormon expedition of 22 or 25 men and 15-20 women (and supposedly some children) who were headed over the Rocky Mountains, having heard that there was a southern route that was emerging, or at least marked, to the Mormon Trail. (There wasn't, at least not where several of their bodies were found a decade later.) A couple of the women and men from the expedition followed Dolores the final 1,800 or so feet to the summit. They supposedly watched as she carved her initials, which would stay for more than a century, in the bluff – also called a “chimney” for its tall, thin appearance (later, before the lightning strikes, it was also referred to as “the smokestack”) – that gave the peak its final 90 feet of height. The women from the expedition were trying to get Dolores to either come with them or head back down the mountain. The men wanted their women to come back to their pack so they could keep heading west.

Dolores shook free from the grip of a woman, went to the edge of the mountain and cursed Pete Lackey. She cursed him until the men from the expedition blushed, talking about the lack of his real manhood physically, and then mentally, for not marrying her.

She either fell (the version Cobbler's Nook officials espoused), jumped or was pushed by one of the men, who wanted to get back with the other settlers before the cold wind that had developed turned to rain. So Dolores “Peach” Cobbler took the plunge in honor of never taking the plunge – the walk down the aisle – landing on a rock shelf. A good part of her had to be removed with a shovel. “Peach Cobbler everywhere,” was how a great-uncle phrased it to me.

That was the end of Dolores Cobbler.

But it was the beginning of Cobbler's Nook.

The town literally lies in the shadow of the mountain, in what is called a 14-mile wide

“valley,” though it is nearly (another point of contention) the same elevation as Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo, other Front Range communities. Romantics and other dreamers perceive the valley as being “hugged” by the mountain because two lines of narrow foothills run northeast (on the north side of the valley) and southwest (south side). The northern “arm” runs long and straight, and at the end, rock formations on a bluff really do appear to be a sort of hand. However, the south “arm” is just barely half as long as the north arm, sort of a battlefield amputation at the forearm, the hill suddenly ending.

The town was incorporated in 1896 and experienced minor growth for decades, the threat of becoming a bedroom community to the bigger towns north and south always looming. In the 1950s, with military bases springing up to the north and south, developers built single family homes, which attracted enlisted men and junior officers who wanted to buy a home but couldn't afford the more costly houses in Colorado Springs to the north and Pueblo to the south. More homes were built when junior engineers, employed by the aerospace industry in Colorado Springs, wanted to buy an affordable house and didn't mind the commute – that's how my parents ended up here in 1958.

Growth of the city was at a crawl during my childhood. With no main pass cutting through to the mountain towns (such passes existed only to the north and south), tourism was mainly for the name of the town itself. And each year during “Cobbler's Days” in July, a steady stream of tourists came to sample cobbler, tell stories, buy Cobbler's Nook T-shirts and caps, watch a parade, read poetry and attend a carnival. When I was in fifth or sixth grade, a long lost descendent, a grandson of Emily Peterson-Cobbler (who did get hitched, was made honest, and moved to California) came back to town.

Glenn Cobbler-Johnson (guys in bars are still having fun with that one) brought a lawyer, called a press conference and was planning to sue for licensing royalties for everything sold bearing his great-grandmother's name, though, he announced, he was open to settlement offers.

None was forthcoming, and when he finally sued for \$10 million, the city rallied and counter-sued, winning when he didn't show up for the trial. Everyone thought that was the last we'd hear of the Cobbler family.

But in my senior year of high school, Cobbler's Peak made national news, several times, over the course of a particularly slow news month. First, lightning struck at least twice over the course of several days of storms at the peak, knocking an incredible 78 feet off the 90-foot rock bluff

“chimney.” Geologists would point out in the week that followed that the bluff was so badly fractured near its base that “Mother Nature just chose this week to do her dirty work” in removing the bluff to a paltry 12 feet, hardly visible from the town or the interstate, even with binoculars. (“The so-called ‘Chimney,’” proclaimed a Colorado Springs radio personality, “is down to just a fireplace.”)

The U.S. Geographical Survey moved to lower the official height of the peak. That 78 feet proved crucial, as Cobbler’s Peak dropped out of the top 50 highest peaks in the United States – a somewhat faint claim to fame that made the city’s official literature distributed to businesses who endlessly flirted (but up to that point, at least, never took the plunge) with Cobbler’s Nook as far as locating a business here, outdated. Cobbler’s Nook officials also felt being dropped from the top 50 would end their long, so far unsuccessful bid to get the peak declared a national park, national monument or at the very least, a state historical site, something they saw as critical to increase tourist flow not to mention a vaster display in atlases and on state maps. Worst than being the 61st highest peak in the U.S., Cobbler’s Peak was now behind the state’s most visited Front Range mountain, Pikes Peak, which at 14,110 feet ranked 58th nationally, a number unimpressive until Cobbler’s Peak slid three spots behind it. “F-ing Pikes Peak” was how it was always referred to when I heard the Colorado Springs-mountain area mentioned.

Thinking the mountain designation was more important than it perhaps was, the city’s leaders fought tooth and nail for those 25 feet needed to pass Pikes Peak by a foot. Scientists and geologists from state universities were consulted on what it would take to rebuild the rock. Talk even extended to removing part of the “hand” from the north arm and taking it, by helicopter, to the top. But the people who made decisions about which mountains were the highest would have none of it (the Colorado Springs and Denver media had a field day with that, calling it, among other things, the “First Brain Transplant” in which “a part of the hand is sacrificed”). At a press conference, the U.S. Geologists announced that as of 1982, the mountain would drop out of the top 50, all the way to number 61 among American mountains. And, to perhaps spite the town officials for the negative publicity (and threatening letters, almost all of them with Cobbler’s Nook postmarks) they had attracted, they would monitor the remaining structure to see if the height would have to be dropped further, as what little was left of the “chimney” was fractured and unstable. News reports noted something else: Cobbler’s Peak was only 38 feet from dropping out of the top 50 peaks in the lowly contiguous 48 states – though reporters didn’t

mention that losing anything more than 12 feet was quite unlikely – further irritating town officials.

That wasn't the first run-in Cobbler's Nook had, as a town, with the government. Decades earlier, Cobbler's Nook bore the government's wrath over the altitude of the city. Denver already had "Mile High City" distinction, but even the Cobbler's Nook town officials back then thought they saw a marketing opportunity to piggyback onto Denver. Cobbler's Nook had been listed at 5,291 feet, but that was pared down to 5,277 feet – a crucial three feet less than a mile (which is 5,280 feet), all that kept Cobbler's Nook from mile-high status, and it gave the town officials a fit. They lobbied and even begged for those 36 inches, hoping to be "Denver South" or some sort of "Mile High Sibling" to Denver for tourism and economic development promotion. Yet the surveyors not only balked, they took offense at the little town's spirited defense of its "height." Cobbler's Nook officials finally threw in the towel after getting pummeled publicly by the Denver and Colorado Springs newspapers ("Southern Colorado Town has Short-Man's Syndrome" and "Yard Work in Cobbler's Nook: Pair of feet plus one needed to ride Denver's Mile-High coattails"). The town decided just to remove the word "Elevation" from the city limit signs north and south of town on the interstate, but when the state got word, the Colorado Department of Transportation decreed that for "safety reasons all incorporated towns and cities must list elevation on signs denoting city limits." While "thin air" was listed as the "health concern" behind listing elevation, Cobbler's Nook was again taken to task statewide for "civic hot air."

No matter how many mountains the "Nookians" (coined by a Colorado Springs newspaper columnist) climbed, no matter how many hoops they jumped through, the town was and always would be: 5,277 feet above sea level.

But the lightning strike that took away the mountain's lofty (some said exaggerated) "status" wasn't insurmountable in terms of public relations because good fortune smiled on Cobbler's Nook that day at the press conference to announce that the top 50 Highest Peaks in the United States list would no longer include Cobbler's Peak. A woman wearing sandals, a long, frayed burlap skirt, no makeup and a long ponytail went to the podium. The mayor grabbed her arm, she whispered something in his ear, and he backed up.

"I'm Amber Mosely-Cobbler," she said. "I've come with a group of my friends from the desert of southern Arizona. I want to honor my great-great-grandmamma."

She was, she explained, the great-granddaughter of Dolores' first child. She provided, much to the chagrin of the local media, no details of what she knew about either her grandmother or great-grandmother. She was dubbed "Lola Granola, the Nookian Princess" by a Colorado Springs radio talk show host. To honor "Peach" Cobbler, she planned to put a "hemp" plant on the mountain. No one back then – or at least in our area – knew what hemp was.

That is until she was halfway up the mountain. Once informed, the mayor sent a detachment of climbers to "formally withdraw" city support for the climb. Amber Mosely-Cobbler and her clan of three hippies decided they would not turn back after a lengthy discussion and prodding from the mayor's climbers (a city planner, a councilman and the city weed superintendent – the Colorado Springs newspaper noted the irony in the city's "weed guy" being sent after the "hemp clan") to end her bid to plant hemp.

Our photographer and reporter stayed with the group, as did a local TV station. We were a tiny TV market, yet we had a local network affiliate. Since we were 108th in market size, we got mostly just-out-of-college aspiring broadcasters, which made the evening news a nightly blooper show – and we all watched, of course.

The wind was blowing by the time the now-shortened expedition reached the summit (there was now a clear path, and while tiring, the climb had been done by thousands ranging in age from 6 to 86). Though they started at 4 a.m., by the time they reached the peak, it was nearing darkness. And the "expedition" had thinned considerably. The TV crew had turned around 1,800 feet from the summit, something the reporter and photographer told "Nightline" two nights later that they would "regret the rest of their careers" which, honestly, were only a month or two old at that point. The newspaper's photographer gave it up 1,500 feet from the summit, the weather threatening like it hadn't in weeks.

Bless their hearts, the small group of hippies and the local reporter made it to the summit. After standing on a pile of the recently lightning-stricken rocks to have her picture taken alongside her great-grandmother's initials (which had survived the rockslide, being only five feet up on the bluff – it was more remarkable that it had survived attempts by vandals to "erase" her signature through the decades), Amber Mosley-Cobbler had to dig for 30 minutes (the ground was hard and cold) to the closest spot that she thought marked her "great-grandmamma's" plunge to death.

She said something about "reintroducing hemp to its natural breeding area" and talked about

the contribution her great-grandmother had made to “this town of Cobbler’s Nook, where the people, while well meaning, are very misguided in their abandonment of socialist values to continue their search for the almighty dollar,” according to our reporter’s story, which would win every journalistic award available at the end of the year, except the Pulitzer. (“Lacked detail on subject’s background, and history behind Dolores Cobbler,” the judges had written.)

With hopes that the little plant would “do all it can to fight off what possibly drove her great-grandmamma to her death” (which I thought, reading the story in later years on microfiche, was the best line in the whole story), Mosely-Cobbler went to stand behind the plant to have her picture taken by a guy in her group who was, it turned out, her boyfriend. She took one step back too many and started to teeter on the edge. Her boyfriend put down the camera, went rushing toward her – just as she regained her balance – and slipped in the dirt, knocking her over the edge. Distraught, he jumped to join/save her. Both died (the Colorado Springs’ newspaper had a field day, including the next morning’s headline: “Mothership calls Nookian namesake home” while a Denver newspaper swung mightily and missed with, “Hemp today, gone tomorrow”).

Her lost life, and that of her boyfriend’s, probably saved several others. The other two from her clan, plus our reporter, hadn’t thought this climb out too clearly, and would’ve had to descend in the dark had Amber Mosely-Cobbler not fallen a very mother-like thousand plus feet, catching our photographer’s attention enough to make him rush down the mountain and alert search and rescue. The shivering survivors, including the reporter, were plucked off the mountain at 1:30 a.m., several thousand feet from the summit in a clearing where, ironically, artifacts from the Mormon expedition had been found about a century earlier.

What started as a nightmare for the PR conscious Cobbler’s Nook town officials turned into an economic bonanza – the kind of story the press dreams about, but only happens occasionally. The media came, en force, and minivans from NBC and ABC, among a dozen of others, dotted the base of the mountain. The story, some of it almost accurate, was broadcast nationwide. My favorite was on a Denver station, which broadcast an “artist’s rendition” of both Dolores “Peach” Cobbler’s plunge and Amber’s. We still have that broadcast on Beta at my mother’s house.

One of those watching, reading or listening a time zone away was Gill Bates, founder and CEO of “SunWest Systems,” one of the world’s dominant forces in computer software. He saw the story, called and asked the city about tax breaks, liked what he heard and built his first non-Pacific Northwest branch in Cobbler’s Nook. The company that liked to think of itself as

SunWest's major competitor, "Aragog Computers," followed suit and built a branch factory/office. The town experienced growth like never before. More than 8,000 jobs were offered almost right away, with thousands more to follow. The county, as part of the deal to lure SunWest – and I suppose, Aragog – took our dirt strip "county" airport and added runways for private airplanes and commercial jets. A motion was made and passed to annex the land just east of Interstate 25 so that the airport could be part of the town.

At the time of most of this growth, I was in college. But I knew Cobbler's Nook had "arrived" when Wal-Mart planted a Super Center by the interstate. My friends, both in college and at my newspaper jobs before I moved back "home" (to a place that had become something I'd never known), always wanted Cobbler's Nook T-shirts. Instead of buying one in "Old Town" from "Charlene's Americana Nook" for \$19.99, I bought three for \$12 at Wal-Mart during Christmas vacation of my senior year in college.

Other businesses came. The town's population exploded, going from just under 15,000 in 1970 to 84,000 by the year 2000, drawing feature stories from Newsweek and a mention in Time about "The Expanding Frontier".

This was the town I returned to, 15 years after graduating high school. It was a town I was born in, raised in; yet a place I barely knew, hardly recognized when I returned. Street signs sprouted where flowers once had, and pavement lined the one-time sleepy, out-of-the way dirt roads. Homes and businesses were everywhere. I missed the small town feel on one hand, but on the other, I appreciated the chance to "move up" from the small daily newspaper I had worked at, to be editor at my "hometown" newspaper. And to meet whom I thought was the woman of my dreams.

2

Janet's beauty lit up a room. Especially the weight room at C-Nook Fitness. I met the woman who would become my wife as she looked for 15-pound dumbbells, while I held onto 70-pound dumbbells, barely able to breathe, unable to speak, waiting for her to move, the pressure pulling me down – gravity plus 140 pounds – suffocating on every level.

At the time I didn't realize that when our relationship came full circle, I'd feel that exact same sensation.

She had an edge to her, and she kept promising me she was going to quit smoking – though I should point out that it was 18 months into our relationship when I finally figured out that, yes, she really did smoke. She was wound pretty tight most of the time, but that made the sex even better. She was passionate about everything she did.

Her love life before we met had been much more eventful than mine, which for me included dating a girl from my hometown off and on for three years of college. Janet, however, had lived with a model, a guy from Italy who had moved in with her hours after he had gotten off the boat that had brought him to America. He stole from her, even taking her furniture from the apartment she had in Chicago. Another boyfriend drained their joint-savings/checking account, which left her flat broke the day before rent was due. The guy had moved onto another woman, a former co-worker of Janet's, and had broken both of the woman's arms one night a year later, which put him in jail for two years.

But all of that was behind her. She wasn't all that much better for the emotional wear, but she had seemed to put it behind her.

On the day of our wedding, she was more spectacular than ever before. Tiny-waisted, relatively long-legged for a woman 5-foot-7, and in near perfect shape. One of my two best men, Ralph, told me I did “good, for marrying way out of your league.” My other best man, the usually shy and reserved Gene called her “a looker,” which caught me a bit off guard. (I wanted to ask Gene, “Who in the hell says ‘looker’ any more?” Well, I guess, a guy named Gene says it, that's who.) My sister, maybe 50 pounds overweight, said Janet was “a waif; don't you ever feed her?” But the only important thing to me was that I was marrying the woman I felt I truly loved, or at least could some day once our communication problems – don't all young couples have these? – were resolved.

Amid a sterile, religious smell, while an equally sterile, religious organ played “Here comes the bride,” her brother walked her down the aisle. Her father had passed away after a heart attack a day after we met, an ominous signal neither one of us noted – at least not at that time.

I looked at her big blue eyes and long eyelashes. She had on makeup, but I always thought she looked even better without it. Her teeth were bright white, the two capped ones in front slightly off center, but no one outside of her family knew about the caps because they'd happened when she fell off her bike in high school.

“Cost me prom queen that year,” she had joked in telling me the story.

As I looked into those eyes, I saw blue like you'd see on a globe. Deep oceans of blue that would eventually fill my lungs with water, forcing me to choose to get out, or tread water before I drowned.

I didn't know that then.

For all I knew, our world was going to be as perfect as perfect could be. We were more than compatible physically. Though she wasn't into sports and I wasn't into art like she was, we'd find a way to grow together, to grow old together.

"Until death do us part," we said, one after the other.

I didn't know that the death of the love would signal the parting, or that it would take me a long time to figure out what I'd done to kill a good part of that love. Of course, while the relationship had grown in the years that followed our honeymoon to one without much more than a sexual pulse in the final year, I was still content, more or less. She, I would find out, was more "less" than content than I thought, or maybe I just chose to ignore the warning signs.

Still, I had always fully expected to be married to Mrs. Janet Lambert for the rest of my life. There was that little debate about her taking my name – I was neither for it nor against it – but she felt like she didn't want any confusion, mostly with phone calls to the house, that we were "living in sin," or worse, that she was my housekeeper.

The first two years of marriage were better than the last two years of dating. Janet was there every night, and just about every day we made time for lunch. When she was between jobs, as she was frequently in the first six years of our relationship/marriage, she was around even more, and we'd meet for lunch...and stuff. We made love almost every night, her waking up when I got home from work, and a couple of times during the week we'd go at it during the daytime, which always put me in a good mood even though I'd have to go to work afterwards.

We bought our first house a year into our marriage. She had finally settled into a job that (I thought) she'd be happy in for a while. We had emptied my savings and dipped into my 401k for a large down payment so our mortgage was actually a hundred bucks cheaper than what we'd paid in rent for our apartment.

So I was happy. And, from what I could tell, so was Janet.

My job, sports editor at a medium-sized, non-metropolitan daily newspaper, kept me away, probably too much. I worked from 2 p.m. until well after midnight, though Janet and I either worked out together on our lunch hours or went out to eat. We also had dinner at our house

almost every night, no matter how hectic it got at my office, at least at first. She worked 8 to 5, so our schedules weren't ideal. My job was stressful; the deadlines, constant complaints from the public who thought High School A got more coverage than High School B, and that certain kids were getting more ink than other kids, who, their parents would tell me, deserved it more than the other kids.

Janet knew I was discontented at work. I even pondered making a go of it as a free-lance writer. I had started writing a book on the side. Many of the writers I knew from bigger newspapers picked up a lot of money doing magazine pieces on the side. If enough free-lance jobs could be strung together with some regularity, I figured I could probably make a go at it as a full-time writer. That was the part of my newspaper job that I liked the most – writing – so doing it full-time spurred my enthusiasm. Though we talked about it on several occasions, Janet pointed out that the money I was making at the paper, despite the hours, was pretty good.

“Maybe in a couple of years?” she asked in a way that sounded more like a suggestion.

I agreed because the stability of the paycheck was steady and reliable.

We struck out having kids at first. She thought it was me, and that I should get checked out. She had, after all, been off the pill for more than two years, and we hadn't had any luck. But I checked out fine, so she went in to get checked.

Without getting too specific, the doctor crushed her – us, really – with the news that she probably wouldn't have kids. There was a problem with her fallopian tubes, and the doctor recommended that we look into adoption. We talked about that, and even looked up a few services, but we never made any calls. In a way, I was relieved. I did want children, but didn't want the child to be raised by daycare. Regardless, there was a distance between Janet and me. Maybe there had already been a little distance, and this just widened the gap.

About a year after being told she'd never get pregnant, she was sick morning after morning for almost two weeks. She was also late for her period, which in all honesty didn't really send up a red flag because we'd been told we were, at least biologically, “child-proof.”

The phone rang at 6:45 p.m. one night at work.

“You need to come home,” she said.

I had missed dinner that night, which always irritated her though it probably happened only once or twice a week. It happened more frequently on Saturdays – I had only Sunday and Monday, or Monday and Tuesday, off – because the rest of the days were full of stories to cover

and the Sunday sports section to put together.

But the tone in her voice sounded urgent, and since she provided no details before hanging up, I rushed home.

She jumped into my arms at the door and buried her face in my neck, breathing hard. She felt warm.

“You’re going to have a baby!” she exclaimed.

I think she meant, “You’re going to be a Daddy” or “We’re going to have a baby.” At the time, I gave nothing more than a passing thought to it, though later, I’d view it as subconscious knowledge of the reality the course of our lives would take.

We both cried that night, wondering if it was going to be a boy or girl, grateful that against the odds we were going to be able to realize what – at least for one brief moment in our relationship – had been our biggest goal, bringing a child into this world to love with everything we had.

The pregnancy was the most exciting thing I had ever experienced. Work was starting to become a bigger problem because Janet needed me more, and I needed to be there more. I would sneak away from work as much as I could. My boss liked me and respected my work – I had a wall full of writing awards, which the paper’s brass treasured far more than I did – so I was given a little slack. But soon the comments started coming, as I was gone more and more when I was supposed to be working. She had to give up smoking – a habit of hers that had always repulsed me – and while that gave her, and our child a better opportunity to be healthy, it certainly took her intensity to a whole new level as nicotine withdrawal, or whatever it was that kept her on edge, played out daily like a frenzied firework display!

My hours were still lousy at work. She cut back to part-time. I thought that would improve her mood, but any freedom she gained was overwhelmed by the feelings of loneliness she experienced staying home. We persevered and did the best we could with what we had, though in looking back surely I could, should, and would have done much better. Yet I didn’t miss a doctor’s visit, and when we first heard the beating heart and saw the ultrasound of the nearly thumb-sized baby, I was out of my mind with joy.

The labor wasn’t easy – for either of us – but, of course, it was much harder on Janet. The labor went on for 16 hours on a Friday. It was gut wrenching for Janet. She swore like a sailor – the nurses told me that was somewhat normal, and I could even expect her to conjure up the

names of some old boyfriends, most likely even the guy to whom she lost her virginity.

“That’s good to know,” I told Judy, a short, stocky nurse who had obviously witnessed dozens, if not hundreds, of labors and clearly knew what she was talking about.

“Just be prepared,” the nurse had told me. “It could get ugly.”

I was fine. Janet did jerk me by the neck during a particularly painful contraction. When she called to the doctor to “give me the goddamn epidural or I’m going to that window and jumping,” the doctor laughed. I sort of smiled, you know, just to be the doctor’s friend and fit into the moment. Janet was unmoved, and grabbed my shirt, yanking me to her face.

“You should be the one going through this!” she said, our faces inches apart and her spit washing my face. “YOU’RE the one who did this to me!”

I didn’t smile anymore that evening, at least not until 11 p.m. She finally dilated to where she needed to be, and the doctor gave her an epidural.

She was ready to bring our son into the world. Despite saying “fuck” probably more times than we had done that particular act, despite the screaming, despite the long labor, Janet pushed when the doctor told her to, and things were looking good.

For a minute.

The heart monitor that they had put on her for the baby had stopped beating as frequently as it had been.

“Everybody out!” the delivery doctor, Loren Ward, called out, loud enough to get everyone’s attention but not enough to be heard down the hall. “Bring in...”

He rattled off some names, some titles, some equipment, but it became a blur to me then. The only thing that registered clearly was the number on the heart monitor, which read 60, this after being up around 100 only minutes earlier.

I didn’t know if I was supposed to go, and frankly, I didn’t want to, this was when my wife and child needed me more than ever. Nurse Judy calmly pulled me aside and guided me to a chair in the room near the window, a good 10 feet from the action.

“Just sit down,” she said.

People filed out of the room. Others filed in. The pediatrician we had picked out, Dr. Fabian, was already on the floor and came into the room. Fabian and Ward talked in short sentences, fragments that meant nothing to me. But by the tone of Fabian’s voice, I could tell it wasn’t good. A couple of nurses in full surgical gear came in. Another nurse, who had been there from

the start, left.

“But,” I pleaded to Nurse Judy, “is the baby...”

“Dr. Ward is the best. His bedside manner needs some work, and yes, that IS chewing tobacco in his mouth,” she said. “But if anyone can pull your baby through this, he’s the one. Just sit over here and be quiet. Don’t talk to your wife unless the doctor tells you to.”

“Can I tell her I love her?” I asked.

She smiled, which I took as a yes.

“I love you Janet!” I called out.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, fuck, fuck,” she said, squirming, as tears ran down her cheeks. I wished somehow that we could trade places at that moment, no matter if it did mean ripping open a pothole sized escape hatch between my legs. Ward looked at me and motioned for me to sit down, which I did.

He never put on a mask or gloves. Ward explained to Dr. Fabian in a whisper that the baby’s cord was around our baby’s neck not once, not twice but three times.

“Gonna be a little sticky here for a sec, Janet,” he told her. “Just work with me now. Come on.”

“Fuck, fuck, oh my God, take this out of me now!” she cried out.

“Stop pushin’!” he said, raising his voice to her for the first time.

Dr. Fabian gasped and covered his mouth. He brushed the side of his brow with one hand, and then squatted down near Ward. Neither said a word.

I felt so helpless. I thought about my child, and what that little being of life must be feeling at that moment.

“Come on, champ,” I whispered my hands together in prayer, “you’ve got two parents who are going to love you with everything they have. You can do it, little one.”

I talked to God, and made some deals – some that I knew I could follow through on, but some that might be a little harder to fulfill. In crisis, God is always 9-1-1.

“Hang in there, Janet. Gimme about 20 seconds, and we’ll be on the right road again,” Ward said calmly to her. I wanted to know what was going on. But the people who were the experts at this kind of thing were doing their best. All I could do was hope, and pray.

I looked at the heart monitor – 40 beats a minute.

A nurse gasped. Dr. Ward never flinched.

“Here we go now,” he said. There was a pause, and he squinted, leaning forward as though he was exerting himself both physically and mentally. Nurse Judy sighed in relief and placed her hand over her chest.

“Done,” Ward said. “All right now, Janet, I think we’re going to be okay here, if you’d just start pushin’ again when I tell you to.”

She pushed. Screamed.

Nurse Judy came over to me and pointed at the monitor. It was at 110.

“Cord around the neck,” she said. “I’ve seen them have it around their necks once several times, twice a few times, but this is the first time I’ve seen it three times. Thank God you had Dr. Ward.”

I would add that to the growing list of things to thank God for.

“Come on over here, Bud,” Ward said to me, as coolly as a guy in a bar saddling up for a cold beer of the same name.

I looked at Janet, who looked like everything but her body had left the room. Her eyes were closed, and she started thrashing to each side of the pillow. I felt so sorry for her, yet so proud of her. Birth is a miracle, which makes mommy’s miracle workers. I moved toward her to hold her hand, tell her I loved her – let her yell at me, whatever was needed. But Dr. Ward raised his hand a little, which told me to stop.

“Look what we have here,” he said, working his hands between my wife’s legs. I had never seen so much blood and other stuff in my life. I was now more worried than ever, both for my wife and my child.

I put my hand over my heart. It was beating fast enough for all of us.

“That’s normal,” Ward said, anticipating my thoughts. “Actually, it’s pretty damn good, considerin’...”

He was so calm, so cool, so collected. He was bringing a life into this world, and he looked to not have a care in the world troubling him. I would have wanted this guy on my side at the O.K. Corral. He had ice water in his veins, was wearing cowboy boots and jeans in fact, and had the sharp smell of Copenhagen on his breath.

He reached actually inside her with his fingers and pulled out this tiny red and wrinkled mass of life, with more hair than I probably had at that moment.

“Someone here order a little guy?” he asked, smiling as he held the baby up. My son started

to cry right away, and Dr. Ward smiled as he handed the baby to Dr. Fabian, who was wearing gloves, unlike Dr. Ward, who really was a cowboy, in all the right ways. Dr. Fabian and a nurse cleaned the little howling guy off with moist rags.

Dr. Fabian held our son and guessed his weight, laughing with two nurses. “I’m saying 5 pounds, 10 ounces,” he said. When he set him on the scale, he was right on the beak.

“Five pounds, 10 ounces,” a nurse called out, as Dr. Fabian smiled.

“That’s two in a row, right on the beak,” Fabian called.

This guy might well be a good pediatrician, I thought, but I’m glad he was in the peanut gallery for the delivery.

Janet was drenched in sweat. The tears were all over her face, but no longer in her eyes. She was still breathing heavy, “Labored breathing,” Nurse Judy noted in case there was any doubt.

Janet’s eyes came open.

“What’s he look like, Bob?” she asked.

Our son. What does he look like? He looks alive, I thought. I looked over at him. He looked beautiful.

“He’s amazing,” I said.

“No, no, what’s he look like?” she asked, almost pleaded.

I looked at him, and his hair was straight up, like a Mohawk.

“Well, to be honest, right now he sort of looks like a little duck,” I said, and everyone – well, almost everyone – laughed.

“You can do better than that,” Janet said, a bit agitated.

“He looks like you,” I said. “He’s beautiful and healthy and happy but probably wondering where he is.”

Fabian brought the baby over, but Dr. Ward glanced at him, stopping him in his tracks.

“Just let her have a look,” he said.

Fabian, rather than set him down, just sort of held him there for Janet to look at.

“He’s ours,” she said, and then laid her head back down. She was spent beyond belief, and Dr. Ward clearly knew that, which was why he didn’t let Dr. Fabian give Janet the baby to hold.

Janet and I had decided in advance that if it were a girl, she’d get to name it, and I’d get to pick the middle name. Since it was a boy, I had the honors. I did have an approved list from her, one of which was especially close to my heart.

“How about Garrett?” I said to Janet before leaving.

“Garrett Paul Lambert,” she said, and again laid back. She had been a trooper in every sense of the word. Paul was her father’s name. Garrett came from my college adviser, Garrett McCombs, a man who had gotten me through college and become a father figure to me. Janet had liked that name and might’ve even picked it on her own.

“Hey, Janet, I love you,” I said. She was rolled over facing the other way, either in la-la land or fast on her way.

“Let’s give her a little break,” Dr. Ward said, motioning to me. “You can follow the nurses down the hall with your little guy, Partner.”

Partner. That was cool. And fitting. The red, wrinkly skin, Dr. Ward told me was because she had carried the child a couple of weeks too long, which wasn’t uncommon, especially since we weren’t sure when we had conceived.

“Thank you, Doc Ward,” I said. He really was more “doc” than “doctor.” It sounded cool. I felt cool saying it. Really, I didn’t know what else to say. I’d offer to buy him a beer, but that would be out of line. I’d offer to buy him a container (can? pouch? jar?) of Copenhagen (Ralph had been among those who “chewed”), but that would’ve wrecked the moment. He rinsed his hands with a cleaning solution and then flipped the towel he used to dry them into a bin on the way out of the delivery room.

He smiled at me.

“I mean, that was awesome, the way you handled all that,” I said. “Three times – the cord, I mean. And you, well, you did it!”

“Ain’t my first rodeo,” said the cowboy doctor.

“I’d say your little guy’s gonna be just fine – cord didn’t slow his breathin’ for more than a minute or two, but, yeah, I reckon it’d have wiped him out in another couple of minutes. But he’s a fighter. Cords get tangled, that happens. You just untangle ’em. Besides,” he said, grinning so wide that I could see bits of tobacco stuck between his bottom teeth, “I’ll just add it to your bill. Now I led this little horse to water, but you gotta get him to drink. Comprende?”

Nurse Judy attended to Janet. I looked back in the room and saw them shoveling hunks of red things – I hoped it wasn’t her uterus, a lung, her liver, or anything abnormal – into huge bins, which had blood splatters everywhere. No matter what happened, my wife had sacrificed part of her body, her soul, for our son and me. I would never forget the courage she displayed to give

him life, and give my life meaning.

“She’s going to be fine, too – that’s cleanup stage, it’s SOP,” Dr. Ward said, perhaps the look on my face conveying my thoughts. “She’s a fighter.”

He was right on that account. And I shouldn’t be concerned about Standard Operating Procedure.

“Go to that window down there and spend some time with that boy of yours,” he said, patting me on the back. “He needs his Daddy.”

Daddy. That’s me! Daddy. I might be nothing else ever in this world. But I was, and always would be Daddy.

3

Man, Janet was a trooper. Delivery at almost midnight Friday night, home Sunday after we spent all Saturday making sure she was okay.

Fabian also circumcised Garrett, and I felt huge guilt as he squealed.

We’ll talk about this someday, little buddy, I thought, and we’ll go crazy at the toy store.

“Squealing,” Fabian told me, blotting blood and then bandaging my little guy’s little member, “is good.”

I’d be squealing too. I almost did watching. I went back and spent time with Janet. They wheeled little Garrett in, in a glass bed/box. He was peaceful and his color had gotten remarkably better.

“How about we go one more night, and you take him home tomorrow,” Fabian said, posing it more as a suggestion than a question.

“I’m not leaving my son in the hospital alone,” Janet said.

Fabian saw the resolve that I had long known her to have.

“Listen, he really is fine,” Fabian said. “It would just be best for him to stay one more night. I’m staying too. I have another baby on the way. So I can check him throughout the night. He’ll be fine, really.”

I packed up Janet and the nurses put her in a wheelchair to take her to the lobby. I took her home and got her into bed. She didn't like that, so I opened the sofa bed in the living room – the very bed we could well have conceived our child on as we waited for the arrival of the real bed we had ordered and was now upstairs in our bedroom. I put on a show she liked, got her some water – she wanted coffee, but the doctor had said to wait a day.

“I don't like him not being here,” she said, and I shared the same feelings. I wanted to go back to the hospital, but I wasn't about to leave her alone, not after what she had done to bring our child into this world.

Our neighbor, Cindy Slater, came by and started visiting with Janet, who was clearly cheered to have another fellow mother with her. They talked childbirth, and Janet started to look like her ol' self again.

“Hey, if you want to go...” she said. I grabbed my coat, pecked her on the lips, thanked Cindy, and headed to the hospital. I picked up a candy bar, bag of chips and a soda in the hospital cafeteria. I felt light-headed so I sat down for a minute. It was late in the evening, and people were there for a reason. Some were working. Others were there to visit loved ones, ones who, I gathered from the grim expressions on a couple of older women's faces, might not make it through the night. What an amazing place a hospital is: Where life begins, and ends. One elevator going up. One down. The pendulum swinging back and forth. Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

One man was talking to what appeared to be his brother. His wife was in “having a lump removed.” His hands were shaking incessantly as he gripped a cup of coffee. His friend or brother tried to comfort him. What do you say in this situation? What are the right words?

Another man came in, dotting at his eyes with a handkerchief. Two people, a man and woman, who I guessed were his children, while comforting him, were also crying, though much less pronounced than their father.

“We'll take care of all the arrangements, Daddy,” the woman said. “Momma's in a better place now.”

I walked out in the hall. There was a crowd coming one way, so I went the other, meaning I'd pass the emergency room to catch the “back” elevator up to neonatal care. Two guys and a woman in blue uniforms went running past me, stopping in front of a set of cabinets behind the ER desk. I saw them running in my direction in time and leaned my back against the wall, as if I was going to be searched.

And I realized that life is a search. A search for hope, a search for love, a search for happiness. We search for so many things we never need and forget about the searches that are worth our time.

My son would never search for love or support.

“Four cars on the interstate,” said the older man in what I deduced to be a flight suit. He held his walkie-talkie to his mouth. “We are en route, ETA 12 to 15 minutes if we can stay below the storm.”

He glanced at his watch, then back toward the other two.

“Helmets on first,” he said to his staff. “Expect turbulence.”

The other flight-crew members just nodded.

I hadn’t noticed storm clouds, only a soft trickle of rain. Here these men and this woman were going out to a car crash, flying there in storm clouds in a helicopter.

He turned and looked toward the other man and the woman, who grabbed a plastic case and black bag that I guess had medical supplies inside.

“Going to be a lot of blood,” the woman said. “Double fatality. Four more critical on the scene. They’re rolling Denver Flight for Life, too. It’s bad, really bad.”

The two men nodded. What meaningful work, to save lives. I remembered about a year, maybe 18 months earlier, a Flight For Life helicopter – one from this very hospital – had gone down in the foothills, a “sudden and ferocious cross-wind” blowing it into the side of a hill as the crew tried to rescue a hiker and his buddy, both of whom were drunk. One hiker had fallen 30 feet bending down to catch an unopened beer that had rolled downhill. He had fallen hard and had a serious head injury.

The entire Flight for Life crew died. Another helicopter from, I think, Denver or Pueblo, came in, and both of the irresponsible, reckless hikers lived. Our paper carried the memorial service for the crew on the front page, three full-color photos. All left behind kids, a fact that stuck in my mind.

I also remembered the first time I had ever been in this hospital – well, my first recollection, because I had been born here as well. Our doctor’s office wasn’t in the hospital, so I had only seen it from a distance as we drove by to get my throat looked at, a bruised wrist examined after getting hit in a baseball game by a pitch and so on. The first time I remember being at the hospital, I was 8.

My father, who had never smoked, had lung cancer. The last year of his life was hard to remember because he wasn't really himself. He weighed less than my petite mother when he died. He hadn't been around a lot, working himself to the bone but providing us with a good life. I don't think he and my mother were very close. I remember him leaving the house a lot, with voices raised. I'd go out in the hallway, wanting him to stay, and he would say that I fought with my sister all the time, and he didn't want to be there. Though my sister and I were constantly at each other, it hadn't been that bad lately, so I didn't know what he was talking about. Two nights later, he left again, for what seemed like forever, but was probably about two or three months.

"If you stay, I promise Patti and I won't fight," I said, fighting back tears.

He didn't say a word, and after he pulled open the door, I heard the heavy screen door slam. But he was still my dad.

His life had never been easy. He had served two tours in Vietnam. My main memories were playing ball with him when I was little – it's on home movies that I still occasionally watch, converted from eight millimeter to VHS, though without sound.

We had ridden the back elevator up that day, and as a third-grader, I demanded the right to hit the floor button number in the elevator. When we got to the room, my mother told me to say "goodbye" to my father. I tried to hold his hand but he had a spasm, pulling away so quickly it scared me. He started to gasp for air, and I was told to leave right away. I waved at the door, and said softly, "Goodbye, Dad." My sister was two floors up, having her spleen removed after a hard fall on her bike. She was discharged two days later, the day my father was buried. I remember feeling a lot of confusion, a lot of numbness but little else. I remember every single family in our neighborhood brought all kinds of food, hot dishes and cold sandwiches, cakes, pies and cookies, all of it stacked so high on the dining room table that it was over my head, and I was warned not to touch anything, lest the entire collection fall to the floor. I remember how warm it was in the church for the service. As it ended, several men wheeled the silver casket draped in an American flag, past me. I reached out and touched it.

"Please don't go, Daddy!" I pleaded, wrapping my arms around the coffin. "I'll be really good! I won't fight with Patti, I promise, if you don't go!"

People gasped, ladies cried, and an uncle grabbed me firmly, but not without love.

"Come on there, big fella," he whispered in my ear, holding me. I sobbed and kicked until I collapsed in tears, exhausted. My uncle held me until the church cleared out, with everyone

following the coffin out the door and to the cemetery for burial. My uncle talked briefly to my mother, where it was decided he'd take me in his car. He held my hand, and we never got close to the burial. I didn't want to say goodbye again. I was done with goodbye.

My father had given me life, but hadn't been a real part of my life. I carried that thought with me while I headed for the elevator on the day I became a father two decades, two weeks and two days after my father had died in the same building.

Garrett was sleeping peacefully as I sat in front of the window. The nurse wheeled a chair over, a really comfy desk chair, with armrests.

"Stay as long as you like," she said. "We have only one other baby tonight. No one will say anything."

There was a little girl – well, a very large little girl – in the nursery with Garrett. Dr. Fabian came by, and I thanked him, too.

"We were lucky to have Dr. Ward," Fabian said.

"Yeah, I know," I said, thanking him and standing to shake his hand.

"No, I mean really lucky," he said. "The other two who deliver babies are, well, they're very *competent*. But if you're going to go to war, and he did with that cord, you want Dr. Ward on your side. And, are you ready for this?"

I looked at him, brows raised, confused.

"Ward wasn't even supposed to be here," Fabian said. "The doctor on duty went home sick early in the evening. Garrett is going to be fine. Listen, any kid that overcomes what he did is going to be a real battler."

As I sat back down, he put his hand on the chair to stop the seat from rolling backward.

"Well, I guess someone upstairs was looking out for us," I said with a smile and shook Dr. Fabian's hand. "Hey, thanks again."

"Babies, each and every one a miracle," Dr. Fabian beamed.

I nodded. Especially this baby, I thought. Especially our baby.

Garrett sort of shook his head, opened his mouth, and then relaxed again. Through the glass, I saw everything I ever wanted in this world. A lump rose in my throat, and I blinked a second late as a trickle started from each eye.

“Hey, there, little guy,” I whispered. “I’m your Daddy. I haven’t been good at a ton of things in life. I almost got thrown out of high school for being ornery, and almost dropped out of college to join the Marines. But here I am, and here you are. I’m gonna be the best Daddy there ever was. You are going to have a lot of questions, and I’m going to have a lot of answers, or I’m going to do my best to find them out for us. I’m going to take you for walks when you come home. I’m going to push you on the swings. Then I’m going to throw you your first pitch. I’m going to help with your schoolwork because learning is important. We’re going to watch Tweety and Sylvester, and Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner, but I probably won’t be able to tell you why he never catches Roadrunner. But most of all, Garrett, Daddy is going to love you.”

Sunday evening, I brought Garrett home. His mother held him and rocked him, but beckoned me before I had enough time to get his crib readied for him. Regardless, I went back and took him in my arms. I knew this little guy and I were really going to get to know each other well.

I had planned to take my two weeks vacation from work, though my boss had been reluctant because it was an especially busy time, with high school football and volleyball playoffs in full swing.

Janet was back at work Monday morning. And then out for a beer Monday night. That irritated me a little, but after what she’d been through Friday night, I wasn’t about to say a word, even when she came home a little buzzed at midnight, reeking of beer and cigarettes. She showered and changed though, and came to lay on our bed with our baby.

His eyes had opened, and they were brown like mine, but they were very large, like his mother’s beautiful eyes. He had my nose, and her wide, full lips and her sculpted chin. He had my ears, sticking out a bit, but, hey, that wasn’t something he’d ever have to fight over.

“He really is something, isn’t he,” she said yawning.

I was feeding him, and she offered to help out. But I felt funny about that, since she had been drinking, so I said that I’d finish, that he was almost done. He had already wet his diaper, I told her, and I wanted to save it.

“You can,” she said, “until tomorrow. Then it’s in the trash. Don’t worry, there will be more.”

I put Garrett into his crib and we stood over him, gasping in awe at his little breaths, propping up his head gently on the small pillow as Dr. Fabian had instructed us.

Janet went to bed, and I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. By the time I came back in, she was asleep. That was good. I lay down next to her, and talked to God about the deals I had made in the hospital, how I really would follow through since He kept up His end of the deal, and then I faded off to sleep. Every time Garrett made a noise I jumped and peered in at him. Even when he didn't make a noise, I'd pop up just to make sure he was breathing because I couldn't always hear him. And I had heard so many horror stories about sudden infant death and everything else on the news and in magazines that I was a little paranoid.

I was awake holding him when Janet got up. She came over, kissed him on the top of his head and then kissed me on the neck.

"I can already tell," she said, "that you are going to be a doting dad."

I watched her get dressed for work and I was more than a little turned on – and felt guilty for it, holding our son. Then again, that sort of feeling is what created the little guy. Janet had stayed in fantastic shape throughout the pregnancy, so much so that our doctor had told her it was okay, normal, even expected to put on more than the 28 pounds she had gained. But she had stayed on the stair-stepper until the eighth month, though she said "going for 20 minutes on level 1 after going an hour on level 10" made her feel like all the hard work staying in shape through the years had been for naught. I told her she looked gorgeous – and she did. A guy at her work told me it was funny because he couldn't tell she was pregnant until she'd turn to the side; from the back she still looked fabulous. I didn't thank him at the time because I felt like punching him in the nose. But he was right; she looked like a million bucks. The pregnancy did seem to annoy her a bit, and she wasn't exactly radiant. But I wasn't looking for storybook, just a healthy child and wife.

As she left for work, she said, "Take good care of our son. I'll see my two guys at lunch time – about 11:30 if I don't get hung up at the office."

"I love you!" I called out as she went down the stairs, the slam of the screen door that I was ready to rip off its hinges indicating she hadn't heard me or was deep in thought.

A kiss, "I love you" or a nuzzling hug would have been sweet, but I had my little prince in my arms. I was sleep deprived but very happy and my wife was beautiful.

And back at work. It seemed odd, but come on, I told myself, we had set this up where I'd stay home before he was ready for daycare, at least two weeks.

Maybe it was the exhaustion, but I felt like his mother had walked out that morning in more

ways than just going to work. Garrett rustled in my arms.

“Another wet diaper!” I said, turning him around and holding him up to my face. “Good boy!”

Two hundred. A two and two zeroes, flashing in red on the scale, like a red flag on the back of an overloaded 18-wheeler, attached to a sign cautioning, “WIDE LOAD.”

“Scale off a bit?” I asked a gym worker after the reading shocked me. I hadn’t weighed myself in a few months. But when Garrett was born, I was maybe 175, about 15 pounds above my ideal weight.

“What do you mean?” the gym worker asked.

“Well, it just seems about 25 pounds heavier than I remember,” I said.

The young man with rippling arms, two earrings (one in his ear, the other in his eyebrow) sized me up.

“Dude,” he said, “it might just be you who is 25 pounds heavier. I was five pounds *light* on that scale today.”

Note to self: Find a new gym.

The cold spell wasn’t completely over yet, so I was still wearing the heavy sweaters to work. At home, I was in sweats and a sweatshirt, mostly because it was comfortable, but also because it was easy to clean after feeding my son, so I hadn’t noticed my clothes getting tighter.

But 200 pounds? That day I had planned to lift some weights, get a little circulation going, and then head home. Instead, I headed to the treadmill. Four miles was the goal. It would take about 35 minutes, and then I’d go home.

Except I couldn’t go that fast on the treadmill, not if I hoped to go half a mile, much less four miles. I cranked it down to 6 miles per hour, then to 5.2 miles an hour. By the time I did four miles, I had soaked through my T-shirt and my sweatshirt. I could barely stand. I shut off the treadmill and stood for a moment.

My “friend” the gym worker came over.

“Hey, dude, I didn’t mean anything by that comment earlier,” said this guy, whose name I didn’t know, and, honestly, didn’t care enough to find out.

“No problem,” I said. “I just...I just don’t know how it happened.”

“What’s your goal?” he asked.

I wanted to tell him that I wanted to be able to button the top button on my Dockers and jeans, or that I didn't want to look like I'd just climbed Everest after four miles on the treadmill.

"I want to lose about 25 pounds," I said, before clarifying. "Actually, 25 pounds ago, I wanted to lose 15 pounds. So, I guess, 40 pounds is the whole goal."

"That's 160," he said. Not only did this guy look like he had zero body fat, he could add.

"I'm 160," he said.

We were about the same height, I noticed, even though the arm of the treadmill was the only thing keeping me upright.

He motioned toward the treadmill.

"You're done?" he asked.

"Well, I can't lose it all in one day," I said.

He smiled and laughed. A tongue piercing, too. Take away this guy's jewelry and he's probably 155 pounds, I thought.

"No, what I mean is, if you're going to run that much – and if you haven't been running in a while – you probably should walk a while to cool down," he said. "Might be easier on your joints. Carrying all that extra weight..."

Mr. "All That" as he was likely viewed by all the women in the gym was questioning the athleticism of me, a former athlete.

"I'll be all right," I said, releasing the treadmill arm from my grip, proving I could stand upright on my own, which, of course, showed I wasn't that far from being in shape.

I started to head toward the locker room, and he walked alongside me.

"It's not all about the cardiovascular and working out," he said. "Diet is a big part of it. You could burn a thousand calories in here with a two-hour workout. But for most people, that's not much more than a meal or two. You've got to burn more calories than you take in. It's almost as simple as that. Eat smart. Cut back on the fats, the carbs even. Go protein, high protein, and you'll lose everything you want faster than you could imagine. You get rolling, it'll take on a life of its own, and if you stick with it, you'll reach your goals relatively quickly."

Rolling. That made me think of the spare tire that had formed around my waist.

"And this running thing?" he proposed as if it were a question. "I'd cut back on that. I'd walk if I were you – walk for an hour or more if you can. Then, when you're down 20-30 pounds, pick it up and start jogging again."

Who was this guy to tell me I couldn't run? He read my mind.

"Just see how you feel tomorrow, and the next day especially," he said. "If you're not too sore, then stay with it. But from what I've learned, your joints, maybe even your back, will be paying you back the next few days."

"Okay, thanks a lot," I said, without a trace of gratitude.

All of those late night pizzas when my son wasn't sleeping through the night. All of those bowls of sugary cereal at 2 a.m., 5 a.m., 7 a.m. – 25 pounds worth, at least. To be honest with myself, I hadn't done much cardiovascular work. Pushing Garrett around the neighborhood, or the mall when it got colder out, was the extent of my cardio workouts the past six months or so.

Time for some changes. Some serious changes. I vowed to do some GOOD shopping before I headed home that night. Low cal, low carb, high protein shopping. I'd start right away.

Of course, when the little guy woke up at 2 a.m. that night, getting up the stairs was so difficult that I did it on all fours. It wasn't better the next day, or the day after that. Indeed, running would have to wait – if I had my sights set on walking properly anytime soon, which I did.

Then, I had my legs taken out from under me. Another lifestyle change, one I hadn't ever pondered as possible.

Thank goodness I had my son. And my two best friends.

Ralph is a good friend, though still a little rough around the edges, those edges have since been smoothed out considerably – especially for a dyed in the wool Republican. I consider Ralph and Gene to be my brothers. Gene is gentler, kinder, but way too liberal for my tastes – and I say that as a registered Democrat – at least to be considered kin.

I met Gene in high school and Ralph shortly after I moved back to Cobbler's Nook. He did some work for me at the newspaper, just part-time stuff that didn't interfere with his job as a probation officer. Gene used to tease him about how Ralph could be so Republican and yet be a government worker at the same time.

We talked about anything and everything. We were all less than five years out of college. We were young, had our own apartments in the same building. Gene and I, having attended college together, never stopped being buddies, staying in touch through two time zones, several moves, a job change for him, two job changes for me - the final bringing me to my hometown. When I

hired Gene to come back and work for me at the Daily Herald, I knew it was the best hire I'd made, or would ever make.

As a part-timer, Ralph was perfect. He had a solid grasp of what we needed from someone who was a "stringer," meaning he went out to cover games, or stayed in the office and took the plethora of phone calls from coaches reporting their games, the ones we didn't send a reporter to on a particular night.

Those two guys made work bearable for me, as pleasurable as it could be. Both worked hard, were low maintenance (for the most part) and after work were always a blast. Gene and I would drink beer while all three of us played Nintendo or watched movies (often "Field of Dreams" or "Hoosiers" – two movies that, by laws of man, guys cannot turn off once they start), usually at my apartment (because I had the Nintendo). We would always get philosophical on these nights, from issues that meant something to issues that meant nothing to anyone, least of all, us.

We talked about everything: Women, women, world events, politics and, of course, sports and women. We watched football on Sunday afternoon at Ralph's apartment. He had the biggest TV screen, and had it hooked up to stereo speakers, which in the early 1990s was quite a feat, since such a product either hadn't hit the market, or wasn't within three tax brackets of what any of us could afford individually.

Ralph was from a small town in western Nebraska. He didn't drink because he'd been, he told us, an alcoholic in college. He went so far as to go through rehabilitation before his senior year, kicking the bottle once and for all. His father was an alcoholic, a very mean alcoholic, and the highest ranking member in the county's Republican Party. His mother was a stay-at-home mom, active in 4-H (as were Ralph and his siblings). His mother also took a whole bunch of shit from her husband, something that still ate at Ralph to his very core.

And his father passed along his racist views. Ralph's budding career as a probation officer had only strengthened the racial bias his father had passed along to him. Ralph didn't flaunt his racism at his office or at my office, which was a good thing because we wouldn't have tolerated it. And if it's possible for a racist to have a good heart way, way down deep, that was Ralph. Plus, Gene was as anti-racist as they came. And I considered myself diametrically opposed to racism, though I had to admit I did avoid certain areas of town at certain times of night that were populated by a violent, unlawful portion of our minority community.

We sit down at 1 a.m. for a marathon Nintendo session at my apartment. I am the only one

who can “solve” Mario Brothers. While Ralph is picking it up pretty quickly, meaning we would have to soon get another game cartridge – or get a life – Gene is struggling to clear Level 2, of 8, so we’re trying to get Gene up to speed. As if this is going to make his life better. I am clearing Level 3, and Gene is coming back from my kitchen with beers for me and him, and a Coke for Ralph, who drinks so much Coke that I wonder if he ever sleeps. Gene opens the beers. I pause the game and take a swig. Ralph holds the Coke can in one hand, taps the top with his index finger until it almost gets annoying, opens it and takes a huge swig. After he belches and wipes his chin with the hand that is going to be on my Nintendo controller within 10 minutes, he decides to empty his mind, as he often does.

“You know what pisses me off about niggers?” Ralph asked.

Gene and I cringe at the same time. I look at my windows, hoping they are closed. I have several neighbors who are very pleasant, and happen to be either black or Hispanic.

“The ‘N-word’ is off limits in this abode,” I said.

“Ralph, do you realize how much hate is in that word?” Gene asked.

“Okay, coloreds,” he replied.

“That’s almost as bad,” Gene said. “Do your parents know the extent – or limits – of your vocabulary?”

That’s a bad question; we both know he got the freakin’ vocabulary from his father, the one his mother tolerated because while she didn’t like hate, she didn’t mind it as much if it wasn’t directed at her, which it often was. And “coloreds” didn’t comfort me, either. My grandmother used that word – it was from her generation – but I always found it extremely offensive.

“ANYWAY,” Ralph said. “I picked up two of them as cases today. So, what do you think I picked them up for?”

Gene and I didn’t say anything. Didn’t look at Ralph. I double-checked the windows, flipping the video-game controller to Gene. Watching him struggle with something a 6-year-old could master was always good for a few laughs. And if this was Ralph’s platform tonight, we’d need a few laughs from somewhere.

“Drugs for one of them, and driving while wasted beyond belief for the *third* time for the other,” Ralph said. “I mean, what is it with these people?”

In the time it took Ralph to finish the thought, Gene had lost both of his remaining “Mario lives.” Game over. To play again, the screen indicated, press “start”. If only Ralph could start

over, in life, and avoid the bitter hate his father instilled in him, either verbally or with the belt he told us he used on him, sometimes for no reason, after a bender. There were no buttons for that game, yet Ralph's life was about pushing buttons.

"Then I leave work today, and get cut off in traffic. And guess who it was? A nigger!" he ranted.

"Ralph!"

"Ralph!"

"Okay, all right, Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson, here's my point," Ralph stated.

If something so pointless could have a point, it would be up to Ralph to make it.

Gene emptied his beer and got another. He had killed half of it by the time he came back in and sat down. The irony of this – Ralph spewing racism and Gene pounding Bud Lights to be dead enough intellectually to survive Ralph on these nights – made me wonder of the roots of Ralph's own previous alcoholism. Did he drink to numb his past? Did he drink to forget what lay ahead in his future?

Though I hadn't taken Ralph on in any meaningful way on his racist views up to that point – we'd only been friends because Gene introduced us, and brought him in to the paper, and that was only a few months ago – I felt compelled to say something.

"Ralph, you think all of these blacks are whacked out on drugs and everything else," I said.

"This guy was *dealing* them, sometimes to school kids," he said. He leaned back, took a slug of Coke, and burped loudly – "supersonic" we called such things in college – proud of himself for either making a point or the wall-rattling belch. "Okay, go ahead, defend him now."

"Who do you think this guy sells most of his drugs to?" I asked. "If you think all blacks are poor and bad with money, who is this guy selling to?"

I didn't wait for an answer, because if he started rambling, my point would be lost.

"White people," I said. "And not just white people, but white people with money, the doctors and lawyers and businessmen who you hold in much higher regard, no doubt."

"Yeah," Gene said. I waited for Gene to add a thought, but apparently that one syllable was enough, and he headed for another beer. He had either peeked at mine, or was rewarding me for standing up to Ralph because he brought me another.

"And about the DWI guy," I added. "How many times has that guy been turned down for jobs because he's black? How many promotions has he lost? How many jobs did his father, or

grandfather, lose because of the color of their skin? How many times have this guy's kids, or brothers and sisters, or he himself, been called 'nigger' by guys like you?"

"I've never called one of them that to their face," Ralph interjected.

"But you've thought it," Gene chipped in. "That makes you a coward. A racist coward."

I looked at Ralph, who leaned forward. Gene, braver with two plus beers in his system, started to stand up, but sat back down. The truth is, Ralph probably needed to have his ass kicked. But it wouldn't be by Gene – Ralph would mop up the floor with him. In fact, Ralph was in the best shape of any of us, and he'd probably punch me out if it came to blows.

"Yes, but you've surely thought it enough – we all know that," I said. "I bet you said the 'N-word' when that woman cut you off today after work."

"Sure did, and I added 'bitch' to it, giving her a bonus," he smirked.

"But see? That's my point," I said. "She didn't cut you off because she was black. She didn't cut you off because she was a woman. She cut you off because she was an inconsiderate driver. That has nothing to do with race, or sex."

"Yeah," Gene chimed in.

Apparently that's all Gene had to offer tonight, besides being my personal beer runner.

"Well, you two girls have a good time," Ralph said, tossing his empty Coke in my trashcan. "I need a lot of things, air, water and food. But I don't need this shit. I know that much for sure."

He left the door open on his way out and we heard him head down the stairs toward the door. This was really a conversation that we'd have to have at some point, I realized, no matter whether it sent Ralph lunging for our throats or, as it had turned out, to the door.

"You know," Gene said, setting his beer down. "There were signs of this for him."

Gene was a big "sign" guy. He attributed my womanizing in college to my upbringing and need for attention. He saw his sister dropping out of college a semester before it happened because the signs were there. He saw our publisher weeding out the staff months before it happened because of "signs" the publisher had given off, ones that, for a long time, only Gene had picked up on. Both of Gene's parents were in education, which I thought was a sign of Gene's liberalism.

"You're right, Geno," I said. "It just pisses me off."

"I think it's sad," Gene said. "Do you know how many friendships he didn't make because of his racist views? Or, how about this, the friendships he did make because of those views? Those

couldn't be healthy.”

“I'm just glad he didn't go off on Hispanics,” I said. “Because if he had, we'd have probably fought.”

Gene knew that my sister was married to a Hispanic man. And through the years he had met several of my Hispanic aunts – my mother had five brothers, and four were married to women from South America.

“He'd have mopped up the floor with you,” Gene said with a laugh. “But I would've stepped in.”

We both laughed at that. Gene stepping in? He would have only served as a cushion to me hitting the floor, or a soft surface for Ralph to waste his first punch or two on.

“Really, he's a probation officer, so I don't think he'd actually fight,” Gene continued. “It's just amazing that someone as smart as Ralph has that much hostility toward minorities.”

Indeed, it would take a huge, life-changing event for Ralph to shed, or at least better contain, his racist views. I couldn't imagine anything happening like that, something that would undo generations of racial, ethnical hate in the Soderberg family. I guess I worried most about the hate gene being passed onto Ralph's kids someday, if he had them. We need a lot of things in this world, but racial and ethnic intolerance wasn't on the list of anyone – in their right mind.

“He never will change, you realize that, don't you?” Gene asked.

I didn't answer because both of us knew he was right. But that also meant that the very good-hearted guy underneath – we had volunteered with Ralph at the school appearances he did for his job, and he was golden with all kids, of any color – was probably doomed to repeat the cycle.

“To get rid of those views?” I asked, and then proposed, “Well, I think lightning would have to strike him.”

“Twice,” Gene added, and we both laughed because we needed to.

No, we had agreed, there was nothing that either of us could think of that would change Ralph Soderberg.

What we didn't know is that a month later on a Friday night, a local high school basketball coach would single-handedly knock down Ralph's racial walls. The coach, from a local high school, said that she would bring her team's box score to my office because we had misspelled a few names after her team's previous game. I thought it was classy when she called earlier in the week and asked if it would be better if she brought it by instead of just calling it in. She was a

new coach – a first-year teacher new to the area, she had explained to me over the phone – and the fact that she wanted to work with us, not against us, as many coaches who felt slighted by our coverage, did, gave her points in my book. When I saw a West Cobbler High School warm-up jacket across the parking lot at about 10:15 p.m., I sent Ralph to meet her at the front door, which after hours was always locked.

“Hi,” said a tall, striking African American woman to Ralph. “I’m Lucy.”

4

Ralph’s world was about to change. But as his elevator went up, mine went down – as if I were falling down the shaft.

She asked for it.

I was content to cruise along in Middle America, a mortgage, a marriage that had, almost without notice, gone off-track in recent years from a lack of work on both of our parts. She had gotten lazy in the household chores. I was doing all the laundry, the cooking (she seemed to eat out every meal except breakfast), the yard work and everything to do with our son. But that was what needed to be done, so I did. It was strange that I started to resent it. Because when we first got together, I loved doing her laundry. I found her panties and bras sexy and felt wonderfully turned on even doing her laundry. But time had faded the silk and satin as it had my feelings. It was like having a second child to clean up after. With her, I was no longer feeling love, the fuel that fed me to do such tasks.

I used to send her flowers at least two or three times a month at work, but I had stopped doing it about two months earlier when I went by to show her Garrett’s first tooth. She knew it was coming because I was up with him as he teethed painfully. I walked in and noticed the flowers from the previous two weeks were on her co-workers’ desks.

“Thanks for the flowers,” Colleen said with a smile.

“Yes, they’re lovely if you like flowers,” added Janine.

“What?” I asked.

“Janet started giving the flowers to other women in the office. You know, women who are into that kind of thing,” Janine said. And then quoted Janet, “They just get in my way.”

I wish Janet would have told me this herself, about a year and \$500 ago. She hadn't. It was rude but rather than fight back, I just stopped sending flowers. She never said a word; then again, after the second time I had sent flowers she had stopped thanking me or even acknowledging that she had received them.

But that wasn't really on my mind – before Janet called that afternoon at work two weeks and two days before Garrett's third birthday. My phone rang. I was way behind on work. Garrett was in daycare, which I absolutely hated. Especially today, as about six kids had runny noses and coughs in his 10-child group at the daycare.

“Hello,” Janet said. I was glad she called. We had had a ridiculous argument the night before. I liked to write with pencils, not pens. I had brought home a box, maybe two, of pencils. Less than a week later, there wasn't a pencil in sight, under or behind anything.

She wasn't talking about pencils.

“How about we separate first?” she said – on the phone no less – as I sat laying out the pages for the sports section.

“Separate from what?” I asked, unaware of the path she had traveled down but fully aware of where we had, unspoken – and perhaps subconsciously – arrived.

“From each other,” she said. “I'm going to file, just so you know. I just wanted you to know. The courthouse will serve you with papers unless you make plans to show up and get them on your own. I just thought you'd rather do it that way than have a deputy show up with papers at your work – you know, explaining it to everyone, and all.”

Explain it to everyone? Explain it to me, first, I thought.

“You're going to need a place to live, so take a week or two to find something decent,” she said.

The newsroom was bustling with activity, as it was every afternoon around five. There were meetings going on for the front page, editors suggesting catchy headlines, story budget conferences for the weekend and various other meetings involving other departments.

Suddenly, my world had gone silent. Except on the other end of the phone.

“Listen, you can't tell me you want to stay married to me,” she continued.

Was that true? Maybe it was. We hadn't had any kind of connection for more than a year,

probably dating back to the months after the birth of our son. She had picked right up with her life, having Garrett on Friday night and going back to work on Monday morning. I had taken a leave from work. She couldn't breast-feed because she smoked. So I fed our baby for the most part.

"Are you going to say anything?" she asked. "You have to make some plans because I'm filing next week."

Here our lives were about to go two different directions – as if they hadn't already – and no one had said the "D" word yet. I was numb but I wasn't hurt. I learned long ago that the opposite of love isn't hate. The opposite of love is indifference. And I was guilty on that count. She had always been the one with more passion after I sort of gave up. She broke dishes. She kicked the side of my fender in on my new car when I left to watch football one Sunday morning, not taking into account that I only went to my buddy's house to watch football because she wouldn't allow it on TV in our house. The pattern was troubling, but was soothed by the incredible make-up sex that would invariably follow.

She had almost ended my friendship with Ralph. Or, I almost let her end it. Ralph had called one Sunday morning, and Janet answered the phone.

"Hi, Janet, just looking for a status report," Ralph said, "on your guy. Big game's on in 15 minutes. We're short on chips. He's the chip man, your boy."

"What's the deal here, Ralph?" Janet asked.

"Huh?" Ralph answered.

"Are you gay or something?" Janet asked. "Why is it so important that 'my guy' be at your house every fucking Sunday. Did it ever dawn on you that maybe I want to spend time with 'my guy'? Or do you think of him as 'your guy' too?"

There was a long pause. The pre-Lucy Ralph was a lot of things, including homophobic. Gene joked one day, a Sunday NFL day gathering, in fact, that Ralph was just in the closet. Ralph responded by grabbing Gene, getting more agitated by Gene's calls that "See, look at how you're holding me, this has to be turning you on!" and stuffing him in his closet. So it was, at least literally, only Gene who came out of the closet that day.

When Janet brought it up, though, Ralph took it even less as a joke. I went over to Ralph's, not knowing what had transpired on the phone – I had promised to cut the grass before I went over to watch the games, the mower roaring over any conversation. When I got to Ralph's, he

filled me in.

“With my job, I don’t need Janet spreading any rumors that I’m a mud shark,” Ralph said.

Gene gasped.

“Mud shark?” Gene asked. He thought about it and shook his head in real disgust.

“I just don’t need it, Bob,” Ralph said. Gene didn’t make any jokes because this was serious, Janet stepping in on our friendship. We skipped a few NFL Sundays but picked right up when Janet left with friends one Sunday for an art show in Denver, and I was relieved to get back into a rhythm with my two pals. But the damage had been done, and Ralph rarely called the house anymore. She never got to Gene – Mr. Happy Go-Lucky would’ve just laughed her off as he had so many times before when she’d tried to come between us.

All of these thoughts passed through my mind as my wife was telling me that she was on the path to becoming my ex-wife.

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” I finally said. I was taken off guard by the call. Had I put in as much thought to this whole thing as she had, I probably could have thought better for myself, my own interests. The house was way more than half mine. At that time, I was already thinking about quitting the 60-hour a week newspaper grind to free-lance write and spend more time with Garrett. I had carried us while Janet struggled to find a job she liked – six jobs in 10 years. Surely, I was thinking, with her salary and the fact that I had carried the mortgage and her car payment practically alone for at least five years would allow me some freedom to get on my feet after the initial struggle I assumed it would take to get my free-lance work off the ground.

Yet leaving my job was contingent upon a lot of things. And banking on us staying together, apparently, was a dividend that would never yield another cent. We had nothing in common – politically, recreationally, artistically. Heck, the only thing we’d had in common for 10 years was that we both loved her body. You grow together, or you grow apart. We had no common interests, no common goals. At that critical fork in the road in every relationship, our path was so clear that neither of us blinked or considered another option, yet this was all done with no more thought than buying a toaster.

“I guess I should get a lawyer,” I said.

“Sure, if you want,” she said. “But it’s pretty simple: The state bases child support on our incomes, which produces an amount that is termed the child’s standard of living. Then it’s divided by what each of us make, and that amount is what you’ll pay.”

“You’re going to have custody?” I asked.

“Of course, I am,” she said.

I didn’t think that was right. Yes, she did spend time with Garrett in the evening. But once I got home at midnight or so, it was me, all day until the next afternoon when she got home. He’d spend maybe an hour or two – max – in daycare.

But I didn’t have any fight in me because I wasn’t prepared to fight when I went to work that day. Actually I had written my two-week notice and re-written it a couple of times. I was going to run the idea past Janet, I suppose, at some point that week before I quit. I had, perhaps only in passing, run the idea of me quitting past her a few months ago. Strange, we had only a few real conversations, but I recall none as meaningful. Anyway, it was her quitting – her giving me notice – that had the floor now.

I don’t know if I expected her to be supportive of my career change or against it. I guess I didn’t know what to expect. It wasn’t like I was, after all, doing it for her or for our relationship. I was doing it to spend more time with my son.

So I looked for a place. My budget was going to be tight. I started out looking to rent a small home. Then, I visited apartments. Finally, I found something that didn’t look like it could ever be “home.”

My new “home” was a rundown, two-bedroom townhouse about a mile or two – and a world or two – away from the dream house we had bought together, though which was, in all honesty, a starter home by any real measure.

Janet had the locks changed on the house – she told me she was doing this, and since I still had no fight in me, I just nodded. Within two weeks, she gave me a key. The lock change was another of her wise investments – probably made with money I’d given, or surrendered, to her.

I’d pick up the little guy most nights after work, wrap him up warm and bring him home with me. Rarely did he wake up. Rarely did I sleep much after bringing him to my new “home.”

He’d stay with me during the day. The custody arrangement we had gave me “official” visits every other weekend, and Tuesdays and Thursdays. She had forsaken the “maintenance” money her attorney thought she was due, since she had only worked “sporadically” since we married – she forfeited it under the condition that I would let her have the house, with no buyout money due me.

“You’re in a conservative area,” said my attorney, a semi-friend who coached a YMCA

basketball team.

And specialized in corporate law, not divorces.

As if that shouldn't have been obvious.

"From what I can tell, it's a pretty good – well, a pretty standard – deal," he said, not specifying just who it was a good deal for. Over the following months, I saw him several times, and he never made eye contact. I think we both knew why.

Child support was \$550 a month, no paltry sum when my take-home was less than \$2,100 a month, plus the \$200 a month I had to pay my attorney for 20 months, \$450 a month for daycare (I was court ordered to pay three-quarters of the childcare – and while part-time was slightly less expensive, anything over 10 hours a week was full-time, and we were right on that border despite my best efforts to keep him out of there), a \$240 car payment, plus \$700 a month rent, and, well, everything else.

I was all right with it until the second month, when I was dipping into what little savings I had to pay cable and utilities. I was paying \$1800-plus a month in bare essentials, not including food. Strangely, I was, for the most part, happy, though lonely and borderline depressed at times, especially late at nights or on the weekend when my son was with his mom. Going to the Laundromat was a bit humiliating, since I had six months earlier paid \$800 for a digitally-operated washer and dryer that sat in the basement of my ex's house. But Garrett loved going to do laundry, which in turn, made me actually enjoy "laundry day." It was almost always me and a bunch of single mothers, guys who had done to them what my ex had done to me, though I sensed many of these women were truly on their own and didn't have a backup, which is how I viewed Janet, though she was, according to the state of Colorado, the primary-custodial parent.

But being apart was good. I didn't have to walk on eggshells when Janet was stressed out, which was almost always except when she was drinking. I didn't have to wash her smoke-filled clothes, kick her cigarette butts off the back porch, wash her dishes, help out with her student loans, make her car payment or carry the mortgage alone any longer.

The only downfall I saw was that work was cutting into the one thing I really enjoyed; being with my son. Janet was working more late nights and was out most weekends. I knew that only because I'd call needing Garrett's clothes or something of his, and she'd be gone. I'd let myself into the house; quietly get his stuff and leave.

We walked a lot – the gym worker's advice – all over the neighborhood, and beyond. I lived

in what would be called the blue-collar projects in our area of town. I lived in the smallest set of townhouses, many of which, I quickly learned were filled with single parents, almost all mothers, or couples, usually young, saving for that first mortgage – if it came before the “phone call” about ending the relationship that they, like me, assumed was forever.

I either held Garrett’s hand or pushed him in his stroller up the hill. We went past some luxury apartments – which would later go condo, and for sale, not for rent – which offered free laundry, a pool on the complex and a weight room/gym. But they started at \$1,800 a month – which would have finished us.

We walked further up the hill to upgraded townhouses. These, unlike mine, all had at least one- and sometimes two-car garages, decks and even some good yard space in the back. I had a patch of grass maybe 8 feet by 12 feet in the front and a paved parking area me and the other three renters shared in our “backyard.”

Further up the hill, where it (mercifully) leveled out and where Garrett would start walking until he got tired and wanted to be carried, sat the single-family homes. (What a nifty invention the Gerrycarrier was! – and getting Garrett up the hill as he got heavier was quite a workout.) These homes were close together and one level (maybe a basement too, I guessed), but with, usually, a one-car garage and both front and back yards.

Across the big street that ran through the neighborhood – thus separating tax brackets – were the elite houses, bi-levels, with wrap-around decks, spacious yards and fancy fences that people like me would need installment plans to pay off. I couldn’t see over most of these fences, but maybe that’s how it was supposed to be. But I did have something these folks didn’t have – time with my child. When one walked as much as I did those first few months, I got to see not just the expensive cars they drove, but when they would come and go. Often, it appeared both parents worked, some leaving early in the morning and returning late at night. That had to mean hours and hours of daycare each day for those who had kids.

Though it was a neighborhood and we all had a lot in common – namely divorce and/or single parenthood – there were obviously a lot of people not unlike me, struggling with their confidence, wondering what went wrong and how their dream lives turned into this nightmare of buildings with faded paint and worn out roofs. Fridays and Sundays were almost surreal, with the fathers coming by at the start of the weekend to pick up their child and then returning the child (or children) to the mother on Sunday afternoon. Most of the fathers – and there weren’t many –

in my neck of the neighborhood did not have their children living with them, so in that regard I was the exception. Many of the women were outwardly kind, but clearly in pain as the remarried fathers drove into our neighborhood in shiny, late model trucks or SUVs, their new wife in tow while “dad” prepared to be a father for two days, often only every other weekend.

Usually the new wife was younger – and often childless – than the former wife. Yet this woman who had given birth to this man’s children – and perhaps sacrificed her job, her figure and eventually her self-esteem – was discarded in this odd merry-go-round of love, or convenience. The women were standoffish to me, especially at first, even though I was in the same boat, bailing water and trying to keep my head above the rushing financial current, not to mention the emotional wreckage I was dealing with as a father and former husband. There was one woman, Jill, several doors down who always had a smile, was always upbeat. Jill was outside flipping through her mail talking to another woman, Mary Ann my immediate neighbor to the left who was raising her four children in a two-bedroom townhouse identical to mine, when her husband came by in his brand new Suburban (with his new wife) to pick up two of his four daughters – the oldest and youngest balked at going. I overheard Mary Anne confide to Jill, “48 hours of fathering once every two weeks!” Mary Ann asked Jill how she always stayed cheerful, optimistic. Jill explained that she “found Jesus Christ, the one man who I could always count on, who’d always be there and never leave.”

Mary Ann was attending nursing school during the day, trying to hold her family together day by day, working tirelessly into the night to keep up with her homework, balancing her approaching 40th birthday against demands that would rattle even, or especially, a much younger woman. She’d given up nursing school almost two decades earlier to start a family, raise children. And she, like me, found herself alone (as far as adult companionship went) with four daughters. She told Jill how it wasn’t fair that she was viewed “as having all this baggage” while her husband was basically childless, for all practical purposes, moved on to a younger, childless, new wife and lived in a house with twice as many bedrooms as the small townhouse that she was now forced to call home.

Having thumbed through my mail three times – offers from credit card companies that would surely have been withdrawn had these companies seen my current financial, not to mention emotional, state – I had to abandon eavesdropping and retreat to clean my kitchen and bathroom before my son came back from an overnight sojourn to his mother’s. I wanted to tell Mary Ann

that we were better off than our ex's. That we were better parents, better people. And that time would heal the wounds she was nursing as she sought to become a nurse. But it wasn't my place, and since communication between the single moms and me hadn't really started, I'd have been terribly out of place adding my two cents, especially since just a few months before I barely had that amount to my own name.

Empty cabinets stared back at me as I started on the kitchen. Since I had lost everything but my ass – and my still-bulging stomach – in the divorce, I was going to have to scrimp to make ends meet.

No more late-night – or any other time of day – pizza. Chinese food? No way, unless the grocery store had two-for-one sales on frozen Chinese dishes. Lots of generic Cheerios or generic oatmeal or store brand juices.

Nothing good, in other words.

I had been divorced two months when Monday rolled around. Heading to work about an hour late, I dropped Garrett off at daycare with a bunch of kids who were sick – runny noses, coughing. He pleaded with me not to leave him there, puddles in his big brown eyes, his bottom lip quivering.

“Can you be a big boy if this is one of the last time's I take you here? I mean, you can start staying home with Daddy soon if you want, all right?” I whispered. He looked confused and I hated to confuse him. But in this period of my life of broken promises, I was going to keep my word to this little guy. I guess he sensed that I was serious, so he put on his best happy face and went like a brave little boy as I headed to the office.

When I got to my desk at work, I called our personnel office, getting a number to call to check on my 401k. I had amassed \$82,000 in the bull market of the late 1990s. If I pulled it out, I'd get hit with a huge penalty, but I'd still have \$45,200, or that was the best guess the personnel director could give me when I showed her the numbers. That had been the money for our future - Janet's, Garrett's and mine. She had decided that future wouldn't include her. So I had to plan for a future with only my son and me.

Gene walked over to my cubicle, and I flipped over the notebook I had been writing on.

“You've got something to hide from your best friend?” he asked, clearly hurt.

“Just a lot going on in my mind,” I said.

He sat down and wheeled his chair over next to me.

“I know this has been tough on you,” he said. “But you know what? You’re a devoted dad. How many guys can say that? You could be at the Washington Post or New York Times if you pushed it.”

The Post had turned me down two years earlier. The Times hadn’t responded to my résumé or follow-up phone calls. Though I did have several chances to advance to larger papers, I always turned down the flattering queries, thinking I was building something that was more meaningful than simple career advancement.

I couldn’t leave Garrett and Janet wasn’t about to move to a big city. But Gene was giving me a compliment. I didn’t want to tell him that I had just made final plans to cash out my 401k, was going to give my notice and hoped to make a go as a free-lance writer, though I might have to take some sort of job – and I had no idea what at the time – to make ends meet.

In fact, I wanted to recommend Gene to be my successor as sports editor. He had clearly put in the time. But there’s no way the boss would’ve gone for that. Gene was a good enough writer to handle his beats though he was marginal on features and the occasional column, and he’d probably never win an award, which management put a lot of stock in when it came to promotions – it’s how I got to be the sports editor. He was good enough to make deadline most of the time, but his pages were often lacking what the editor wanted in terms of design. Planning and organization weren’t Gene’s strongest suits, and he knew that, though I had no doubt he wanted to be sports editor.

“I’ll be all right,” I said, hoping that he would be, too, when he learned of my decision.

I went over to the business office and typed a two-paragraph resignation, thanking WestMedia Inc. for employing me and for everything else they did for me – two paragraphs was more than enough room for that, probably one paragraph too long. I took it into my boss, Lynn Johnson.

“Quitting? Are you kidding me?” he asked. “How much thought went into this?”

“I want to leave on good terms,” I said. “But I have to leave.”

I had to leave because of Lynn Johnson, though I didn’t tell him that. He had a wife and three kids, and by the hours he put in, I wondered how many hours a week he actually saw his kids. He had one of those elite houses on “the hill” – two stories, sprawling yard, privacy fence – and his wife worked full-time at the hospital, which was good, because his children always seemed to have whatever was going around from picking it up in daycare.

“Listen, you have to think this through real good,” Lynn said. “Because there’s no one on staff I’d promote to sports editor. If I have to launch a search and bring someone in – and then you decide you want to come back, I don’t know if I’ll be able to help you.”

The truth is, I needed a lot of help, financially, and having that door open would certainly be a safety net. But I wasn’t doing a test run. I wasn’t about to commit to raising my son, and then pull the chute and jump when there was a little turbulence – and make no mistake, I expected plenty of bumps.

“It’s final,” I said. “I might need a letter of recommendation or something from you at some point, I just don’t know. But, yes, I’m sure this is what I want.”

He went into the publisher and gave him my notice. L. Eldred Carnahan was a businessman. As an employee, I had pretty much earned the right to do what I wanted. But I did swim, for the most part, with the tide, not fighting the petty battles that some chose to take on daily or at least weekly. Picking and choosing my spots were strengths of mine. I didn’t gripe, made my deadlines, kept the community happy (a big thing for a community daily newspaper) and won several awards every year, several of which hung on the wall of his office, staring back at me as Carnahan told me that I could be making a big mistake.

But the mistake I had made was not quitting earlier. I had lost an arm and a leg financially in the divorce, though I’d be walking with both legs and regaining most of both arms had I quit before Janet’s decision to leave the marriage, and me. My son gave me strength. That arm and leg would be just fine if I could just be “Dad” all the time. As Carnahan rambled on about the dangerous nature of the economy – “This dot.com thing isn’t going to go on forever, at some point here in a year or two, the bottom is going to fall out” – I just listened. If he was right (and he would be, eerily so, as time would prove) then I was making a wise decision to cash out my 401k. Though I didn’t know it at the time, my \$82,000 would have been worth just \$26,000 pre-taxes and penalties in two years (when you are a full-time, stay-at-home dad, you have the time to figure out such things).

He went on for half an hour. My thoughts continued to drift. Finally, he realized that even though I was sitting five feet from him across his desk, I had already left.

“Just let me know if I can ever do anything,” he said. “You’re very talented. But no one is irreplaceable. We’ll move on, just like you will.”

We decided I’d work the last two weeks without telling anyone I’d given notice, just to

“ensure a smooth transition.” In my first act as lame-duck sports editor, I decided to defer the deskwork to my staff and take off early. It was only Wednesday, and I’d already worked 34 hours, including two through-the-night sessions Saturday and Sunday, since Janet had Garrett those two nights, as Monday had been a holiday. But the thought of him spending one more minute in daycare than he had too – I had, after all, just quit to avoid this very scenario – was troubling. So I went and picked him up. He was happy to see me after he awoke from his nap. Ann Marie, his “teacher,” told me she had kept him away from all the “sick kids” that day. I thanked her and carried the tired little guy in my arms to the front counter.

“I’m going to be pulling Garrett out of daycare in two weeks,” I told Connie, the center director.

“Good for you,” she said with a smile. “I know he just lights up when he sees his daddy.” She looked at the calendar.

“Well, you are paid through the end of the month, which is two weeks away, so it should break just right,” she said.

I called Janet and told her I’d like to come by for dinner.

“There’s nothing to eat in the house,” she said. “Listen, you should know something...”

She’s moving? She quit her job? She’s selling my house? She needs more money?

“I’m sort of seeing someone,” she said.

I didn’t feel a thing. Good for you, I thought, you can be someone else’s problem. My only hope was that he was a decent guy who would treat my son well because I’d kick his ass and be doing time in jail if he was some weirdo, which, aside from me (I liked to believe) had been Janet’s preference in men.

“I just need to talk about something with you, and it’s very important,” I said.

“How important? What did you do? Did you get another girl pregnant?” she asked tersely.

This is why we’re divorcing. You don’t know me any longer – and I don’t know you.

“I wish,” I said, eliciting a sigh of disgust from her. I hadn’t taken the bait, but I’d pulled hard enough on the line to simulate a bite.

“Pizza Hut,” she said. “6:30.”

That was a lot longer than I wanted to wait for dinner. Longer than I wanted to wait to tell her the news. But she had been setting the rules that we’d lived by for so long now, that I acquiesced. Garrett and I went to our townhouse, took a scenic walk and then got changed for

dinner.

Garrett had a kids' meal and I had a single-serving salad and water, paying for the bill before Janet arrived. She got there at 8.

She sat down, the smell of smoke wafting across the table, noticed we had started without her and gave Garrett only a "Hi, Punkin." How could she not hug and love on this little guy every time she saw him?

She grimaced as though in real pain when the waitress said they no longer served beer so she ordered iced tea along with a small pizza.

"This works out, I'll be able to take half of it home and have dinner tomorrow night," she said proudly.

"I quit my job," I said.

She stood up, slammed down her napkin with her fist, shaking the table. Garrett's eyes got wide.

"No, sit down," I said. "I'm not trying to get out of anything, but thanks for thinking that."

"It's called intentional impoverishment," she said, "and I swear to God, if you try –"

"Calm down, I'm not trying anything," I said. "In fact, I'm going to pay ahead three years on child support. I'm going to stay home with Garrett and start freelancing."

"I have custody!" she exclaimed, drawing attention once again from the only other two couples in the restaurant.

"I'm not asking you for anything," I said firmly, "and I'm not asking your permission. Every kid in that daycare, except ours, is sick as sick can be right now. I don't want Garrett going through that."

She looked at me with such disdain that I couldn't believe we had ever been in love, or even ever made love.

"How will you survive?" she said without a trace of care, indicating that survive meant paying her off.

I didn't want to tell her about the 401k – she had never known too much about it anyway, I think, and thank God it didn't come up during the divorce.

"I'm going to free-lance, and with the, uh, separation check from the paper, I will pay ahead child support for a long time," I said. "You'll be saving some good money on childcare."

"YOU'LL be saving even more," she said.

“I didn’t know it was a contest,” I said. “Listen, I’m not asking for anything. If you try to make this difficult, we can go through ‘intentional impoverishment’ and anything else you want. We can leave our son with every sick kid in the community five days a week, if that’s what you really want.”

She had taken a lot of pride in getting Garrett into “Learning Steps” – I thought too much pride, in fact, for shoveling child-rearing responsibilities onto a bunch of young women working their way through college or single mothers who worked at “Learning Steps.” Bless those women’s hearts because they had a hard job. But it was not a preschool by any form. Their job was to keep the kids from getting hurt until their parents picked them up.

I had this rambling repertoire of thoughts I wanted to spell out for Janet as she picked at her pizza. I wanted not only to be a dad but to be the best dad in the world. I wanted to give my son all the love he could ever need. I wanted to see him ride his bike for the first time.

I wanted my son to know me. And I guess in another sense, I wanted me to know me. I was so consumed by my job, I never knew the seasons had changed until I needed a coat or needed to find my short-sleeved shirts. I only knew the date because it had to be changed on the folio of the corner of each page in my section.

Getting recognized around the city as the sports editor was flattering at first. I’d rearrange my entire schedule to do a radio appearance to talk about sports, but I wouldn’t force an extra day off for myself or to spend with Janet. I realized that even I had started to know myself as the “sports editor” until my son was born. There was no way to rewind the hands of time and work on my failed marriage. But I could work on me.

With the way things had played out in the divorce, my son had already lost his family structure. She wouldn’t admit it – and maybe wasn’t honestly aware of it – but he might’ve already lost his mother, but that wasn’t my concern.

He wasn’t going to lose his father. No matter how nasty his mother got. No matter how self-serving she became. No matter how many cigarettes she smoked, no matter how many beers she guzzled.

She ate her pizza, questioned me in three or four different ways about how I was going to “survive,” all of which I answered with, “It will work, I guarantee it.”

“I’ll bring him by on my way to work tomorrow,” she said, reaching for Garrett – neither of us realized it at the time, but she’d hardly ever have him on weeknights in the months and years

to come. He reached out to me and I kissed his hands. For some reason, it was always almost impossible for me to say “goodbye” to him, and this night was even less of an exception. I wanted to take him home, tell him stories that would make him smile and laugh, and love him into giggles, before he drifted off into a peaceful sleep with me watching him, rubbing his soft little back, leaning my ear against his face to make sure he was breathing okay, covering him up to the shoulders so he wouldn’t get cold.

“Come on, Garrett,” she said a bit too forcefully. “We’re going home.”

No, I wanted to say, you are going to your mom’s house.

But you’ll be home in the morning.

And we will be fine.

5

The last two weeks at work passed slowly. I skipped meetings that I never should have started going to in the first place. I did the essentials, but my heart wasn’t there. And I started planning for the future. I contacted all three local colleges. I talked to the sports information directors from each school. For all the out-of-town and out-of-state kids, I got their hometown newspaper number and contact person. I figured I could do features on as many of these kids as possible, and pick up \$75 to \$125 a story, depending on the size of their hometown paper – and even a game story if they wanted.

I asked Lynn if I could get off early the last day.

“We were going to have a cake for you after we took you to lunch,” he said.

“But I’m staying in the area,” I said. “This will turn into a question-and-answer session. It might put ideas into their minds.”

He smiled and agreed. I could take the whole last day off as a personal day, so it wouldn’t cut into my vacation or sick leave, which promised to make my last check rather substantial.

I talked to the local couple who handled my taxes. They said my 401k check would count as income for that year. They knew my situation – I had covered both of their sons in high school

sports – and had done my taxes for several years, never charging me more than \$200. They offered that as a flat fee to handle all of my taxes the first couple years because I was “being noble” in my fatherhood plans. I would be incorporated, and they would pay my taxes quarterly for me.

For the first month, I did nothing but be a dad. When Janet would take him in the evenings, I’d go to the gym.

I was ready to run. I was down to 185 pounds and felt so much better. It was like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders – a series of weights, like Janet, and the job.

Furnishing our townhouse was another matter. Getting a big bed wasn’t at the front of my mind, or the top of my budget. We picked up a really cushy couch, Garrett and I slept downstairs on the hide-a-bed, making the upstairs basically storage and room for a small collection of his toys that his mother had either let him bring over, or forced me to bring over because his room at his mom’s house was overflowing.

I also realized I had to work on something else: Me. I hadn’t been the most likeable guy my whole life. And I realized that certainly didn’t help our marriage. I realized, and this sounds crazy, that I didn’t like myself a whole lot sometimes. And when you’re alone, you have to like yourself – if not, no one does. I went back and saw Dr. Young several times. She gave me an almost-nothing rate once my insurance ran out (“I like seeing you. I feel like I’ve helped you down this road to where you are now – though its taken the hard work you put into ‘fixing’ your problems. Still, seeing you and how far you've come, well, I guess it feeds my ego,” she said, laughing). We talked more about my father, how he had been an absentee dad, how easily I had slipped back into that cycle. My mother had run to alcoholism to deal with my father’s absences and then his death. Janet had just run away, I felt, from us. So had I abandoned the relationship (“Probably should cool it on the ‘The only thing we shared was a love for her body’ comment you mentioned the day I first saw you – that won’t endear you to any woman if you harbor hopes of dating and establishing another relationship at some point,” Dr. Young advised).

Dr. Young told me she thought Janet and I probably weren’t compatible to begin with, but when it was factored in that my commitment to my work was more than it was to our relationship, we never really had a chance. That allowed me to stop blaming Janet and blame myself – hold myself completely accountable regardless of what part she played in the downward spiral of our relationship. I had to take responsibility for that. To be honest, I did

blame myself. I often wondered during long days alone if Janet and I would be able to reconcile, to rebuild from the point it had went awry. I realized our foundation hadn't been built on common ground in the first place ("So, separate lives, separate residences make sense," Dr. Young pointed out).

On the home employment front, free-lance work paid off right away. The athletes from the Air Force Academy, a 45-minute drive north from Cobbler's Nook, were usually from out of state, and most of their hometown papers hired me to do a feature story. I picked up almost \$3,000 in the first four months of being self-employed. It wasn't a windfall and I was dipping into savings. But it was a beginning. I spent a lot of time alone late at night writing or outlining several book manuscripts, and when Garrett was at his mom's, I'd walk and think not just about the path I was following through the neighborhoods, but the path I'd chosen in life. If I could go back to square one, I would have traveled a different route. I'd have become a father sooner. I would have started my very own writing career sooner. Sooner or later, I guess every person comes to this sort of crossroad. In a way, I felt I was fortunate for getting there when I did, because I believe some people don't think about "what could be" until it is never possible.

Garrett started kindergarten. His first day of school was the hardest of my life. His backpack hung on his body like a shell on a snail. He held my hand tightly while walking across the crosswalk until he glanced at the kids he recognized from orientation as being in his class. There were more backpacks on the ground outside the kindergarten door than at Everest Base Camp, which I suppose was fitting because they were at the start of an educational climb that would last 13 or more years.

When his hand slipped from mine, it was like a balloon deflated, causing my throat to constrict.

My eyes began to water. I wanted neither to embarrass my son nor let him go. He needed this, I know; this is logical, this is growth. Why does a child's growth have to hurt a parent so? He looked up at me, and I pressed my lips together as if around a valve on a beach ball, trying to stem the tide of emotion washing over me, reasoning if no air escaped, neither would my emotions. I saw in his big brown eyes that he was looking to me for assurance.

Which is what I was looking at him for.

So I squatted down, because really, only one of us could be the dad.

"This is so great!" I said in an overly enthusiastic tone that was barely above a whisper. "This is the coolest school I've ever seen! It's going to be awesome." My son knew I didn't usually exaggerate. Great, coolest and awesome in the same sentence had to signal a disingenuous performance.

"I know," he said. He was looking down at the ground, making me wonder if he knew this was a great school, or if he knew these were just words from his nervous father.

Other parents were leaving, in fact, most had backed up, some heading quickly to work, one man already on his cell phone, others walking away but stopping to wave again and again. Some kids clutched their parents, others shooed them away. My son and I were in the middle, and I had to take the lead from here. I had to leave because that's what my son needed.

My hands on his shoulders, rather than guide his chin up with my hand, I waited until our eyes met. I looked him from head to toe, his shirt buttoned up to his neck (his choice) and his matching shorts, absolutely adorable.

"I am so proud of you," I said. "I'm not going to hug you and embarrass you, but after school, we're going to get a Happy Meal and then go to the bookstore. I want to hear all about your day, so remember everything so you can tell me. In a few hours, not that many really, when you're out of school, that's what we're going to do, all right?"

"O...kay," he said, nodding his head, the syllables slipping out like an aborted jailbreak between his barely open lips.

Out in the car, I prayed to God to watch out for my little boy as I myself sobbed like a little boy. I tried to stop, which just made it worse, especially as my nose started to run at a speed equal to the tears coming down my cheeks. I made it home but looked at the clock every fifteen minutes, finally backing off to every half hour by lunchtime. When I went to pick him up, I again felt overwhelmed. What if someone was mean to him? What if his lunch was spoiled - had I sealed the baggie with his sandwich? What if a big kid smashed his lunch? Did the teacher 'get him' at all, whatsoever - understand how special and smart he is? What if he had to go to the bathroom? We didn't really go over that, how to wipe down the seat and line it with toilet paper, at home. How many ways have I failed him as his parent? I was expecting a mal-nourished kid with a black eye.

The bell rang, and he wasn't among the first kids out. I started to worry. But after about a dozen kids, I saw my own. His smile was so wide that it jump-started my heart, dried the tears that were starting to form when I wondered when the damn dismissal bell was going to ring.

"It was great!" he said. He recounted his day for me. The reading was books that he had done a long time ago, but the teacher had let him read a lot out loud because some of the other kids apparently "hadn't practiced" as much as he had. He played with four or five or six boys (there were two or three Andrews and one or two Joshuas, so I couldn't be sure if he was referring to the same kid a couple of times or another with the same name). They were segregated from the big kids on recess - again, how in the heck could I have failed to ask about this on orientation day?

We sat in the car, and I watched him put on his seat belt. He looked up at me confused, my smile lost in my last thought.

"You know, you are such a big boy now," I said.

He tilted his head.

"Dad, I'm just in kindergarten, you know," he said, allowing his old man a grin.

I was there to drop him off and pick him up every single day. I did the parent-teacher conference alone (Janet had a meeting). I went to his Halloween program alone (another meeting) and took pictures so she could see how cute he was in the Christmas program (she was out of town in training for a new, somewhat lucrative job or promotion from what I could tell).

We had long, enthusiastic talks about his day at school. He always wanted to learn more. We read at night for an hour at least. Our walks were the best, though, talking about why things are the way they are, and are not. The wisdom of my little boy astounded me. I was glad I was getting to really know him. And I was glad that he was getting to know me; the new, improved me because I don't think the man his father was before the counseling, before the breakup would've added a whole lot to his young life during these intellectually formative years.

The only really hard times were Thanksgiving and Christmas. Janet had family not far from town, so Garrett went with her for a turkey dinner. I had a turkey sandwich but was otherwise content to go for a jog and watch football, passing on my mother's invitations to go to St. Louis to see her family and several of my cousins - that was just too far away from Garrett. Besides, I

rationalized that a big turkey dinner wasn't in my weight's best interest (I was down to 175). The rest of the Thanksgiving weekend was harder. Over the past year, I had written up just about every out of state college athlete in the area for their hometown newspaper. I didn't want to free-lance for the Herald – I had just quit as sports editor and being a part-time writer wasn't exactly the path I was pursuing (though the money would've helped).

But it was a big enough town to where I didn't always run into people who had known me. When I did have to explain where I'd been and what I was doing, I joyfully explained I had a career change and was now "consulting" because it sounded better and more socially/economically acceptable than "freelancing." I volunteered for my son's class with 14 other parents – all moms, one of whom remarked how "cute it is to see a man that is 'kept.'"

I didn't smile, though keeping my true thoughts, not to mention actual situation, to myself was more than this woman deserved.

When Garrett was in school, I went to the gym, probably too often, because I should have been chasing free-lance work. But I had exhausted the very rudimentary free-lance opportunities I knew of. The thought of not knowing what was next (as to how I'd pay the "next" rent, how I'd pay the "next" round of utilities or cable) was unsettling.

I hadn't seen much of Gene or Ralph. Since Ralph and Lucy had hit it off so well, no one saw much of him. He had given up his part-time job at the paper. The last time I saw them was a Saturday night when we were over at Gene's apartment (he had the same one he'd had since moving there six years earlier), an expensive two-bedroom apartment out near the interstate, in a complex with an indoor pool, elaborate on-site workout facility – and astronomical rent of \$1,200.

Ralph had arrived late that Saturday night and looked as if he'd been crying. Gene and I had never had the chance to praise – or debrief – Ralph on how much his life had changed, his troubling sociological views torn down and properly rebuilt because he was always with Lucy, which was fine with us, because she was so very right for him. He had been planning to take her to meet his family over the holidays and ask her to marry him on Christmas. Gene and I had limited contact too, because he was working harder than ever before at the paper, and frankly, I was a little too embarrassed to have him over to my tiny, sparsely furnished townhouse.

"What's going on, Ralph boy?" Gene asked.

“My father,” he said. I think Gene and I knew exactly what he was going to say, but it was only his place to say it.

So he did.

“Son of a bitch won’t let me bring Lucy home,” he said. “Said no N-I-G-G-E-R in his house or in his family. Called me a spade lover. Told me we’d have fucked up kids. ‘It won’t come off when you wash them,’ is the way the bastard phrased it.”

Ralph spelling the N-word would have made Gene and I smile under any other circumstance. Not this one, though.

“Forget him,” I said, knowing Gene would disagree because in Catholicism, family is something to be prayed for, tolerated even, but never abandoned. “You’ve chosen a life different from his. You chose happiness.”

The mood needed to be lighted.

“And quite frankly,” I said with a smile, “she’s way too pretty for you anyway.”

Ralph smiled.

“Tell me shit I don’t know,” he said, a grin flashing only for a millisecond.

“At least she hasn’t cleaned up your language,” I noted.

Gene came back in the room, bringing, as always, another beer for me and him.

“Oh, bull!” Gene said. “You should see him around Lucy. He NEVER swears. He says ‘damn’ and she gives him this look...you oughta see it!”

“Yeah, well,” Ralph said.

“It’s a sign,” Gene whispered to me, “that our boy Ralph is changing. Joining society, you know...” I nodded.

I had missed this. I had been off being a dad. When I was free during the day, Ralph was working. Gene was either sleeping or working or with his girlfriend. I saw him only occasionally at the gym, as he often worked out at his apartment complex’s facility. After a while, his constant asking of “How’s it going?” became something I dreaded. He probably didn’t mean it as literally as I took it. But I didn’t have a good answer. Should I say, Going broke, Making ends meet, Getting by. What? So our visits were short, but he was just arriving at the gym when I was leaving. We had talked about playing golf, but it would have been a tight squeeze getting back in time to pick up Garrett from kindergarten, which got out at noon. In first grade, it would be easier (if I had the money to golf) because Garrett wouldn’t get out of school until 3:15.

The truth is, Gene adored Garrett, and Garrett always seemed to smile when Gene was around. Someday, we'd get back to that normalcy. If I could find – much less define – what normal was supposed to be in this life of mine, a life that had been turned upside down (in no small part because of my doing). Perhaps it was designed to shake any loose change out of my pockets, as I felt my “attorney” had done to me. I drifted back into the conversation. This tone of Ralph's voice, this level of raw emotion, was something I'd long suspected – or hoped – existed but never actually heard. And now, the depth of his change, his new understanding, his new lease on life spewed forth with passion. Ralph had come to a crossroad. I was happy for him.

“That's not the half of it,” Ralph was continuing. “My mother. She came out last month.”

“And you didn't call us?” Gene asked indignantly.

“Come on,” Ralph said. “This is MY family we're talking about. I wanted to make it as easy on Lucy as possible. So, anyway, my mom comes out here, falls as in love with Lucy as I'll ever be. And so, she calls me at work today and tells me she's leaving my dad.”

More power to her, I thought, and as my eyes met Gene's, I could tell he was thinking the same thing.

“Guys, she's moving out HERE!” Ralph said. “She came out last weekend without even telling ME she was here. She said, ‘This is about me, honey, not you, don't think I'll ever be in the way’ – and got everything set up.”

“Good for her,” Gene said, catching Ralph and I off guard. “Nothing against your dad, but it'll be the best thing for her.”

Actually it was everything against his dad. She saw her son find freedom, not just in who to date, but who to be, how to live, how to decide for himself. I could relate. I had learned these things. One of the first things you learn when there's a lot of time alone is liking yourself. After that, everything gets easier. I learned that before I either didn't really like myself, or didn't know myself. My job had defined me. Since I had chosen to be a dad, I was choosing to let my son define me, which in a way, meant knowing myself because my son is an extension of me. I believed Ralph was headed down the same path, only it was Lucy opening that door, whereas for me it was my son.

“She's got a job waiting for her at the copy shop near the paper – assistant manager,” Ralph said, a muffled chuckle of sincere happiness, not mocking at the title. “She's ecstatic. She's got a tiny apartment at that fancy complex down the road from Gene's place.”

He was looking at me. His mother was going to live in the apartment complex I couldn't afford, that hadn't yet gone condo.

"But she's got a studio apartment, the tiniest thing you ever saw," Ralph added. "I don't know if it's because she's scared or she's putting on a face, but she's the happiest I've ever seen her."

She is putting on a face – her face, I thought, a happy face, a face she hasn't allowed herself to wear, a face she couldn't find for probably three decades. The mask is off, buddy, let your mother breathe.

"So I'm going back to drive her U-Haul out," Ralph said. "Here's the kicker: She hasn't told the old man. He's going to be away this weekend. I'm going to be accomplice to this shit. She'll follow me in my car."

An accomplice, leading someone to freedom. Like the underground railroad, only in 1999.

"And I need your guys' help," Ralph said.

"Name it," Gene said.

"I just need help unloading the thing," he said. "Probably just a dresser and her bed. I'm going to have one of the neighbors, a guy I went to high school with, help me load it all up back home. But when I get back here, I'll need some help."

"No problem," I said. "Just call."

We helped Ralph's mother that weekend. She wasn't wearing her happy face though. We moved the bed from one side to the other, and back again. His mother appeared frail and white as a sheet.

"This whole place isn't as big as my living room," his mom said to Ralph quietly.

Gene and Ralph went to return the U-Haul. Gene was to follow, and then return Ralph to the apartment in his car. I was left with Mrs. Soderberg.

"You know, it's going to be all right," I said.

"I hope so," she said. "My husband...he's never been alone before."

"That's where you're wrong," I said gently, trying not to convey disrespect. "He's been alone forever. You were his audience. Take his audience away, it should help him."

"Or," she said, "drive him crazy."

"It's none of my business, but from what I know, he's already started down that road," I said. "I just think you have a lot of courage to not travel it with him any more."

She smiled and put her hands on my hands. I was cold from unloading the truck, moving furniture. Her hands were warm. And when she smiled, that was warm, too.

“You know Ralph told me you have a little one,” she said. “I’d love to baby sit if you ever need one. I love kids.”

“Mrs. Soderberg, that’s so generous of you,” I said. “But I couldn’t afford a babysitter if the state offered discount services.”

She smiled.

“I’d never ask for a dime,” she said. “Time with our little ones is a treasure in itself.”

I figured Garrett would like her a lot, but I really didn’t have a need for a babysitter, and my own mother was first in line for that.

“Well, if I ever need one, you’ll be at the top of the list with my mom,” I said. Gene and Ralph finally came back. Ralph had stopped and picked up groceries. What a welcoming gesture, I thought. Lucy pulled up and came in, and Mrs. Soderberg hugged her. If only Mr. Soderberg could see this – provided the .22, the .12-gauge and Glock automatic Ralph told us he had were locked and the key thrown in a deep river.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Lucy said.

Ralph’s mom and Lucy unpacked the groceries and put them in the cabinets.

“What a charming kitchen!” Lucy proclaimed. “I don’t have this much shelf space.”

That clearly tickled Mrs. Soderberg.

“Yes, well, it’s not much – this place – but it’s probably more than I need,” she said. “And there’s a pool! I can’t wait for summer. I’ll swim every day. I used to swim when I was a child at the lake.”

“You never told me that, Mom,” Ralph said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” she said, and we all knew exactly what she meant. Lucy went on about how cute the apartment was. She talked to Mrs. Soderberg and they decided that the bed should be moved, and so Gene and I moved it as Ralph stood, his hands in his pockets, taking a deep breath, taking it all in.

“This will give you more room,” Lucy said. “I have a table that would go just perfect there,” she added, pointing toward an open area between the counter and where the TV was going to go, once one of us picked it up from behind the front door and moved it there. As if on cue, Gene did just that.

“I already had the cable hooked up and paid it for the first year,” Ralph said.

Gene was shaking his head. I was smiling. We were all so proud of Ralph, but Ralph’s mother was feeling a pride we couldn’t really fathom.

“You have \$500 credit for utilities, too.”

“Honey,” Mrs. Soderberg said. “I have a job.”

“And no car,” Ralph said.

“The bus picks up out front and stops a block from the copy shop,” Mrs. Soderberg said.

“You can use mine, ANY time,” Lucy said. “Ralph could drop me off at school. He does half the time anyway because he picks me up after work, since I coach at practice until 5:30, 6 or so.”

“Well, now,” Mrs. Soderberg said.

She was beaming. She and Lucy went back over the apartment. They went to the closet – a walk-in closet, in a studio apartment! – and Lucy made some suggestions.

“We could pick up some organizers at Wal-Mart,” she said, out of our view, as both of the women were in the closet that was probably one-eighth of the whole apartment in square footage. “You know, there’s so much more space in here than I’ll ever have!”

Mrs. Soderberg was home.

That would have been enough for her for a day, for a week, for a month, for a year. For years.

But there was more.

“Ralph, have you told your mother?” Lucy asked, as Gene and I were about to leave.

Ralph looked at her.

“Uh, I was thinking later,” he said.

Lucy shot out her left hand, as if catching a door about to slam. A ring with a modest diamond circled her finger.

“We had planned to wait for Christmas,” Lucy said. “But we decided to now, because—”

“Lucy!” Ralph said to halt her.

“Because, Elise,” she said to the woman I had known only as Mrs. Soderberg, “we’re getting married in two weeks. And you’re going to be a grandmommy.”

Mrs. Soderberg cried like I’d never seen anyone cry before. Maybe from 30 years of an abusive marriage to a controlling, racist man. Maybe because Gene had a new life. Maybe because she had her own life back.

Maybe because she was going to be able to baby sit after all.
For her own grandchild.
She'd escaped the pirate.
And a little treasure was on the way.

I didn't want my son to be as lousy in sports as I was. I think that's an area where I especially missed having a father, both when my father was alive and when he was dead.

Garrett's mother, if I recall one of our few deep discussions, had been quite an athlete up until the end of junior high. So Garrett and I went out in the postage stamp of grass that made up the front yard for us and our neighbors in front of the townhouses. I showed him the proper stance, had him take a few practice swings, then threw him a few pitches, which he was unsuccessful swinging at. I took some time for more instruction.

"Watch the bat meet the ball," I said, holding his arms out, my hand on the bat too, and flipping the ball, gently tapping it forward with the bat. He looked frustrated.

"Maybe you can just throw it better," he said as I took a few steps back to pitch to him.

"We're both learning, bud," I said.

"No, because you already know how to bat a ball," he explained.

"No, we're both learning because I've never showed someone how to hit a ball before," I said. "Let's both learn. I'll be a better teacher. That'll help you hit the ball better. Deal?"

He smiled, the one tonic that always left me high, but never hung over.

A couple of foul balls. A couple of swings and misses. And then, the first hit to end all first hits. I had thrown a couple of low pitches, and like a good hitter, he was adjusting. He extended his arms and made solid contact with the ball, sending it out of our tiny front yard and across the street, where it bounced off of a neighbor's old Volvo.

This neighbor was also home for the day, though I'd never met him. I saw him get up off of a lawn chair. He was holding a beer, and his first step showed it wasn't his first because he knocked over three cans with one step. We were looking at our first baseball fight, just like the guys on TV, I could just feel it.

"Whoa!" he yelled.

“Hey, sorry about that!” I piped up. Garrett’s feathers were up – proud as a peacock – his concern nil, for he had just homered on his first-ever hit. He might not be picked first at school when they play ball, but my fear that he would, like me, be picked last, was eased.

“Holy cow!” the guy said, looking at his windshield. “What a hit!”

He threw the ball back to me.

“I didn’t think he’d do that,” I said, still walking toward the man, but not as slowly now.

“Homer Jameson,” he said, extending his hand after flipping me the ball. I had a mitt with a ball in it on my left hand; he had a 16-ounce Budweiser in his left hand. So we shook and I introduced myself.

“And slugger over there is...?”

“That’s my son, Garrett.”

“Good hit, Garrett! You must be the best one on your team!”

Garrett smiled and waved his hand by way of thanks.

“How old are you Garrett?”

Garrett shifted the bat to his left hand, and held up the five fingers on his right hand.

“This many!” Garrett called out.

“Wow, you might be the best 5-year-old hitter there ever was!”

“Thanks,” Garrett piped back to him.

I walked back to our strip of lawn and looked at my son, who was already back in his batting stance, the suddenly magic plastic wand waving eagerly above his head.

“Come on, throw it, Dad!”

I looked around. There were several other cars on the street, several a lot closer than Jameson’s, especially if Garrett pulled the ball, which he was bound to do as he got the hang of this more and more.

“How about we take this game to the park?”

“Let’s go,” Garrett said.

“Go to writinggigs.com – there’s a ton of free-lance things,” Gene tells me a week later, though he admits he heard it only second-hand from a friend he met at his previous job.

We hang up. I log on and am grateful when AOL connects me – I have my AOL account on my lone remaining credit card that has room left, but the room, I know, is scarce, and the \$37 I have to pay that month will cover only interest.

I go to the Web site. Nothing up my alley. Only six possibilities, and nothing that I have any experience in (a sewing Web site: Fabrics&Fun.com, a stamp collectors site and magazine: CollectingFever.com, and a bowling site: UpYouralley.com, etc.).

However, one ad is very intriguing, physically intriguing because I am a guy, financially intriguing because this online publication wants “weekly reviews up to five submissions – LoveOnTheRun.com.”

It is porn. Submission in its final form, as a participant, a viewer, but as a reviewer?

“Do you like adult videos?”

Absolutely not. No way. Never. There’s no plot ... well, once upon a time, I used to, in college, but then again, me and the rest in the audience in my small apartment were usually trashed. Cripes, every guy likes – at least at one time liked – porn, whether he admits it or not.

Porn to a nearly middle-aged, single father is workout-video infomercials at night with women in workout outfits showing you how they allegedly got their rock hard abs or long, long, long firm legs in seven days, or your money back, guaranteed. Sound is better down on the TV for these infomercials.

“Do you like to watch people having sex and writing about it?”

Hmm, never thought about it THAT way...however, practically, there are laws against that in this town, at least to the extent where this involves peeking through windows... a girl in college that I had taken out asked me if I wanted to watch she and her roommate. But I chickened out and didn’t call her again. Of course, I never told my buddies, either, because I’d have been thrown out of the “Guy Club” where there are three rules: 1. Never sleep with your buddy’s girl, or his ex. 2. No crying. 3. Never say “no” to watching girls have sex.

“You watch, see what you think,” this girl had told me. “Do whatever feels right.”

“Like, um, join in?” I asked.

“Well, you could take care of yourself,” she said. “If my girlfriend likes you, joining in is a possibility,” she added with a coy smile.

Well, my options were playing with myself in front of two girls, or maybe being asked to be the jack man for the wild ride.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“What?” she asked incredulously.

“Just, no,” I said, and left her porch. Of course, I was turned on by the idea – not the playing with myself part, which I hope I made real clear.

God, why does that always creep into my mind when I hear anything about porn? I never was into porn, though I watched it with the frat boy fervor that was required and never bitched about it. I just had a hard time watching it with seven or eight other guys. I mean, didn't THEY realize that the guy to their left, and right, were as erect as battleship flagpoles? That made me feel a little funny.

Well, on this porn-review ad, there is an email address. I send a note: “I've been an editor at a newspaper and am a free-lance writer. I do a lot of feature writing, and in the past reviewed (non-porn) movies.” I sent that to a woman named Amber Azure, according to the ad.

I logged off, and as I plugged the cord back into the phone, it was ringing.

“You want to write about porn?” this gruff voice interrogated on the other end of the line.

“Uh, well,” I said. I wondered if the religious right was using this as a set-up. I had taken the bait – hooker, lines and winker...jeez, not the time to have useless, clever puns pop into my head.

“DVDs or video? \$30 for DVDs reviews, \$25 for videos, as many as you want a week,” the man said, still not identifying himself.

“Well, I'd certainly like to learn more about it,” I choked out.

“Listen, we send you tapes of people fucking and sucking, you write about it,” he said, a cigarette raspy-ness a part of every syllable. “What's confusing you?”

I don't know what to say. The pause is too long.

“You there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

There is another pause.

“Whoa, wait a minute,” he said. “You gay? Because if you are, it’s not a problem. We have a whole slew of tapes with guys banging other guys. Listen, it’s not for me, but if you’re into the whole anal thing guy-on-guy, we can set you up. If you’re into the ass business, we got it from head to toe. I’ve got ‘Bending over backward until it feels like bending over forward’ and ‘Come in the back door, please,’ sitting on my desk, right here. It’s only \$10 a review, but...”

“No, no!” I said. “It’s just that...”

I hear a voice in the background.

“Dammit, now!” a female voice rang out.

“Hold on,” the man without a name choked out, hacking into the phone.

“This is Amber Azure, Mr. Lambert,” a female voice said.

“Yes, Bob Lambert, I just emailed you,” I said, “and...”

“I know,” she said. “Newspaper experience. Perfect. We just posted the ad this morning. A bunch of sickos have responded, but no real journalists. This is killing me. We have to have reviews on the site by next Tuesday – five days – or we lose the studios that have committed to advertise. I’ve been writing two reviews a day on the weekends, one every other day during the week – just too much for me to do on the business end of it, to do much writing. We do have good industry support, but if the reviews aren’t up there, I’m shit out of luck.”

Shit as an adverb, I thought to myself, this woman’s a real journalist. Amber Azure, have I heard that name?

“So, I can FedEx these four tapes and two DVDs out to you, if you can give me some kind of guarantee that you can have my reviews flowing in, say two or three a day, for at least the first week,” she said. “We don’t exactly check references...”

“I didn’t see where you asked for them,” I replied.

“Listen, I was in newspapers, too,” she said.

“Yes, well, I thought so, but in all the state press association releases I had seen, Associated Press bylines, and the various news services, I never saw the name Amber Azure,” I said.

“Think about it,” she replied. “This isn’t the kind of thing where you use your own name. I’m no more Amber Azure than you are. I used to work at the Times.”

“The LA Times?” I asked in awe.

“The New York Times, the REAL Times,” she said confidently. “Don’t ask my real name. I don’t know you well enough. I got a six-figure signing bonus for this, and four times what I’d

ever make at the Times in the best-case scenario.”

“Holy cow,” I said.

“Well, economically, it’s been my best move,” she said. “I was pissed at my editor at the Times for about the 20th time, and this came along through a head hunter. I’m obviously not using my real name, so I can probably return to the Times – in a different department of the newsroom – if it goes south. But there’s a lot of money here. So...well, anyway, enough about me – though it is refreshing to talk to a real journalist again. You need to think of a name for your online byline.”

Like Buck Naked, I thought, or 2Much4U Johnson, or B. Gest Member. I held in a laugh.

“Nothing stupid,” she said. “And remember, we need good writing, but you’re not going to win any awards for this. You’re not going to have any clips from this to show to future employers in the writing world. You’re not going to make any friends with anyone who can help you later in life, unless you are only looking to get laid, in which case I’d like you to tell me now...”

There is a long pause. She continued.

“Good,” she said. “Email me your address and consider them on the way.”

Another pause.

“Are we on the same page?” she asked. “You’ll probably have to watch each tape a couple of times, just so you can do the review justice.”

Another pause. Say something quick, if you want this money, dirty as it might be. I turn and look at the counter: The utility bill. The water bill. Car insurance, which I couldn’t afford today even if I was a porn addict who wrote around the clock.

“Yes,” I said. “This sounds, well, uh, er, good. It’s just that, well, I am divorced. I’ve got some good free-lance things, but not even to, well...”

“I almost sailed with you in that boat,” said Azure, or whoever she was. “I went through a divorce, kept the house in the Hamptons. Conveniently quit my job before my ex filed. He thinks I’m unemployed. I work from home 99 percent of the time. Had to come down here today to National Porn Emporium – I took a cab because I am all but positive our friends in the religious community take down the license plate numbers of anyone who drives through the security gate – to reassure my boss that I had this review thing under control. My office is an empty desk and a phone I’d have to blow the dust off of. Anyway, I want to keep my house and my kids. And this

job...well, shitty as it may be, is my ticket to being a stay-at-home mom with no money woes.”

I understand, I want to tell her. In fact, I want to tell her my own life story. But heck, I don't even know this woman's real name.

“Clancy Prince,” I said.

“What?” she asked.

“That'll be my byline,” I answered. “Get me the tapes. We're in business. Thanks.”

“All right,” she said. “If this works out, I'll help you out however I can. I still have a pretty good name in the journalism game. I was a senior business writer at the Times. In fact, when I gave my notice, my managing editor told me to stay in touch because the boss that prompted my quitting might be on his way out the door...then again, I like being at home. Anyway, I'll write my life story someday and you can read about it then.”

She giggled and sounded absolutely charming. So charming that I really didn't know if I really wanted to hear her real name.

“Tapes on the way, then,” she said. “Email me, though. I'd rather not leave anything in writing in this office, if you know what I mean. I'll get your mailing address and forward it directly to shipping. You should have enough videos and DVDs tomorrow to keep you, well, entertained, for a good week or two. But get through it fast. The sooner I have some reviews to post on the Web site, the better. You'll be dealing only with me, so that will keep things simple.”

“All right then,” I said. “Thanks.”

We hang up, and I wonder if I've done the right thing.

The next day, the FedEx van pulls up in front. A stunning woman in a ponytail comes to my door.

“Have to sign for this,” she said, thrusting an electronic clipboard toward me. “I suspect you know what these things are.”

She clearly suspects something. This is the kind of woman I could see myself asking out, even cold, without knowing a thing about her. She is definitely in shape, she has an honest job, and dang it, looks pretty adorable in her FedEx uniform.

“No, no,” I said as she hands me the box from the National Porn Emporium.

“You don't have to tell me a thing,” she said. “They ship, I deliver. There's a whole bunch like you out there. Several of them on this block, in fact.”

“No, no,” I repeat. “I am a writer. This...this...this is just a way to make some money. I'm

supposed to review them.”

“Whatever,” she responded, taking the clipboard and turning the other way.

“I’m serious,” I reply. “I’m not some loony tune sicko who gets off on this stuff.”

She doesn’t answer, and the woman across the street is getting her mail. I don’t say another word because I don’t want to explain to the world that I’m not a porn junkie, just a single dad trying to pay some bills.

My son is at school, yet I feel like I’m doing something terribly wrong as I insert ‘Oral Education’ into the VCR. I hit pause as I look at the review slip.

There are spots for “Erection Alert” and scribbled next to it, in handwriting, it says, “Put how long it took you to get aroused.” There’s a “Jack Off Factor” and, according to the note, I’m to write in my review how long I lasted before I, well, took care of myself. I fold the paper and set it on my desk, turning on my computer. I hit play on the VCR.

A busty, badly-bleached blonde in a negligee answers her door. A man steps in, and to shorten the non-existent storyline, she unzips him and...

Another knock at the door. Just before the man climaxes, she invites them in. Two more. She unzips, working one with her hand and the other orally. Another knock at the door. I’m only 20 minutes into the hour-long “movie,” and I’m not vaguely aroused. Can this be healthy, this woman performing this act this many times?

After six or seven guys, she changes outfits. She purrs like a kitten to the man she has just finished with and says, “You gotta go, it’s full service time.”

I’m having all of these weird thoughts, like, are these people on drugs? Were the women sexually abused when they were younger? Are these men rapist or pedophiles – or in the case of the porn flick “Man Bites Dog,” zoopheliacs?

She turns to the camera, and for as good as she looked from a distance, she looks scary up close. Her teeth are crooked and brown, and it looks like there’s a chip in both of her front teeth. I realize her dental hygiene shouldn’t be concerning me.

I write my first review. I play it pretty “straight” and talk about how busy this young lady is and how all of her customers appear very satisfied. I turn a couple of clever phrases, “For a movie with oral in the title, there’s very little talking,” and “if you don’t mind movies that ‘suck,’ you’ll probably get off on this one.”

Then I throw in a DVD. This feels like sacrilege because I’m using the DVD player from my

computer – a computer my son uses to go to various kids’ Web sites – to watch “Slumber Party, No Sleeping” as a red-headed, petite woman welcomes four guys in. I start to wonder if she really knows these men, the ones she’s having sex with. How do the cameramen tape this? “Bonnie,” the lead character, has sex with one man who is behind her and “pleases” another lying down in front of her, her head lost for a good few minutes in his lap.

I write the reviews for the first two and feel nauseated. I turn the tape off, stack them in the cabinet above the refrigerator, and pick up my son at school. When he’s sound asleep in bed that night, I stay up until 4 a.m. watching and reviewing porn. I am only aroused once when I see two people having sex in a bathroom, something my ex and I did more than a few times, but never on tape.

After I get my little boy up for school, I scan my reviews for typos. After logging on, I hit send, and it takes a few minutes as each file uploads to Amber Azure, the New York Times business writer who will be editing my copy about people having sex.

As soon as I hang up, the phone rings.

“Hey, it’s me – the reviews are very good,” she said. “It’s tough, isn’t it?”

“Yes, well, I’ve reviewed movies before, but none where you can actually SEE the people having actual sex,” I said. “To be honest, I wasn’t turned on – and I don’t know if that’s normal. Listen, I just don’t know if I can do this.”

She rolled out the magic words.

“I’ll cut you a check and FedEx you out a dozen more tapes and six DVDs,” she said. “And listen, since you obviously have some talent, I’ll double your pay for the next batch of tapes, triple it for DVDs – the industry is really pushing those now, and the budget has plenty of room for me to cheat since we haven’t had a lot of luck getting reviewers.”

She says all that, but all I hear is “*I’m sending you money and more money.*”

My mind has turned into a calculator. I will get \$600 for the tape reviews and \$540 for the DVDs. This is a (very dirty) gold mine.

There is a knock at the door the next morning at 11 a.m. I had taken my son to school and run 9 miles at the gym. After thinking about it, I wonder if I am compromising myself reviewing porn. I feel I have journalistically violated myself; yet the bills are going to be paid. I’m all for moral stands. I’m also for food on the table.

The same delivery woman is at the door. Her nametag, which I must have missed the last

time, reads Janet, same as my ex. I wonder if there is a message here.

“You’re keeping them in business,” she said, again not meeting my eyes. I tell her thanks and do not try to plead my case. After I sign and close the door, I open the box. There is a check for \$160, and before doing anything else, I head to the bank, cash the check, and pay all the bills except the car insurance.

Over the next week, I watch more porn than anyone should in a lifetime. I try to turn at least two catchy phrases per review. A couple of times, I almost vomit. I want to call Ralph or my other buddies, but I know they will do two things: Never let me live this down and ask me to get them free porn. Or worse, come over and watch it. I don’t want to become a satellite viewing theater for the National Porn Emporium.

I send in the reviews and realize at 4 a.m. that I can’t watch any more porn - ever. I’m out of the guy club forever. I’m all porned out. “Friends” is on. It’s the episode where Joey and Chandler have hit a combination of buttons on their remote, which accidentally gives them free porn. By the end of the show, they are across the hall asking Monica and Rachel if they can watch their TV. They can’t watch any more porn, they tell Courtney Cox, but they can’t be known as the guys who gave up free porn.

I’m just going to have to be that guy. I send the tapes back at the FedEx office that afternoon, using “Clancy Prince” as the sender’s name. I write “NP Emporium” as the recipient’s name, and if the guy weighing the package has any idea what that is, he doesn’t express it.

The next day, Janet comes to the door – doesn’t this woman EVER get a day off? I wonder. I tell her to hold on a minute. I open the box, take out an envelope, open it, pocket the check for \$1,140. That’s enough for the \$420 car insurance for six months, plus a month’s rent.

“Return to sender,” I told her.

“You’ve got to fill out a form,” she said.

“I can’t just write it on the box?” I asked.

“Hold on, let me get a form from the truck,” she said. “You’ll have to provide billing information, a credit card.”

“They told me just to use their FedEx account to return all tapes when I’m done reviewing them,” I said.

“No matter, you have to fill out the form,” she said.

I want to invite her in, but I’m aware that she thinks this is a porn den. So I copy Amber’s

FedEx number into the billing box.

“Can you reseal the box?” I asked.

“No problem,” she said.

She pulls a tape dispenser from her hip and seals it.

“We won’t be seeing each other again,” I said, and then wonder why I said it, realizing this woman probably thought about putting on rubber gloves before coming to my door.

“Listen,” she said, holding up her left hand, where I see no wedding ring. “You do what you have to do. We all do. But I think it’s admirable you’re returning these tapes.”

She smiles and it almost turns into a chuckle.

“What?” I asked.

“One more thing,” she said.

“What?” I repeated.

She points toward my fly. I look down.

Good God.

Getting porn delivered to my door. My fly is down. I’m surprised she let me use her pen. Anything I had planned to say is now out the window, as is my penis, save a very worn pair of Hanes. I had wanted to invite her in for coffee or ask her out to a movie. Heck, I could tell her that I’d probably be quite the lady’s man in bed, learning what I have from two weeks of practically round the clock porn, at least during in-school hours and at night. Alas, there is no dramatic send-off, no sweet words. Just me zipping up as she turns around. This is humiliation in its worst form. This is the dream where you go to school without clothes. And you’re caught with porn!

“Good luck,” she said, and walks back to her truck.

My career as a porn reviewer is over. I head to the bank and deposit the check after being told I’d have to fill out forms to get more than a thousand dollars in cash back. No matter, I write checks for the rent and car insurance and head home, wondering from where my future income will come.

To be honest with myself, I realize I have no idea. But it won’t come – not the right word, but not the right time to search for another – from watching people have sex.

No dates, no prospects. I was tired of waiting for Gene or Ralph to have their girlfriends set me up. Frankly, it was a little pathetic, too, to count on someone else to find me love.

So I went lower.

I went online to a free personal ad section. You could find your “exact” match, and that sounded pretty neat. I had trouble negotiating my way through creating my own personal profile. At first, the personal template said a “female” looking for a “male.” I kept looking ahead, adjusting the spot defining me from “female” to “male” and answering questions. I was in “good shape” not with a “few extra pounds” and definitely not “large.” What was my idea of the perfect first date? I could choose “dinner in a public place and a movie,” (the politically correct answer) “videos and chatting on the sofa,” (the first half appealing to most men) or “ice cream and a day of shopping,” (I’m guessing that was the one that catered to women).

After filling out the questionnaire, it offered me a chance to proof it. I just clicked away, glad to be done with it. I didn’t want to review my answers to the corny questions. As suggested, I hadn’t divulged much about myself, which I assumed was a safety guard.

The next night, a Thursday, when I logged on, I received an instant message from “FitNfirm.” She sounded interesting.

“Saw your personal ad,” FitNFirm typed. “Think we could talk?”

I typed that my child was sleeping, and if I logged off to free up the phone, I’d only run the risk of waking up my child (I didn’t denote the sex of my child, a self-imposed safeguard, I supposed).

“I understand,” Firm typed. “Wow. A kid. Good for you. So you have an ex?”

“Of course,” I typed. I guess she just wanted to confirm that I was no longer married. This Internet dating thing, I had heard and read, was full of potential pitfalls not to mention danger. And I suppose married men could hide behind their keyboard and line up dates. Well, I couldn’t fault her for asking. I asked FitNFirm about her ex, and she said, “Never married, not planning on it.”

“When did you discover this was you, the real you?” Firm typed.

I had no idea what she meant. That my marriage had fallen apart? That I wanted to be a single dad?

“I’m still in the process of discovering me,” I typed.

“Totally relate,” she typed. “It was hard for me, too. My parents still don’t have a clue who I am.”

“Oh, well,” I typed back. “At least you know who you are.”

She asked how old I was. I told her mid-30s.

“I’m only 25,” she said. “And I’ve never been with an older man. But I’m good with it, if you don’t mind me being a bit younger.”

I said that was fine. Heaven knows what we’d talk about. But jumping in with both feet didn’t mean standing at the edge of the pool feeling the water with my toes. It meant taking a sort of plunge, a leap of faith.

“No, I’m good with it,” I typed, feeling a bit lecherous. Let’s see, when I was graduating high school, she was starting kindergarten. That wasn’t a good vision. Well, she is now an adult, and I’m an adult.

“By the way, my name is Fran,” she typed.

“I’m Robert,” I said, being as careful as possible. It wasn’t like that isn’t my real name. It is.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I’m self-employed,” I wrote. “You?”

“I’m in the fitness business,” she wrote. If she is anything like those very fit and firm women on the late night infomercials, I don’t care if she’s 25 or 45. This was starting to sound good. Really good.

She wanted to meet Friday night. Well, she was moving a bit fast. But why not jump in with both feet, a convincing thought that was gaining speed. Garrett would be at his mother’s Friday and Saturday night. The prospect of being alone wasn’t all that appealing, especially if Miss FitNFirm looked anything like her screen name.

“Okay, let’s,” I typed boldly.

“Want to start with a drink first?” she typed. “Then we could drive up to the mountains, if you’d like. I’ve got a little truck, very comfy. A shell on the back. Maybe, you know, if we like each other, we could just take it from there?”

Cool, a girl who was fit and had a truck. The mountains, though, well, that sounded really fast. Or was it? I had been out of the dating loop so long that I didn’t know fast from slow. I figured as long as I knew wrong from right, I’d be fine.

“One more thing,” she typed. “I’m not saying we’re going to do anything, but I need to know

if you've been tested.”

“There was a test on the personal page?” I typed back.

“No, TESTED,” she typed. “For, you know, that.”

“What is that?” I typed in response.

“HIV,” she typed.

I stared at the term. It was unsettling. But I reasoned that at least this was one girl who was going to cover all the bases. I had to respect that.

“Sure,” I typed back. “I haven't been with anyone since my ex. And before our child was born, we both had to be tested for about everything, including that and a bunch of other stuff – syphilis, anemia even.”

We decided to meet in the parking lot across from “Tom's Tavern” which had a movie theater adjacent to it. The single-screen theater had closed down when the megaplex 16 had opened at the mall a block down the road. I hadn't been to “Tom's” before, but driving past it a few times it appeared rather upscale. And I had to be open to trying things.

We'd talk in the parking lot for a minute or two in her truck, make sure all was well to start out with, and then have a drink, and, she typed, “just kind of play it by ear.”

I wrote that all of that sounded just fine.

“Oh, I can't wait!” she typed. “See you tomorrow night. 8 all right?”

“Fine,” I wrote back. “Looking forward to it.”

“I'm going to call it a night,” she typed. “I don't want to sound too forward, but I've got to get out of this thong. It's killing me.”

“All right then,” was all I could type back, my fingers shaking as a wave of excitement crashed over me and left me otherwise speechless, even in a cyber-sense.

By the time I went to bed, I found I was aroused for the first time in months. I didn't do anything about it – I wasn't that lonely yet, I told myself. Still, it didn't make it easy to fall asleep. I wondered about Fran's hair. Was it long and blonde, or did she have closely cropped black hair, lining her high cheekbones...

For some reason, I felt guilty the next day. I was excited for something other than being a dad. But Garrett would understand when he was older. He had an “extra special” day at school and produced a colorful, chalk picture. He and I were holding hands looking at a snowman that we had just built together, he told me. What a sweet kid.

After he went to his mother's, I went for a walk. What would my first "line" be tonight? I was about 12 years removed from either being "cool," or knowing what "cool" was in this day and age. I dressed casually. And finally cared about how I looked. I was able to wear a pair of khaki Dockers I hadn't worn in two years. I chose a casual but sharp looking button-down, short-sleeved shirt.

I started wondering what would happen if things progressed and we left for the mountains in her truck. Granted, going up Highway 24 to the mountains would take only 45 minutes. But would my Blazer be safe in the parking lot of the old theater? What kind of a thought is that, I wondered to myself. Play it by ear, your vehicle will be fine, and focus on Fran.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I saw a cute little Ford Ranger. I thought I had seen it before, with its high camper shell on the back, but I couldn't place it. Besides, there must be a hundred such vehicles in this city, I told myself.

I drove toward the passenger side and swung around to park on the driver's side. I wanted her to see me first because I didn't want to startle her. I pulled in, and the door opened.

Out came a guy. Great, I thought, her boyfriend. My first date is going to end with a fight in a parking lot. It was dark – the streetlights for the theater weren't on, and the only light was from across the lot where the bar's parking lot had filled up. I debated about backing out right then. But the guy was walking toward me. I didn't want him to kick in the side of my Blazer. I'd just explain that there was a misunderstanding, I didn't know she was spoken for (if people that age knew what "spoken for" meant) and I'd leave.

But I didn't see a woman in the truck. If she was hiding in the back, then, well, this could be some weirdo freak thing, and I definitely wasn't into that. But he already had his hand on my passenger side door. I left it locked and quickly got out my side. As I stepped toward the front of my vehicle, I recognized the guy – the trainer from the gym who told me it was me who was off, not the scale.

"Hi, again; well, this is a surprise," he said.

I went around and shook his hand. His girlfriend had sold out, told him of her plans, and he had left her, I thought, to "go settle this" on his own.

"Man, you have lost all that weight and then some – I haven't seen you since I quit that dead-end job at the gym months ago," he said. Then he looked me up and down, and said, "Look at you!"

“Hey,” I said, taking his hand as he shook it. “I had no idea. I’m Bob.”

“Not Robert?” he asked.

I was confused. His girl had even told him my name!

“As you’ve probably guessed,” he said, “I’m Fran.”

What? You’re who? What? Where? Where is the girl? You are both named Fran?

Wait a minute.

“I had no idea,” he said. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as gay.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. FitNFirm was fit and firm. And male. Very male. Male, male and male, even in sexual preference.

“I am so sorry,” I said, putting my hands in my pocket. “I, uh, I’m not gay.”

“What, is this some kind of sick joke?” he asked. He was all decked out, too, dressed to the hilt. Probably in a thong, I thought, getting chills as last night’s online chat went through my mind.

“No, I don’t know how this happened,” I said. “I placed a personal.”

“I know,” he said. “I found it. Male seeking male.”

Oh, no.

“I must’ve screwed up,” I said. “I must not have checked ‘female’ for what I was ‘seeking.’ I mean, the main page said ‘female’ seeking ‘male’ when I entered the Web site. I must’ve only changed ‘female’ to ‘male’ and forgot to click ‘male’ to ‘female.’”

He studied me for a second. For a gay guy, Fran would be quite a catch. But I wasn’t a gay guy. I think he sensed I was serious in my error. I wondered he if was going to go ballistic. While I’d fight him if I had to, the police report would be hard to explain, most of all to those at the paper, who check these reports every morning, especially – on weekends.

“Okay, my man,” he said. “I guess it could happen – failing to change the second box from ‘male’ to ‘female.’ You’ve got to pay better attention, though.”

“Yes, no kidding, don’t I know that,” I stammered, wanting to be home and alone more than anything.

He looked around, and we stood there in uncomfortable silence for several minutes. There were no numbers to exchange, no “see you later” to pass off.

“Well, want to make the best of it?” he asked. “Game’s on TV. We could grab a beer.”

I didn’t want to grab anything. Or have anything grabbed.

“Listen, I am an idiot,” I said. “But I, er, well, I’m just not into that.”

“Not into making friends?” he asked, sounding a little offended.

“No, it’s just that, I screwed up online,” I said. “I think I’d rather go home, fix or delete my personal, and, well, move on.”

“All right then, man, your choice,” he said. He extended his hand and we shook.

He headed toward the bar, walking backward.

“Just don’t judge,” he said. “Don’t judge if you don’t know. Cause you don’t understand.”

“I wouldn’t judge anyone,” I said. “It’s just not me.”

“If you’re sure,” he said, opening his arms.

“I’m sure,” I said. “Good luck.”

“You, too,” he said.

I got back in my car and pulled out of the parking lot. How could I have been so stupid? I headed home and deleted my personal ad. Online dating wasn’t going to help me find my mate, I knew, even if I filled out the damn questionnaire right. Once was enough.

But I was dressed for the evening so I went to the mall, which wasn’t too crowded. I window shopped – that was about all I could afford – and went into the bookstore. I was in “fiction” holding Elizabeth Berg’s *Open House* when I heard – thankfully – a female voice call my name.

It was Samantha, Gene’s longtime, if somewhat off and on, girlfriend.

“Hey, there, stranger,” she said, giving me a hug. “Long time, no see. Gotta date with you tonight?”

“Good God, no,” I said, not offering any explanation for the defensive tone in my voice.

She smiled, we exchanged small talk. Gene was working late on Friday, as he always did.

“You’re so lucky to be out of that,” she said.

And unlucky to be out of a paycheck. I had checked out of my old life, in effect. But I didn’t want to get too philosophical with Samantha.

“Well, at least one of us has a date,” she said. I looked around. Her “date” that night wasn’t Gene. It was...

“Janet, over here!” she called out.

This evening cannot get any worse! Just what I want to see tonight, my ex-wife after my nearly first date with a man. And who did she dump Garrett off on? And, while I’m thinking of it, when did Sam and Janet stop hating each other enough to shop together?

A head popped up on the other side of a bookshelf. It wasn't my ex.

"Come here, someone I want you to meet," Sam said.

It was Janet all right. Janet, the FedEx lady. Her hair was longer than when I "met" her, what, three years earlier? And she was more tan than I remembered. God, she looked gorgeous!

I can't believe this, just what I need on the night of my nearly...to see the woman who delivered a library full of porn to my door.

"We've met," Janet said. Her hands were on her hips, so I kept mine in my pockets.

"Hi, Janet," I said. "As you know, I'm Bob. Bob Lambert."

"Yes, I recall," she said. And then she did something I didn't expect. She smiled. Her hair was down, flowing with soft curls. She had lipstick on, and her miniskirt while almost to the knees, was very attractive, as were her black nylons. And a V-neck shirt, flanked by an open jacket hugged her feminine shape.

"How'd that happen?" Sam asked.

The porn? I was broke.

"That you met?" Sam asked to break the silence.

"When I was starting out the free-lance thing, I had, well, uh, I had some stuff delivered that I had to write about," I said, before adding quickly, "but I stopped and haven't seen you since," I said, looking at Janet.

"Well, I think ol' Bob here is terrific," Sam said. "He left that rat race Gene is getting trapped in tonight, so he could be a full-time dad. He had the absolute worst divorce you could ever imagine. He was lucky to get out alive. Gene calls his ex 'the evil one.'"

She giggled. Janet smiled again. Great teeth. Sam and my (ex-wife) Janet had never hit it off. My ex was judgmental and didn't think much of Sam since she didn't have Janet's views on everything from the environment to politics. When Sam told Janet she'd have to smoke outside the first time we had dinner at Sam's house, the mold was cast. And that was the last time we'd gotten together, the four of us.

"How is that writing career going, anyway?" Sam asked

"Yes, the writing career," I said, seeing an opportunity to clarify or vindicate, Janet's previous interactions with me. "It was a struggle at first. I took any work I could get to pay the bills. But I'm lining up stuff every week. I've got a few manuscripts going. I want to be an author."

Sam came over and put her arm around me and endearingly started pitching me like a used-car salesman.

“If anyone can do it, Janet, it is this guy,” she said proudly. “Gene was telling one of his friends, Thomas something or another, the other day that Bob is the best writer he’s ever read, and my Geno has read them all. Bob, this will happen, just keep believing.”

Go on, I thought, sell her this old jalopy. High miles, needs bodywork completed, engine still misses when it comes to love, but lots left in this unit, one of the finest available.

“Hey, how about Ralph’s wedding?!” Sam added, shifting gears and leaving the Bob car in the dust. “I cannot wait to get to Vegas!”

I wanted to tell this Janet that I wanted to see her again. After all, we’d never forget our first meeting. But I didn’t. Sam and Janet headed toward the cashier, and I headed toward the food court. I had \$2 in change I had found in my car cleaning out the glove box. I had a large diet soda and walked until I finished it. The mall was closing in 20 minutes, so I window shopped to the far end of the mall and took a long walk outside to my car. Fresh air, I needed some.

When I got home, I had two messages.

“Just wanted to say goodnight, Dad,” Garrett’s voice said. “I love you.”

“I love you too, G-boy,” I said back to the machine.

The second beep went off.

“Hi, Dad,” Garrett said. “I love you the mostest. Okay? Goodnight.”

Ralph and Lucy were going to get married in Las Vegas.

“It’s not all that romantic, but it’s going to be fun,” Ralph said when he invited me. I explained for the first time that I wasn’t really in a position, financially, I confessed – to go to Las Vegas. He offered to buy my ticket, but Janet was going to be out of town for more training, so I’d have the little guy.

“Bring him,” Ralph said. “I’m buying. Besides, you and Gene are my best men. I could use a third, if Garrett’s up to it.”

Sold.

We had a blast in Las Vegas. Garrett never left my sight, but he never left Mrs. Soderberg’s side, either. He held her hand walking down the strip, and I had to do all I could to keep the tears in. How long had this woman wanted to hold a man’s hand, even a 48-pound little man? That in

itself made the trip worthwhile. Watching him go to Lucy's arm also warmed my heart. She, Mrs. Soderberg and Samantha took him for ice cream while the "guys" played a few slots at a casino caddy corner from a Ben and Jerry's. I was down \$5 when I called it a night. Gene was strapped on journalist's wages and didn't gamble. Ralph, who already had a sure thing in Lucy, put down \$10 and turned it into a hundred in a half hour.

We went back to get the girls. I saw Garrett from across the street. He had never let anyone pick him up, but when he extended his arms to Lucy to cross a street, it was just about the most natural thing I'd ever seen. I also wondered if he was getting enough love from his own mother, but that would be a concern that I'd think about another time, in a city without shining lights 24 hours a day.

The wedding was quick, but special in its own, Las Vegas way. Rather than stand in as a third best man, Garrett stood between me and Mrs. Soderberg, who never shed a tear, only smiled, during the ceremony. Garrett and I were the first ones back to our room each night. Mrs. Soderberg had a connecting room, and Garrett shuttled back and forth showing her and me his latest Lego creation.

"A smokestack," he proclaimed proudly. "A ship and a smokestack."

I laughed harder than he or Elise could understand. Because a year earlier, he was struggling still with his S's, R's and W's, and sometimes "A" sounded like a "U." Or at least it did when he called his first smokestack a "Fokefuck." From the mouth of my little babe...

When we got home, Garrett "graduated" from kindergarten. I took pictures (his mom had a new project that she had put in "80 fucking hours for, can you believe that?" that week alone).

We had a good summer. Money was tight. But I didn't think it was fair to keep him in town, mostly at home (except for daily trips to the playground). So we loaded up the camper and went to Yellowstone, and then into Montana. We stopped at the side of the road at rest areas to sleep most nights, but I did splurge for two nights in Yellowstone, and then three more on the way home in "Thermopolis" which had a series of natural hot springs flowing into a water park. Besides, the AAA discount got us into the RV park for \$8 a night and provided complementary tickets to the water park for two days. We talked at night for hours. He drew and built "things." We saw wildlife and geysers, met people and took lots of pictures. I read him a story the first night, but he asked me to make up a story the night after that. So for the final nine nights, I built on the story about "Glenn" who dreamed of finding a magic well, but in the end abandoned his

journey because to find the well, he'd have to leave his family and friends behind. And Glenn couldn't do that.

"Well, that's good," Garrett said as the story concluded when we were stopped in Casper, Wyo., for our last night. The camper was a bit chilly, out of propane, so we bundled up and slept side by side on the double bed that the couch folded out to – "Just like home," Garrett noted cheerily.

We came home exhausted, but our bags were packed full of smiles and memories. I called Gene and he got me a free ad in the paper to sell my motor home. Leaving it parked at Janet's house was a constant sore spot for her.

"Take it, or sell it," she had demanded several times. We had gotten hail damage on the trip. I didn't think it was severe, but the insurance company offered to settle for \$2,800 (sent to me within 48 hours, no less, after I overnighted the Polaroids proving the damage) provided I took care of it on my own, but under the condition I couldn't file again on it for hail. I took that money, and then sold the camper for \$5,000, making an even \$3,000 in profit (actual profit since I owed \$2,000 still on it).

That was good. Because that \$5,800 was basically all we had to our name, save an almost insignificant amount in the bank (anything is significant when you're broke, I learned). And there was a stack of bills – credit card, past due utilities (including final notices for gas and electric and cable that had come in the 10 days we were gone) waiting for us at home.

As I stepped into the Blazer that I had bought new – my first new vehicle – I realized that I had to liquidate my assets further. And that meant the thing I was sitting in, putting into gear, and backing up. But I couldn't back up much further financially. I'd take my car, trade it in, and get what I could for it, then get a cheap, very cheap, used car.

Ralph has a friend who sold him his car. I remember Gene and I went through it with him, and it was, at least four years ago, a fair deal. I went to see him.

"If you'd brought her in a year or 10,000 miles ago, I could do a lot better for you," he said.

Buddy, if you knew how many miles I've put on in the past year, you'd be a lot more understanding, I thought to myself, and there's another thing I could've traded in a year earlier to save me some money. Instead of answering, though, I shrugged my shoulders. I might be on the unemployed side of self-employed, but I wasn't a legal robber (a car salesman). I found a Toyota Corolla with 55,872 miles on it. Toyotas are reliable. And he explained that this one – OF

COURSE – was well maintained by one owner. The Blazer, with all the options and still relatively few miles, netted me \$13,800, or about 10 grand less than I'd paid for it two years earlier.

Depreciation. Depression. They even sound alike.

But he gave me what I honestly believed (and belief is everything in buying a car, especially a used one) was a decent deal, \$6,200. So I pocketed a check for \$7,300 (they forgot the “lot fee” of course, which stole \$300 from them so I felt like, even though they told me they were bending over backward, that I would have to endure a good shafting) and headed to pick up Garrett in the car.

“I miss, Mr. Blazer,” he said. He had tons of room and tinted windows in our SUV. Now, he can hardly see out the window, and he's in a very plain seat that, frankly, had seen better days. But he likes the stick shift, and by the time we are home, he is talking about how cool it is, that it “really is like a race car, Dad,” and we play “chase” running into the house. Even though I should feel like crying, I am smiling and at peace with the world.

And I was excited about first grade, even though we were only two weeks into the first semester. My son's world was expanding and every day was an adventure.

But I had to start planning for the future. Living month to month had been a struggle, but without any real income on the horizons, I started to wonder if I would have to get a job. But that would mean giving up full-time fatherhood.

No matter what, I couldn't let that happen.

I had almost 10 grand in the bank, which was about seven or eight months of financial survival. If no other bills popped up. If the new – only to me new – car ran fine. Insurance refunded me \$250, but I went ahead and applied it to next year because I was counting on there being a next year.

Still, the clock was once again running.

It just had a little more time on it.

We pull into the school parking lot and my son is beaming.

“You’re in the classroom today, right?” he asked with a smile that triggered something in my heart to smile back like there’s no tomorrow.

“You bet, bud, see you at 11,” I said, knowing I’d be there from 11 through lunch and computers until 2 p.m.

There were only a handful of fathers who brought their kids to school, and only one I know of who was, like me, a stay-at-home father. Don, who doesn’t volunteer, is married and his wife has a high paying job, judging by the cars they both drive. But Don showed up to pick up his kids reeking of alcohol a couple of times last year. Of course, since one or two moms smelled it on his breath, they all know now. He is no longer part of the club that I unwillingly, unofficially joined, although I suspect because of my penis, I am just an associate, not a full-fledged member.

First grade had turned into second and we were still surviving.

But barely. Still, my son has all the loving he needs from me. He still goes to his mother’s house, but mostly on the weekends, and sometimes only Saturday night. Many weeks he is with me all seven days, though she did swing by and take him for KFC or a Happy Meal on Tuesdays or Thursdays. Often she is right back with him because she is headed back to work, or at least that’s what she says.

School was once again enjoyable for Garrett, and palatable for me. I had thought about home-schooling him because I don’t enjoy the school politics. But I don’t think it would be in his best interests, overall. I know a lot of parents do it, but I suspect only a few do it really well. Besides, it is healthy for him, the social part of it, and though he probably learns more with me, and doing learning CDs on the computer, school is part of his regimen. Too much dad might not be best for him. Besides, I either work out, walk or chase down free-lance work while he is at school. It is a break for both of us, but I still miss him a lot every day. I often showed up a full hour before school let out. I’d bring a paperback and get through 50 to 100 pages, plus I’d get a plum parking spot, so we could get out of there, ahead of the mad rush of mini-van, SUV-driving moms in a hurry to turn the school parking lot into a potential demolition derby.

Of the mothers who volunteer at the school (there are two fathers, but I’m guessing they go only once a month or so, whereas I am twice weekly) very few are single mothers, which I can understand. There can be few things harder than raising a child or children alone in this world.

The single moms who volunteer have all my respect. *I'm you*, I think when I see them, *just without a vagina*. I want to talk to them because I can relate to them. But there is a pride among the somewhat poor, and it is expressed through silence.

To the “school motherhood club,” (the stay-at-home moms) their kids are everything, which I also respect. However, some of them seem unfulfilled – perhaps even bored – so they are immersed to their shoulders in this subculture of school “Momhood.” Some of them are at the school four or even five days a week. There are definite cliques. The worst is the Parent Teacher Association, which operates behind closed doors. Really, I’d figured out that they might as well meet in a women’s bathroom because it is all women - mostly the big (sometimes literally) gossipers.

I did not join the PTA and am not asked to join. It is clear who runs the PTA and the school. I patted myself for cleverness when I realized it should be the Parent-Teacher Club because a club is exactly what it is. The PTA kids get a little more space, a little leniency and I suspect some extra credit on their report cards, since their mothers are part of the liaison committee with the school’s teachers. Their children are the teacher’s pets, at least in the first- and second-grade classes I’ve been in, and I am glad my son is not among the pets because he is special on his own merits, and deserves/wants/needs no special treatment based on the bias or politics of PTA.

I am close enough, physically, to overhear some of their chats. The backbiting is sorority like, and the backstabbing would make Caesar quiver. There is a battle for power among the mom volunteers. Some suggest, very pointedly, that certain moms not be allowed to be at the school as often, or at least not be part of certain projects. I often wonder what is said about me, though I don’t think I am involved enough to have a vote, or be voted out.

Some of the moms in shape trash the heavy moms if it happens to be a mom she doesn’t like. And the heavy moms speculate that the physically fit moms – women they must view as anorexic or bulimic – must be having affairs.

“I mean, come on, what’s she trying to sell wearing a mini skirt to an elementary school,” one heavysset woman, PTA Treasurer, said to another, Mrs. PTA Vice Prez, as they mowed down leftover chocolate chip cookies after snack time.

Cars are a status symbol or so I’d inferred. Some have the big eight-person SUVs that get a handful of miles to the gallon. Anything that doesn’t get at least two miles to the gallon for each potential rider on board is not worthy of being produced in Detroit. Why regular people need

these space/gas/parking lot/air hogs, I have no idea. Many have mini-vans with only one, non-soccer playing child. My Toyota is more than enough for us, and the mileage keeps my gas and insurance bills low.

“I guess they aren’t doing as well as she’d have us think,” said one mom, pointing to another who drove into the parking lot in a very used, but new to her, Explorer with in-transit tags. “Of course, with all the time her husband puts into working outside that house on the weekends, and even weeknights, he doesn’t want a lot to do with her anyway. She’s lucky he got her that.”

Yet, when the woman got out of the Explorer, the one badmouthing her waved to her, and they were still visiting when I left 10 minutes later. Money is a constant source of entanglement in the conversations. One woman was pondering getting a job so she and her husband could upgrade to a house on “the hill,” about six blocks and as many tax brackets away from my neighborhood.

I would learn later that her husband ended up buying the house, told her she didn’t have to work, and started putting in 15 hours a week of overtime at his job to pay for the upgrade. She was also planning on upgrading to a more powerful SUV because “the city doesn’t feel it’s important enough to plow the street very often, and I’m not going to die going up and down that thing everyday.” Does she ever see her husband anymore? Do their children ever spend any time with their father?

If the scene weren’t so scary, it would be comical. And it’s not like I haven’t learned a lot from these moms. I know where, and where not, to shop for groceries and school clothes. Because some are such regulars at school, I’m almost ashamed to admit that I know their menstrual cycles. Some of these women are “real” – truly happily married, kind and caring souls. But those aren’t the ones who gossip.

“Look at this,” one mom said to another in the “pod” area outside the classroom, where we were cutting construction paper into strips for an upcoming poster. She was pointing to a blemish. “This is how my husband knows when to back off.”

I didn’t know what they were talking about until they continued.

“Well,” the other woman said, “when I *start*, my husband’s relieved because he knows I’m not pregnant. Thank God, I do the laundry. You wouldn’t believe it, I spot for two, three days every cycle.”

They laughed. I blushed and turned away, getting up for a drink of water.

But the time with Garrett is heartwarming. We are having more fun than I could ever imagine. I have gotten to know the best, kindest person I will ever meet in my life, and that is my son. But finances are tough, very, very tough. When I cashed out my 401K, I paid ahead five years on child support, and after living on what was left for a couple of years (aside from the help the free-lance work provided), there's under \$100 left in my savings account. I have a couple of free-lance checks coming in, but it won't be enough for rent, let alone food, the car payment, and bills, bills, bills.

I walk in the afternoons like a man possessed after my daily – literally every single day – pack of soup noodles for lunch and some weak powdered sports drink. Add that to the time at the gym each day and the “Financial diet” that I’m practically starved by, and I’ve lost most of the weight I ever hoped to when I quit my job. I have shopped extremely smart (thanks in part to the Momhood) and have stretched \$72.35 into two months of groceries. That has to be a record, one I would never tell anyone about.

I froze five loaves of bread when I got six for two dollars. I picked up tons of soup noodles when they were six for a dollar. Garrett loves those, and if I’m absolutely dizzy, out of my mind hungry, I will indulge in an extra package. But we really are at critical mass economically, so I’m doing all I can to conserve the food.

After school, I have taken to eating whatever is left of the peanut butter sandwich in Garrett’s lunchbox. He is such a neat freak kid that he seals the bag each day. With the remaining food in the cupboard, I am eating almost nothing (I weighed 168 before breakfast) -- but I am hungry and can’t survive like this for long. I don’t want Garrett’s friends to know that his father’s final meal of the day is leftover sandwich scraps, the odd cookie, and maybe some broken potato chips in the little Lays bag. I don’t want Garrett to see me quickly drinking some barely cold milk, the only milk I allow myself, as I face away from the living room where he is sitting, coloring. I finish the milk and rinse out the thermos quickly as he enters the kitchen, waiting to start on what remains of the sandwich.

“I know you’re hungry, Dad,” he said. I am confused, but he is smiling as he points to the baggie, which I have used five days in a row because we have only a dozen left. “So I saved you some extra today.”

I feel tears well up in my eyes and I hug him. How long has he known? How obvious have I really been? How much this little boy must love me...

“Listen, your dad is getting plenty to eat,” I say, holding him and trying not to shake, trying to win this battle against my emotions. “I just eat what’s left so it doesn’t go to waste. I want you to be a big boy and eat all your lunch from now on, all right?”

He only nods, and I suck my lips into my mouth so I don’t shudder and shake with sobs. I roll a shoulder, which is trembling gently, and then my forearm to my right eye to catch the tears that escaped.

“We’re going to be okay, you know,” I assured him. While he doesn’t know the extent of my money woes, he does know something is up. He’s seen me reheat what’s left of his dinnertime “O’s” (3 for a dollar, 25 left in the cabinet) and scarf them down at night. The little guy is extremely bright, so he’s obviously grasped what’s going on somewhat fully now. “We can always ask your mom to make lunch for you if it comes to that.”

“Nah,” he said, hugging me again because he knows, he understands. Because he loves me, he added, “If you don’t mind, I like your lunches the best.”

He might not know that our financial situation would be better served by his mother making his lunch. But moments like this are what keep me going when I know I’m going to have to search the couch and under the car seats tomorrow for change to put gas in my car.

The three-year membership I bought at the gym is up for renewal. I can’t afford it. On the last day of belonging to the gym I met my wife at, I weigh 155 pounds. I’m five pounds below my lightest adult weight and I feel good about myself.

But unsure about the future. Especially the immediate future.

Gene says his friend can probably give my free-lance career a boost.

“This guy does business with about 10 magazines, heck, maybe more than that – a big-wig, a money-man,” Gene said, and I have no idea if big-wig, money-man means editor, publisher, advertiser, distributor, or what – Gene’s a reporter, for crying out loud, so he should know these things.

“It’s Tuesday, so if tradition holds, he’ll be playing racquetball at the YMCA today. I did a story on his daughter – she’s the star tennis player at Valley High School, and I met him at the interview. I told him I don’t free-lance – not to mention the paper’s policy against it – but I

immediately thought of you. Let's go work out a little later than usual."

"Usual" is about 8:30 a.m., which is perfect because I'm home in time to shower and have lunch, whether I'm volunteering at school that day or not. So "unusual" might not work.

"How late?" I asked.

"About 11," Gene said. "He plays right before the noon hour and gets out of there about 12:30."

That's an adjustment I can live with, especially if it provides more money to live by. Gene is still working sportswriter hours, going in at 2 p.m. and not getting off until after midnight, so his day is pretty open. If he and his girlfriend, Samantha, ever walk down the aisle, I wonder what will happen to his schedule, his life and even his way of thinking about his career and what he wants in life.

We get to the gym, and the "regulars" that I usually see aren't there, save a couple of familiar faces heading toward the door as we walk in. We work out, and Thomas Gavin, a very large man, is playing racquetball voluminously – he grunts when he hits and talks after every single one of his opponent's shots. Between points his baritone bellows off the enclosed court, the sort of noise you expect to be able to actually see.

Though I'm exhausted after our weight workout (two packets of generic oatmeal for breakfast every day leaves me low on energy too), Gene suggested we kill a little time playing some basketball. Gene, though soft and not athletic looking now, was a standout on his high school team, and I was told not to come out by our high school coach, so the outcome is very lopsided, and I'm really tired when we finish. I figured that my superior athleticism would overcome my lacking technical skills. I was wrong. And, I was beaten.

When we come back toward the racquetball courts, Thomas is gone. I can't rearrange my schedule tomorrow or the next day because we're making a sign at school for recycling week. I know this because yesterday at school in the "pod" area outside the classroom while I listened to Gina talk about her husband waking her up for sex last night, I was, with probably too much energy, cutting green construction paper into strips to be used for grass.

Woken up for sex? That's nothing! I want to tell Gina. *I had sex in the women's restroom at a basketball game, we did it in the airport parking lot, we did it in the darkroom at the newspaper...* I am coming dangerously close to cutting off appendages (fingers, not the one directing both my thoughts and incredible cutting energy – I believe I am setting a record for

green construction paper grass strips produced, if such records are kept) – and these are ones I actually need and use. I catch myself and slow down.

And because Gina dragged her story out, our class has an acre of grass, enough for next year's worth of signs. But that's good. Because grass, like glass, can be recycled, unlike a broken heart. And I am just now realizing that's what I have. But I have my son so my heart will continue beating.

"Let's catch a shower," Gene said. "Thomas is probably in there now."

I'm not sure after seeing 300-plus-pound Thomas playing racquetball in a pair of biking or running (or waiting-to-die) tights that were...well, too tight, that I'm ready to start a relationship, even a business relationship, in the locker room. We head into the Men's Shower and Locker Facility, and, thankfully, Thomas isn't naked. Gene called out to him across the room, and he said, "Get your skinny butt over here!" to Gene. This is relative, I am aware, because Gene's butt is well...never mind. Anyway, Thomas is wearing – if my eyes aren't deceiving me – a black sweater and a towel.

Wait. We get closer, and there's no sweater. My God, we've found the Missing Link. Call National Geographic. Get a film crew over here from the Discovery Channel. There is literally a rug of black hair covering this man like nothing I've ever seen. Gene smiles at me, knowing what I'm thinking. And I know if I remotely express what I think, free-lance dollars will be going down the drain with the pound or two of thick, black hair that Thomas likely shed in the shower.

"I have someone I want you to meet," Gene said, slapping a high five with Thomas.

Inexplicably, Thomas drops his towel, and I don't know where to look. If I look at him, I will see, I fear, a blanket of black hair that makes it appear that Thomas is in a body suit, and I will break out laughing.

Thomas was holding a container of talc as Gene said, "This is Bob Lambert, a buddy of mine – he's a writer."

A smile from Thomas who splashes talc on his chest. He raises each arm and slaps his left pit with a right hand full of talc and then repeats it with his left hand, other armpit. This is how a black bear looks in a snowstorm, I think. Then Thomas sucks in his gut, and coincidentally the air in the room clears a bit. He dumps a dollop of powder into his hand and runs it along each side of his groin. I turn my head so I don't see "IT" or the black forest protecting this serpent that

I've turned my head to avoid seeing.

And then – *oh my Lord, is this happening?* – he extends his hand to me. It's a furry black hand with talc all over it, streaked clear to show skin where moisture from his...CROTCH...absorbed the powder from part of his hand. This is shaping up to give me nightmares, I believe, for years to come. Well, I'm hoping to get off (probably not the term I'm searching for, but my brain is doing back flips, begging me not to extend my hand) on the right foot with this guy, so I shake his hand, which is moist in parts and at the same time in other parts, talc laden.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. No one else notices the oddity of this meeting because we are, after all, in the men's locker room, and we are men. Women don't understand this, and I understand why they don't. I am confused. Women go to the bathroom together all the time, but I bet they don't shake after applying talc between their legs. But, this is the men's locker room, where, apparently, nothing is off-limits.

“I was hoping, Thomas, maybe some of the magazines you work with could hook Bob up with some free-lance work,” Gene said.

Thomas pulls on what looks like Speedo underwear – I swear to God that if he would have pulled on a thong at that moment, (de'ja'vu) I'd have run or passed out! His underwear is engulfed by flesh and hair, disappearing in a white cloud of talc. If this ever shows up on “Magic tricks revealed,” I will turn off the TV and tell my son the “Disappearing underwear” trick isn't something he needs to understand for years to come, if ever. I am drifting – which was Janet's biggest issue with me until we ran out of issues and resolved to be roommates – when I notice Thomas is looking at me as if I am supposed to confirm Gene's request.

“Yes, I'd like to get some assignments, some free-lance work – I really, really need the money, but I love to write,” I stammered, still trying hard not to wipe my hand on my shirt, my sweatpants – though a container of kerosene is the only thing that could cleanse my hand, and my conscience, at this point.

“Hey, no sweat,” said this man, Mr. Sweat himself who is a minute removed from the shower yet dripping sweat from head to toe and probably points in between, though those points are no longer visible, hidden by hair and fat. He reaches for his pants in his locker and pulls a business card out of a pocket.

“My email is on there, send me some info and I can get it to a couple, three editors I know,”

Thomas said, huffing and puffing for air after latching, thankfully, his pants. He puts on a white tank undershirt, and again a white poof goes up. “The editors I know, they pay quite a bit for their articles. I want to say \$600 or \$900,” he says, and smiles, “but don’t quote me.”

Don’t quote me? I think to myself. I’m going to forget the logistics of this exchange and deny it if anyone ever brings it up.

“That’d be great, thanks, I’ll email you when I get home,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan, my man,” he says, and I wonder if this is male-bonding or if I’m his prison-bitch elect, the cage surrounding the locker area making me feel incarcerated, at least intellectually. Amazingly, this guy has the most gentle smile and kindest eyes I’ve seen in a long time, if you can get past the built-in fur coat and powder sandstorm. “Hey, what do you write about?” he asks. “Some of these are men’s magazines, some recreational activity – sailing, cross training, that kind of thing. One or two are based here, several back east – Pennsylvania, New York, one in Ohio, another in Indiana – but they don’t give a shit where you live. They’ll just want you to write some interesting stories and make their deadlines.”

“Actually my background is in sports, so I have experience there, and I don’t miss deadlines. But I started my career in newspapers on the news desk, so I feel like I’m diverse,” I said.

“That’s a plus,” Thomas says. “I’ll look for your email. Attach a resume if you want and I’ll forward it to my contacts.”

He slaps me on the back, and I muster all the resistance I can to not fall forward. My stomach is a bit nauseous right now, maybe from the basketball, maybe from what I’ve just witnessed and unwillingly participated in, in the locker room.

Gene thanks him and we head back to get dressed. I follow the footprints Gene makes through the talc as though I’m mimicking his steps down a snowy path. Gene has to get to work, but I tell him I’m going to shower at home, as usual. I thank him and head out of the gym. Outside the air is cool and refreshing. I head home and shower. My talc is the same as Thomas’ so after that registers, I dump it in the toilet and scrub my hands again until the skin is red and raw.

At home I put together the final few paragraphs on a critical chapter in my first book, *The Letter I Should’ve Written* about a man who dies a week before his wedding and witnesses his funeral from above. A book that might make me a truckload of money and be read by millions. Or one that might never see the light of day and not make me a dime. That’s what I’m inclined to

believe because after sending “a cover letter, synopsis and several sample chapters” to agents, I’ve been rejected or ignored across the board. Big time agents, small agents, new agents, old agents – they haven’t had the time of day for me. Of course, when I had a full-time job, this was just a minor annoyance. Now, it’s a growing concern since I thought this book had some promise, both in literature, and financially. I write about a man’s thoughts for his fiancée:

Oh, my Princess, what I wouldn’t give to dry those tears and put a smile on your face.

I finally found everything I was looking for in a woman, and here I lie, months away from our wedding as you, Sharon, face the future alone. You shouldn’t have to be alone for long. You are the perfect woman; the best friend, the most beautiful, the smartest and most caring woman I’ve met in the world, just like my mother in so many ways.

We had so much fun together. I loved the mornings we had over at your house. I really did want you to stay at my house, and it was really hard to see you leave a couple nights in particular. But I just couldn’t imagine what Mrs. Jones would think of me if I did that. Still, you were so understanding.

Proposing to you was such a special moment in my life, and I know it was in your life, too. I remember when we looked at rings, and while you knew I had money, you wanted something modest. You had picked out three different designs that you liked, and none were excessive. So I called the woman at the jewelry store the next day. I had her merge the three rings into one, taking the special characteristics you liked in each ring and putting together one that encompassed them all. Yes, maybe it was a little bit gaudy. But I knew I had to have the absolute perfect ring for the absolute perfect woman.

I picked you up for work the day I got it. It had snowed and it was pretty brisk out. I had it all planned out: A big dinner over in the town where you lived. Then, we would go for a walk, and I would ask you to spend the rest of our lives together.

Remember that night? Oh, it was so crazy! We went to all three restaurants over there, and they had all closed early because of the storm. It kept snowing and snowing, and we had to put my Explorer in four-wheel drive just to get to your house. We didn’t have the romantic dinner I had planned, and the three-dozen roses I had bought for you had started to freeze.

But we got to your house, and your face lit up when you turned around at the steps to your door and saw the roses sticking out as I tried unsuccessfully to hold them behind my back.

“Hey, what have you got there?” you asked with a big smile.

“Oh, just a couple of flowers,” I said, as I pulled them out for you to see.

"A couple of flowers! What did you do, buy every rose in the store?"

"Not every single one," I answered. "But they did mention something about being able to close early today!"

As you leaned forward to kiss me, I could see our collective breath in the cold. Your lips were still so very tender and warm.

We went into the house and it was about 7:30 p.m. Since neither of us had eaten since lunch, we were both starving! We looked around your kitchen and ended up settling on salads and turkey sandwiches. Boy, can I treat a lady to dinner, or what!

We put "Love Story," our favorite movie, in the VCR. I got a fire going, and we snuggled in front of it as we relaxed and looked into each other's eyes.

"You like the flowers?" I asked.

"I love them," you answered, giving me another kiss.

"They won't last long," I said. "I saw when you put them into the vase that they had started to harden from the cold."

"They will last forever," you said.

"Forever?" I asked. "Well, maybe forever if you freeze them!"

"No, silly," you said. "I've saved every flower you have ever given me. I press them and keep them in books to preserve them forever."

You got a dictionary and showed me how you did it. The petals still smelled sweet. Of course, anything that was ever around you, even for a moment, automatically smelled good to me.

"Well," I said. "I'm glad you like the flowers. But I also have something else for you."

"What?" you asked. "What else could you possibly have for me?"

I reached into my pocket but pulled out nothing but some change and a wrinkled dollar bill.

"Oh, Jake," you said with a grin, "you shouldn't have."

"No, not that," I laughed. "I didn't get you a buck forty five."

Via the locker room incident that I've yet to scrape from my memory (and believe me, I'd make five easy payments of \$19.99 – if I could afford it – to wash my brain cells forever of that interaction), I've picked up 10 free-lance assignments. Ten, 10 actual magazine pieces to do! The checks for these will total \$7,400, which is more than I have made so far this ENTIRE year, and it's September. I made most of the calls while Garrett was at school the past week, have written two of them, and started a third. I have interviews completed for two others. It's going to be a close call if we'll have utilities turned on when the checks come in. I've heard that some publications are slow to pay, but as a free-lancer the last thing you want to do is complain. I sold my stereo at a pawn shop, and that \$75 paid the phone bill – I needed the phone for these free-lance calls, almost all of which are long distance.

As Garrett eats (he finishes everything like a good boy, and I feel bad as the growl in my stomach makes me feel less worthy to be his father) I write my heart out, write the stomach pangs away. I shut off the computer and we turn on the TV. I paid the cable ahead for a year, which was probably stupid in hindsight, but I will enjoy it now because aside from the thing I love the most (time with my son) there are no other luxuries I can afford. I am relieved when the computer shuts down all right. It's been acting up lately with error messages and the occasional blank screen. I couldn't fix it now under any circumstances, and the list of things to be paid is so long now that a computer just isn't in the plans. I've figured it out in my head that if this computer conks out, I will take my notes to the library and type the stories there, where I can also access email.

I'm killing too much time at night watching shows I grew up on as a child (*Brady Bunch*, *Barney Miller*) and then as a young adult (*Thirtysomething*, *Northern Exposure*) – and I realize my time at night could be better spent. I was up several hours after Garrett went to bed every night and up an hour or so before him each morning. I started working on the third manuscript I had started, the one that I was most comfortable with, and the one that was furthest along. Plus I hadn't received a rejection yet for that one, so it was still unblemished, as was my optimism for it.

Over the course of three nights, I read it again, found some things that I liked, didn't like and did some rewriting. I emailed it to Garrett McCombs late one night a couple of weeks later and

followed it up with a phone call.

We chatted pleasantly on the phone. After my Garrett was born, I had called Garrett McCombs. He was flattered I named my son after him. We had talked about going up to Fort Collins to see him at Colorado State University. But time, finances and a whole lot of other things (leaving work, something I didn't want to explain) came up.

"Hi Garrett," I said when I reached him the day after sending the email.

"Hi!" he said excitedly. "How's little Garrett doing?"

"He's always happy, loves learning – a big reader, in fact," I said. "Listen, I'm so sorry I've been out of touch. A lot has gone on – Janet and I divorced, I quit my job. But I've been freelancing for several magazines."

"Good to hear! The writing part, that is, and about Garrett," said this man. I could imagine him sitting there, smiling. He was Santa Claus without the belly, a perpetual twinkle in his eyes. "I got your manuscript. I must say, I'm impressed! I've already started making some notes."

"Thank you so much, Garrett," I said. "I don't know what I'm going to do with it. But...well, I feel like this is something I always wanted to do."

"I'll send it back Monday," he said. "Go through it, see what you think – you know I've always wanted to write a book, but I got comfortable in academia, and, well, tenure is like valium – it can numb you to ambition... anyway, get it back to me again. We have some first-rate writers in the English Department who I've befriended, both are relatively recent hires – of course to me, anything within five years is recent. So get it back to me when you're ready, and I'll see if I might get them to go through it."

"Boy, would I be grateful, Garrett," I said. "But in terms of money, well, it's just that, well, I'm a stay-at-home dad surviving on free-lance wages, and—"

"Hey, don't give it a second thought," he said. "I'll make it real clear to them up front; that this is for a young man very special to me, who holds a very dear place in my heart, not to mention his son. If you promise to bring him up to visit before the end of the year, that will be more than payment. I want to get together, and get pictures of Garrett and me together."

"My Garrett will just love you, I know that," I said. "Count on it."

"I'm proud of you, and you made a wise choice to be there for your son," Garrett said. "I'm just so glad for you and little Garrett. At least you didn't have to sell your soul to make it."

Sell my soul? I thought. I wrote porn reviews. *I sold my soul to the devil and I have the*

receipt. But it was Garrett who taught me more than a decade earlier not to dwell on things. I had been a dweller floating down a river of negativity, he told me, and I had to stop it. So I did. And I wasn't about to start again.

"I'm just really thankful, Garrett," I said. "But, again, I apologize for not writing you sooner, and calling you now when I want something. I feel selfish, and I know not keeping in touch was just irresponsible and thoughtless on my part."

It was hard to swallow. Like Dr. Young had pointed out, I was finding it hard to swallow that I (finally) had a conscience.

"Don't worry about that, concentrate on where you are going. You had the guts to put it down on paper – you're already halfway there," Garrett said, "to becoming a published author. Be in touch. I will, too. I'll contact those English profs this week and show them a sample chapter or two – this is really excellent writing. This is the refined version of the talent I saw in you when you were my student."

"I'll always be your student," I said, and I meant it about a lot more than just writing.

"I appreciate you thinking to involve me in this," Garrett said. "Talk to you soon, I have students at my door. But like I said, what you've sent me – this is special."

I thank him and hang up. But I think, *No, Garrett, it's you that's special. And I hope those students at the door realize it.*

I'm writing into the wee hours of the morning. Poor-man's porn is on, and that is Suzanne Sommers with something she is squeezing between her thighs, and I wish it were me. I was a big Three's Company fan. I need a date. Not sex, just companionship with the opposite sex. And hugs, not just the very special ones I get from my little boy.

After that ill-fated "date" accrued via online with "Fran" (I believe that is one of the names on the list headed for extinction), I was "set up" (boy, that is taking on a whole new meaning) with someone who is the daughter of a woman my mother works with at a local pharmacy.

This is going to be just what you need, my mother tells me. Jo Ann (another name on the list) is career oriented, has a bright future, has finished her degree despite her “single-momhood” (which my mother, in this context, makes sound like “sainthood”) and isn’t planning on leaving the area. In fact, if she can get her “weight under control” she’ll really blossom.

Whoa, whoa, “weight under control,” I say, what’s this all about?

“Nervous eating, well, that’s what her mother told me,” my mom said, as though she’s selling me a car. She hasn’t seen this woman in “two years, maybe.” So, to ease my mind, maybe, my mother adds, “She used to be a size 8, you know.”

Weren’t all women a size 8 at one time? Granted, I (and my friends) hold ridiculously high standards considering most of my male friends no longer wear belts, no longer tuck in their shirts for logistical reasons (not the least of which is that we don’t always use the top button on our pants anymore), and no longer count calories (did we ever?).

“And besides,” my mother rambled, as per usual, “you should see the heart she has. Her daughter couldn’t be more adorable and sweet.”

This, my mother finally admits, is all from pictures and talking to Jo Ann on the phone when she calls work to speak to her mother and my mom answers.

I can’t back out on this arranged date because this girl is a “former” size 8. I wore jeans that once said “30” for waist, and I couldn’t fit into those without a gravity pulling jump from my second-floor master-bedroom deck. So I went on the date.

And if Jo Ann (I might be spelling that wrong, we didn’t get that far) wasn’t a size 8 – or less on our date – then I don’t know women’s sizes very well (I don’t anyway).

We met for dinner at a local restaurant. Her daughter was with her father (Jo Ann’s ex), and my son was with his mother (my ex). We laughed at how that sounded while we waited to be seated. So many “X’s,” we could have played tic-tac-toe.

Actually, she was quite attractive, a size 6, I’m guessing.

The appetizers came, which would be the main course, as it turned out. We talked about our work. She had a very good job at a local computer company and was hoping to finish her master’s degree online. She thought it was “neat” I was a writer.

“But what do you do for REAL income?” she wondered aloud.

“I make enough to be able to be a stay-at-home, single dad,” I said. “So, really, that’s more than enough in my book.”

Surely, she could relate to my righteous desire to be there day and night for my son. Surely, she'd understand that since my ex has a job at another local computer manufacturer, and she's at the office 60-70 hours a week, which includes Saturdays, and occasionally, Sunday, that a child needs a parent, not daycare, to be raised right in this world. Surely, she'd see the writer-thing as romantic perhaps, or at least dripping in creative juices.

Wrong. Wrong. And wrong.

Jo Ann worked 70 hours a week ("I'm even going back tonight! My supervisor has given me two new accounts, and I'm in line for her job if she leaves for a job she interviewed for last week," – which is, ironically, with my ex's company). She and her ex-husband, who also works full-time, send their daughter to a day-camp program in the summer, and to both before - and after-school local care programs, picking her up at 7 at the "Reach Higher!" childcare center, she explains, dipping a cheese stick in sauce before taking a bite and raising her eyebrows toward me.

I want to explain that I have nothing against daycare, that it's just not for me and my son. That it's just not the way I want my son reared – by strangers, for the most part. And that the prospect of spending 60 to 90 minutes a night with my son five nights a week is precisely why I left a 60-plus hour job a week at a newspaper for the fulfilling, yet somewhat economically, unreliable career as a free-lance writer.

By then, though, enough has been said. She has anticipated my thoughts to the letter, or my silence hasn't showed enough interest in this high intensity, labor intensive career that she has built. Either way, it's like wires have disconnected. There will be no spark. No light going on. No power to fuel what it would take to start a friendship, much less a relationship.

She wipes her mouth. I don't know if I was staring at her, or around her, but the motion of the red napkin meeting her lips drew my attention back to her face. I'd tuned out, apparently, and she was ready to be on her way out.

"Let me save you 25 of those free-lance dollars, and let's call this a night," she said, flipping a five dollar bill on the table. "That should cover my part for the iced tea and cheese sticks. Good luck."

Before I can stand up – because that's what a gentleman does, even when he's being slammed – or say something clever like, "Well, at least we can be friends," or "Maybe there's a more common ground somewhere," she's up, "putting on" her purse (since when did they make

these things like small, thin-stringed backpacks?), slinging her light jacket over her shoulder and on her way toward the door. I don't have time to thank her for the look at her very cute (and nowhere near sized 8) bottom (I'm guessing size 4 at this point, thanks, Mom). My mother, it occurs to me at this time, could never have had a career in newspapers: She botched the info and really had no timely information. Oh well, from what I've gathered, she never really wanted a career in newspapers.

12

I continued working on *The Letter I Should've Written*. I was excited because I had figured the story out in my head, solved a way to develop several other key characters and found a way for "Jake" to be on the verge of marrying "Sharon" before his untimely demise.

I got up and went to my jacket. In the pocket was the ring.

"Would you like some of that champagne we bought when we had dinner together the other night?" I asked.

"That would be fabulous," you replied. "It's still unopened. Remember, we got so caught up in each other, we never did even open it."

"That's right," I answered. "Why would I need champagne when I have you?"

I pulled out the champagne glasses in the cabinet and put your ring in your glass before I filled it. Then, I carried the two glasses into the living room and we sat by the fire.

The wind was whistling against the windows.

"Boy, I sure am glad we're in here and not outside tonight," I said. "I had actually planned to go for a walk tonight."

"I'm glad you didn't," you said. "Because then you would have been my little Jake frozen on a stick!"

We drank the champagne and toasted our relationship.

"To the woman of my dreams," I said.

"To my knight in shining armor," you said.

We touched glasses and started to drink.

"Oh, what was the other surprise?" you asked.

"Let's finish our champagne, and then talk about it," I said.

"I can deal with that, as long as I'm with you," you said.

As you put your succulent lips on the glass for a drink, it finally caught your eye.

"What...is..." you looked stunned.

"Jake," you said as you fished the ring out. "Oh, my God, Jake! Jake! Jake! This is...I mean, I think it is...Jake!"

I helped you stand. Then I took a knee, holding your left hand.

"Sharon," I said. "I love you more than I ever imagined I could love any one in this world. Everyone thinks I have it all together in my life. But in one way, I have been a lost sheep, wondering what direction I would find love in. When I was ready to give up looking, you came into my life. I know what I feel for you. I know that while I want you for the rest of my life, that I also want you to be happy and I want to watch you grow. I want to be a part of that happiness, and I want to be a part of the growth. I will do everything within my power to be the best husband in the world. That is, if you will marry me, and be my wife."

Thank goodness the phone interrupted – I had a little time before picking up my son at school – or so I thought until I answered it.

"So the date went well?"

My mother is on the phone two days after I "saw" Jo Ann, only long enough to get a glimpse of our very different paths in this life.

"Where in the hell ..."

"Don't curse around me, I'm still your mother," she pointed out.

"Where did you get that information?" I asked.

"Oh, call me Nosy Nellie, but her mother told me Jo Ann thought you were cute and very polite," my mother said.

"You have to be kidding me," I said.

"Yes, well, her mother pointed out that Jo's intensity often bowled over prospective boyfriends," Mom said.

Intensity? She was G.I. Jo when it came to intensity. Like my ex. Come to think of it, those two would be a perfect couple. I wonder if my ex has tried online dating, and found getting

started as hard as I did.

I am wondering what planet my mother, Jo Ann's mother, and Jo Ann herself are residing on, because I'm not within a million light-years of it.

"Listen, don't be so quick to give someone the boot," my mother is continuing. "She said – and this is cute, the way she phrased it – she appreciated your 'dadness' and how endearing it is that being a father is so important to you. By the way, you're okay on money, aren't you, dear?"

Jo Ann has told her mother who told my mother that her son is tight on money, and that the date went well.

Great.

I don't say a word. Because, well, because I'm not a part of this conversation, this world that my mother is living in.

"So," my mother said, "she's at work, but apparently it's pretty high pressure, so she doesn't take personal calls. All personal business, well, I suppose her company is against that. But she asked her mother to give me her cell number to give to you."

I breathe in. I breathe out. I am acknowledging that I am, in fact, on the line, and alive. Aside from that, I don't have much to add to the conversation.

"For Christ's sake, Mom!"

"Don't you go getting all irreligious on me!" she said. "I am still your mother!"

"Yes, well, then," I said. "Let me state this very clearly."

"Please do, Honey, you know how I hate it when people beat around the bush," she said.

My mother, the queen of bush beating, who just dropped a line to see if I'd bite and reveal my financial situation, is telling me not to beat around the bush.

"If we had the worst nuclear war, one that ended life on this planet," I said, staying calm, "except for me and Jo Ann, and God came and said, 'You must repopulate the earth, you and Jo Ann.' I would tell God that I have a headache, I'm not in the mood, that Jo Ann and I would produce nothing, no one who would enrich the world in any worthy way!"

"You're saying you won't call her?" my mother asked.

I want to ask if she heard the last statement, my un-irreligious discourse on the zero compatibility factor that existed two nights ago and will always exist between G.I. Jo Ann and me.

"That's right, Mom," I said. "Not going to call her."

Maureen was among the not-so-lucky seven dates. Actually, I don't know if we really had a date...

I met her at the bookstore, which I thought, as an aspiring author, was a sign – at least Gene thought so when I told him about her.

She was red-headed and was wearing Wranglers and boots. She was in the sports book section, looking for *Seabiscuit*.

“You work here?” she asked me.

I told her that no, in fact I did not. But I considered myself a “regular” and if I could help her, I would. She told me what she was looking for and I pointed it out. When she turned, I lost sight of the book as her ponytail sailed in my direction. She picked up the book and studied it. Then, she started talking about horses. There's a lot I know a lot about, but horses aren't one of them. They, like humans, have shoes. And that's about the extent of my equestrian knowledge.

“I have show horses,” she said. I wondered if these were the things that little girls bought at Wal-Mart in packs of three, varying colors and sizes – perhaps breeds? – complete with combs for their manes.

My inability to offer anything prompted her, I suspect, to continue.

“I have six of them, and I take them to Texas, Florida – lots of places,” she said. “Rich parents hire me to bring their daughter a horse. Their daughter walks it around for the judges, and if they like her and my horse, the daughter gets a big ol' ribbon. The parents are happy and I make a living out of it.”

I nodded. Good work if you can get it.

“Well,” I said, figuring this was my final possible jumping in point to the conversation. “I'm a writer.”

“Books?” she asked. She looked at me, and then pointed at the shelves. “Any of these yours?”

“No, just free-lance, mostly magazine stuff,” I said. “But, yes, I have a couple of manuscripts, one I’m going to have shopped when I get an agent.”

“Neat,” she said.

“I’m Maureen,” she said, extending her hand. She was fair-skinned and her hands weren’t rough, as I’d expected them to be, since she is, I was under the impression, a cowgirl.

“I’m Bob Lambert,” I said. She had green eyes and I think I was staring.

“Bob, thanks for helping me find my book,” she said, turning to walk away. We parted ways. I looked around for a few minutes and headed to the door. When I went outside, I could see a huge truck parked next to my car. Crossing the street in front of me was Maureen. She opened her truck door into my car’s passenger door, hitting it above the handle.

She turned and saw me.

“Oops, don’t tell anyone about that,” she said smiling.

“That car you used to slow down your door – it’s mine,” I said, surveying the damage, which wasn’t much, not nearly what I thought it would be when I saw her do it.

“Hey,” she said. “You aren’t married or anything, are you?”

Oh my, gosh, I might, just might, be being hit on!

“No, not at all, you?” I answered/asked.

“Not anymore,” she said. “My three kids and I live up in Miller’s Grove. Maybe you could come up sometime. Maybe we could have pizza and take in a show. We have a theater now. None of the movies I’d really want to see, but usually something decent.”

“That sounds like a plan,” I said. She gave me her number.

Miller’s Grove was 40 miles northeast, a town a fraction the size of Cobbler’s Nook. I had driven through Miller’s Grove many times and found it charming. There was an old Duckworth’s, which was referred to as the “5 and dime” by a man at the service station when I rolled through to cover a game, realizing I needed to pick up a light jacket and asked where I might find one. There was also a pizza place.

No longer familiar with dating protocol, I called her that night. I could hear her kids in the background.

“If this is a bad time...” I said.

“I tell you what, I’m putting them down now, call me back in about a half hour,” she said. That worked out well. My son was already in bed, but I could get the dishes done, throw in a

load of laundry, and be done with my housework for the night.

“Great,” I said.

About a half hour later, though not to the minute – I didn’t want to appear too eager or too goofy – I called her back. We talked for 45 minutes, about our kids, what their interests were, what their schools were like and our “jobs.” She liked that I was self-employed, as she was as well. Her mother and father lived on the same property she did, so she had as she described it, “practically built-in free daycare.”

We decided we’d meet at the pizza place Friday night for dinner. But no movie because her father was taking her kids to the local high school football game Friday night, and would probably have the kids back to her house by 10.

I was comfortable listening to her talk about being self-employed. I didn’t have an inkling that she’d be uncomfortable listening to me talk about it.

“What do you do for insurance?” I asked. I didn’t know if that was an appropriate question. But I was on a limited three-year plan through my college’s alumni association. The premium was high, but not unbearable.

“I don’t have insurance,” she said.

“Well then, that’s decent of your ex to provide insurance for your kids at least,” I said.

“No, he’s useless, down in Arizona last time he called about a month ago, but who knows where he is now.”

“What if something happened to you or the kids?” I asked. “I mean, heaven forbid, a serious injury or accident?”

“I believe in God,” she said. “I’m a born-again Christian. I go to this women’s Bible Study here on Tuesday nights. It’s so meaningful to me. I know that God will provide for us and protect us.”

I should have let it go at that. To be honest, the fact that she was a Christian was very appealing. Most Christians have high values.

“But,” I said, “an accident is, by the nature of the word, unforeseeable.”

“God will protect us,” she insisted, and quoted some scripture that, while sounding wonderful and uplifting, I suspected wasn’t in any insurance policy that exists on this earth. She was ready to shift gears, and I suppose that was for the best.

“Guess what?” she asked. “I found a chiropractor in town. My back gets all twisted up on

these long drives. Well, I found this doctor in town. Only \$45, and he fixed me up today. I was so happy.”

“Too bad God couldn’t help you out with your back,” I said with a chuckle, trying to make a joke.

Well, she didn’t get it.

Click. No pizza. No cowgirl. No date Friday night.

Back to square one.

I should’ve been content to push along and not get into a confrontation about, of all things, insurance and religion.

Because the reality is, I consider myself a Christian too, after a lot of soul searching, time alone and reading the Bible, sometimes with my son.

I remember my friend who had left the newspaper to work for a huge Christian organization in town. He was editor of one of the “New Faith Alliance” magazines, “Staying on Your Path.” But he made only \$20,000 a year, less than half of what an editor makes at a similar sized, mainstream magazine.

“But part of it is sacrificing to serve the Lord,” Jim explained to me.

Gene told me a few months later that the sacrifice had grown even greater. Jim had to take a job working nights at the front desk of a motel to make ends meet. Did God want Jim to spend almost no time with his family to serve Him better? How about the gentleman who founded and ran “New Faith Alliance”? This man rode in Lincoln Town cars, had a bodyguard and an estate that was among the most elaborate in town – his home was featured on a Christian channel, and I watched, intrigued. Yet he was willing to let his workers sacrifice, while he lived very luxuriously, and perhaps very deservedly, from his own work. Still, it didn’t sound right to me.

I had been raised Catholic, but broke from the church in high school, struggling to find myself, much less my religion. After college, I realized I really did *believe* in God. When my son was born, that was the final straw – I *knew* there was a God. He became part of me, not just a belief, not just words in a book.

I had been to First Christian Church and enjoyed that. What I didn’t embrace were the judgmental standards most Christians applied to everyone and anyone. I’m not homosexual, and aside from Fran, don’t know anyone who is (or don’t know that someone I do know is homosexual). But listening to the fanatical Christians talk about how all of these people with a

different lifestyle from their own are going to burn in hell was unsettling. I have a Christian neighbor – he tried to recruit me to his church – that had the police at his house on a domestic violence call. I saw a Christian from work that was cheating on his wife. I'd rather have a homosexual couple in my neighborhood that is monogamous, love their kids (if they have them) and are respectful people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Granted, it's not for me, but if we are all sinners, as we are told in the Bible and in church, who is to say someone else's sins are worse than our own? And who are we to pass judgment?

14

Time. It's time. I know it's time. To pick myself up.

Bootstraps. Pick myself up by the bootstraps.

Water. Treading. I've been treading water. And I'm done doing that. Tired of it. Time to swim. Time to breathe. Time to do more than just survive. I am picking up more and more assignments, thanks to the human sweater (Thomas) and to Gene for referring me to Thomas. Regular work, though with the magazines either monthly or quarterly, is still sporadic, it is at least consistent.

We did some upgrading around the townhouse. After several years of sleeping downstairs, I splurged for beds. Garrett picked out a futon bed at Wal-Mart. It was only \$120, but putting it together – which we did together – took two days. We won't ever shift it into its couch form, but it is a perfect bed for a little kid. It's a double bed, so he has plenty of room. And it's only about a foot off the floor, so if he rolls out of bed, I don't have to worry. Plus I put down pillows each night on the floor in case he does roll off. I picked up a bed for me at Goodwill. Just a box spring and mattress, but it's better than the sofa bed, which had bars that dug so deep into my back I'd started waking up stiff.

I thought I'd wean him off of sleeping together on the sofa bed gradually. But the first night, he went bounding up to his room at 8:30, put the only two toys sitting out into the Rubbermaid container/toy box in his closet, and dove into his own bed. He asked only for the standard

“backrub” which consists of me rubbing my hand along the soft skin on his back, me thinking how lucky I am to have this angel in my life.

Up early the next morning, I was typing away on my manuscript when I heard him call me, “Dad, will you come pick me up?”

“Good morning, bestest bud,” I said. “How’d you sleep?”

“Phenomenal,” he said.

I was stunned. His vocabulary already amazed me from writing his own “book” on the computer – he already had almost a full page. He had developed a wide vocabulary, though I suppose his reading is probably what gave him such a strong grasp of the English language at such a young age. In fact, the week before, during the class’ weekly “book report,” he had used the word “insufferable” – one of the “normal” mothers who volunteers told me this as we waited for the bell to ring after school. She was volunteering that day.

“The teacher paused and asked Garrett to ‘tell the rest of the class what insufferable meant,’” she said with a smile. Clearly my son was one of her favorite kids, too.

“And?” I asked.

“He told them,” she said. “He’s just amazing, you know.”

I did know that. And I complimented her daughter, who was very sweet but equally as shy.

“I just wish she had Garrett’s confidence,” said the mom.

My little guy was confident. But he was on the quiet side too, which I took as humility, a gene that must’ve skipped my generation in the family. At times like that I wondered just how far out to lunch I’d been emotionally for so many years, defining myself by my work, praise or power. Coming “down” a few notches wasn’t that humbling, but it was healthy, I knew that much to be true.

As far as Garrett, I thought his use of “insufferable” was good. And “phenomenal”. As far as the bed went, I was just glad that I was finally able to afford one for him, and even for me, though those nights on the sofa bed were precious, every single one.

Garrett acts like we’ve won the lottery. He even told his teacher he got a bed. She asked, “A new bed?” And he explained it was his first bed. She asked me about it and I explained it to her. She hugged me and fought back tears.

“You are such a wonderful dad,” Mrs. Long told me.

That felt good. Those are words that parents love to hear, even if they know (or at least hope)

that down deep it's already true. We also picked up an assortment of Legos, some puzzles, and I really went all out on books when I got my bed, picking up two dozen paperbacks at Goodwill for 50 cents apiece.

My son kept me going. On Friday nights, we'd have "raft night" which entailed piling sleeping bags and comforters in the center of the living room. I "made" buttered popcorn in the microwave, and we drank apple juice as we watched a movie, almost always animated, together. The hook was you couldn't leave the raft – everything else was water. To get to the bathroom, we'd lay out pillows or even shirts, whatever it took to stay dry. The evening would end usually about halfway through the second movie with Garrett falling asleep, often on my arm, just before 10 p.m. I'd carry him to his room and then come back down and clean up. If I were still wide-awake, I'd write or go through notes on my free-lance assignments. Even if I went to bed at 2, I'd still be up before my little boy the next morning, in time to be beckoned by his family call, "Dad, can you come pick me up," and we'd head downstairs to breakfast where I perched him on the couch.

The free-lance life was more than eking out a living, now. I was going to make about \$22,000 this year freelancing, enough to cover all the bills that were essential, though nothing to put away for a rainy day – or even a cloudy day.

And then, as if sensing I had dug myself out of the financial pit I was in, the bill-gods came up with some new ones. The Corolla needed some engine work. Five hundred dollars worth. My college alumni insurance was getting close to running out (it was bare bones and didn't touch counseling), and to get small business health insurance, my rate would nearly triple. But I am making a living. We won't be upgrading to the elaborate townhouses, a single-family house – in other words, we're not moving up the hill. I want to move up, maybe not up the hill, but at least up a tax bracket. I'm proud that I've made it – we've made it – this long. Garrett is going to be in third grade, and I want more for him, not really for me. Yet when I talk about getting a house, he always says how much he loves our home now. We have two bedrooms, and after all, we don't really need more than that. But I want more. More for him.

It doesn't have to be this hard. There is a better way. It's the way I always imagined. Not just as an adult. I imagined it as a kid when I first remember being old enough to be able to write in cursive and put together a thought in paragraph form.

This came to mind because my latest "job" had netted me almost four grand, plus the

potential for more, plus the potential for a fraud arrest.

I was writing essays, for other people. My friend Bradley from the gym had asked me to help him out with an entry essay for graduate school. He brought the printed out version of turkey scratch, random thoughts, no transitions, jumping among first, second and third person, and asked me to take these pieces, and give him a completed puzzle. For fifty bucks. This is hours of work, I told him. Make it a hundred. He said no, fifty, but if he got into grad school, 200 bucks. I could live with this. I was gambling on my own ability and the gullibility of those reading “Bradley’s” essay, that he really wrote it.

So I wrote. I took his experience in education, took out the “you learn about” and changed it to “students learn,” took out all the passivity, made it all active. Threw in some words Brad might have to look up. Talked about how he was “eager to harvest the seeds that higher education had planted within his intellect, seeds that were now begging for nurturing, just a few raindrops short of reaching fruition.” I gave it back to him. He blushed reading it and pronounced it perfect. He brought 200 bucks the next day.

“Doesn’t matter if I get in or not,” he said. “This thing is fuckin’ perfect.”

He referred me to one of his many lifting partners, who had a friend who needed a letter. I told him I didn’t work from scratch, the fee was \$150, and I needed three days. He brought that friend, and another friend. One got into grad school, another had me write a letter recommending his former grad school professor for a job, a job that he got, the fellow told me, in no small part for the letter I had basically written.

Then, I got brave. I posted an internet ad. And the dike broke. I had more work than I could have ever imagined. I was writing on my own schedule, but practically around the clock. Letters for jobs, grad school, for friends, even a few to lawyers pleading his/her case on this and that. Damn, those were impressive letters.

After three months, I had made just over \$3,900 writing these letters – I kept track because I was committed to reporting every dime of it, or at least taking the checks to my accountants, who were keeping me on schedule with the IRS.

I hoped what I was doing wasn’t fraudulent: Since, in every case, someone had submitted a letter that I officially (well, as official as one can get when the pay is under the table) “edited,” not wrote them myself, I was in the clear. But there was perception for fraud, Gene told me one night, while Garrett was at his mom’s overnight for the first time in three weeks, over beers that I

had (finally) paid for.

“Don’t you think, though, that maybe it’s wrong,” Gene said. The very tone of his voice, the softness, the honesty, the downright sincerity, reeked of conscience. And that’s what Gene was to everyone. I had justified it in my mind, so it wasn’t a black or white issue. This was far more gray than black and white in every conceivable area. Yet I felt clouds moving in, and knew I couldn’t keep this somewhat lucrative gig up any longer.

“Do you realize what you are doing?” Gene asked.

I thought he was talking about moral, ethical or plagiaristic boundaries and standards.

“Listen, you’ve made your point,” I said, “and quite frankly, I understand the—

“No, no and no,” Gene said. “Tell me again, what you are doing.”

I chuckled. I hadn’t thought about describing it literally. But here was my conscience personified. I thought about describing it in terms of putting cereal in my cabinets, milk in my refrigerator, peanut butter and jelly in my son’s lunchbox, but I decided Gene was looking for literal, so I went for that.

“Well, everyone,” I said, stopping when I realized everyone was an exaggeration. And when one’s conscious comes calling, hyperbole counts against one. “Well, ALMOST everyone gives me a letter. I take it, fix it up. Okay, it’s more than that. They give me these pieces of crap. Okay, let’s call them pieces of clay, and I mold them. I take what I can gauge from the person – from what little I know about them or glean from the letter – and from meeting them personally, factor in what they’re trying to achieve, and come up with the right words to help them get that.”

Gene chuckled. If he laughed again, I vowed to say something mean to Gene. This was tough to do, to be intentionally mean to the most well-meaning adult person I’d ever met.

“You write, what? A story?” he asked.

My hand was covering my mouth, covering a potential lie? I did not know. I thought about it. Took a slug of Coors Light and thought some more.

“If you have to put it that way,” I said. “Well, then, I suppose, well, yes, I have to take a group of random thoughts, ideas and direction, formulate them, blend them together, and come up with a story.”

I couldn’t maintain my above-meager standard of living if I gave up four grand, even though the free-lance work was pretty regular, and paid well.

Gene laughed again. When my eyebrows shot toward my widow’s peak, Gene quickly put

his beer down, and then both hands out, as if to stop the thought racing through my head, one that involved taking Gene from his high perch and leaving him by the intellectual curb.

“Don’t you get it Lambert?” he asked. He never called me by my last name. I took that as a “sign” he was about to make a point, one about which he felt strongly.

“You’re a novelist,” he said. “You’re a novelist waiting to happen. I – all of us who’ve read what you’ve written, who understand you – know you have a book in you. Heck –”

He always said “heck,” another of his endearing qualities.

“Heck,” he continued. “Or even a bunch of books. You’ve been writing novels your whole life. Nonfiction, to this point. But what you’ve done in newspapers, winning these awards. You didn’t win them because you’re a normal, standard issue journalist. You’re a writer. A real writer. This is a sign.”

I went from wanting to choke him to wanting to hug him.

“I have thought about that, here and there,” I said.

“It’s here and now,” Gene said. “Take it. It’s there for you. You are the only one I’ve worked with – through all my jobs – that has the talent to do this. To do this well. To do this right. To make a living at it. Screw the free-lance work, writing porn reviews, writing letters of recommendation. Dammit, write the book you’ve had in you forever.”

Dammit and screw. Screw as a verb, no less. Gene felt passionately about this. With “dammit” he drove the point home. No doubt my most Catholic friend would be in confession tomorrow morning begging “Father” for forgiveness for that utterance.

I didn’t tell him about the manuscripts that I had written or about talking to Garrett McCombs – who also knows Gene, but advised him against a career in writing, pushing him instead toward marketing.

And I didn’t want to tell him I was, according to Garrett McCombs, already halfway there. I wanted Gene to know that he was there all along. And he was, in one way or another.

“I’m all over it,” I said. “Thanks. I needed that push. That kind of gentle Gene shove. You’re a good man.”

We stopped talking about it right then and there, even though we stayed and downed our beers. Only two each, Gene, that conscience to end all consciences pointed out, or he’d have to call his girlfriend to drive us both home.

There was music in the background. Gene started talking a little about his job, about the

people who I had worked side by side with for so long. I took it in and nodded, but my thoughts – and I believe Gene sensed this – were on the plans for the manuscripts that I’d started.

“Thomas,” Gene said. “I’m going to play the Thomas card again on you.”

“Hey, as long as it’s not strip poker,” I said, in a good mood, a really good mood.

“He’s got contacts in the book world,” Gene said. “He even goes to the occasional signings in Denver, sometimes Chicago, once to New York, I think. I don’t know if he knows publishing folks, or agents, or whoever. Unless you have a lead, though, Thomas would be the one to talk to.”

We called it a night. We walked outside and I hugged him.

Just as, of all people, Fran walked up.

“Looks like you’ve kept all that weight off,” Fran said, putting his hand on my shoulder as I hugged another man. Good Lord, what must this appear to my homosexual near-date?

“Yes, well,” I said. I shifted into manly man mode. “This is my buddy, Gene.”

I introduced them. And then, because I’m a man, I lied.

“Gene, go home to that girlfriend,” I said, “and have her set me up with a girl from her office. I’m ready. I want another child. I want to be married again. I’m tired of dating woman after woman after woman. I want to settle down.”

Fran, like a polite member of any audience, smiled and headed into the bar. Gene looked at me.

“Woman after woman?” Gene asked in a quiet tone. “Like, who?”

I’m glad he didn’t take the machismo as a “sign” there was an underlying meaning, or at least what I was trying to say, or why I was trying to say it.

“I just feel like a date, if you feel like doubling sometime,” I said. “And thanks a lot. You’ve been the most honest and supportive friend, as always. Your friendship means a lot.”

Gene smiled.

“You know, you have lost a lot of weight,” he said, sizing me up in a way that I wouldn’t have felt uncomfortable with had I been absolutely certain Fran wasn’t watching from the doorway – which he was.

I went home and had a message to call Garrett McCombs.

“Good news and mediocre news,” he said. “One of the professors thought it was outstanding. The other said it wasn’t ‘his cup of tea,’ but said it was definitely publishable. I’m going to mail

both of their copies back to you. I just need an address. This is good news, Bob!”

“Thank you so much, Garrett,” I said. “Feedback is critical. I need it to get better.”

“You’ve come a long way from the in-your-face young man I taught,” he said.

“I hope so,” I said.

I had what would turn out to be my final “counseling” session the next morning, running into Dr. Young at the Cobbler’s Always Café. I didn’t want her to think she was “on the clock” during breakfast. But when I noticed her sitting alone, she waved me over.

“Tell me what’s going on in Bob’s world,” she said.

I sat down, picked up a menu for no reason, and smiled.

“I don’t think Bob is an asshole any more,” I said.

“I don’t think he ever was – even though he acted like one at times,” she said. “You just had issues. Everyone does. You think my life has been smooth sailing? You should’ve been on board for some of the storms.”

I made a note to stow that line to use in my writings at some point.

“You, no way,” I said gently.

“Yes,” she said. “You know, the next woman you date will have baggage too. We all do. It’s just how we deal with that baggage that determines who we are, how happy or miserable we’ll be.”

“You know something? I’m making less money than ever, living in a smaller place than ever, getting almost no praise for my writing – yet I’ve never been happier,” I told her.

“You’ve come a long way, baby,” she said, as I recognized that line, but from where I could not remember.

“Thanks, you had a big part in it,” I said.

“You had the bigger part,” she said. “What you’ve been through hasn’t been easy.”

She was right. I told her about how I felt like I had just gotten to know myself – at first, I didn’t like who I was. I had been too controlling, too power-hungry, too driven by a search for glory – it was always about me, me, me, what I wanted, what I felt I needed. All I needed was to love myself, not in a narcissistic way, but for who I was as a person. And now I had Garrett, who gave me all the love I needed, and more.

We talked for more than an hour. She had an English muffin, offering me half, as I finished off a bowl of oatmeal. She looked at her watch and apologized, “I have an appointment in 15

minutes.”

“Thanks for making some time,” I said.

She reached for the check.

“This one is on me,” she said.

“The session or the meal?” I asked, smiling.

“Both,” she grinned. “You’re a friend now, not a client.”

The corrections came the next day – Garrett McCombs had paid, out of pocket, to FedEx the revisions/corrections/advice to me. There were valid points in both. Some of them I took to heart, some I just didn’t feel fit with what I was trying to do. Still, even those had some usefulness that I could either work into a particular part or even use to rework something in another chapter.

I worked day and night for a week, stopping only when the little guy was home from school. Once he was in bed, I worked through the night. On Saturday, I even forgot it was the weekend. When I flipped on Nickelodeon as I did before waking up Garrett, I noticed the usual shows had changed. Then I realized it was the weekend.

His mother came and got him before noon, and I worked through until she brought him back Sunday evening. I called Gene and invited him to my humble abode to edit. He came over after dinner and was thrilled to see Garrett, who was wearing his race-car pajamas – I was so glad he still wore those, even though he had probably out-grown them, at least intellectually. Garrett explained each of the four cars on his “jammies,” starting with each sleeve, to Gene, who sat as though he was getting instructions to save the world. When Garrett went to bed, I explained the whole story to him, telling about Garrett McCombs and how Garrett had gotten two English professors to go through it.

“I’d just like you to go through it, catch any typos I might have put in there doing these rewrites,” I said. For all of Gene’s admitted shortcomings as a writer and layout person, he did

have a keen eye for catching typos.

I opened the file on my computer and it showed 155 pages. I hit word count, just so he knew what he was in for if he wanted to read it.

“92,328 words!” he said. I wondered if he realized that it was as long as a regular book.

He took off his sweatshirt and sat down in my desk chair, a well-worn folding chair. He noticed the bad leg on the front and carefully pulled the chair forward so he was set up in front of the keyboard.

“Throw on a pot of coffee if you got it,” he said, smiling ear to ear. “Looks like an all-nighter.”

“Coffee, black, I remember,” I said. I went and checked on Garrett. I made some small chat as Gene started to read.

“I need to focus, if you don’t mind,” he said, looking over his shoulder and grinning from ear to ear. “But I’ll ask if I have any questions.”

I sat back and felt more relaxed than I had ever been. My first book – well, okay, at least my first manuscript. I lay down on the couch, turned the TV off and leaned back. And fell into the deepest slumber I’d had in months, maybe longer.

At 7 a.m. I felt my arm move. Gene was standing above me.

“Doesn’t Garrett have school today?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you be getting him up?”

Gene hadn’t slept, his breath wreaked of coffee and something else.

“Helped myself to a sandwich,” he said. “Hope that was all right.”

A sandwich? All I have is peanut butter, I thought.

“Peanut butter and onions,” he said, breaking into a laugh. “It wasn’t bad, actually. It kept me up.”

“You stayed up the ENTIRE night?” I asked.

“Yep, finished about 15 minutes ago,” he said. “Fixed a few things. Nothing major. Hey, this thing is really, really spectacular! I’ve seen a ton of things you’ve written in the newspaper and magazines, and this exceeds it – by a mile! Anyway, yes, this is outstanding! I can say ‘I knew you when...’”

He is the best friend in the world and I know that. And I hope he knows I know that. He pulled his sweatshirt on.

“What’s your girlfriend going to say?” I asked. “I mean, you were gone all night.”

“You conked out at 9:30,” he said, laughing a tired laugh. “I called her at 11. She thought it was awesome. Told me to go for it. And let me tell you, I enjoyed this. Thanks.”

Of course the best friend in the world thanks you when he’s done all the giving, and you’ve done nothing but take.

“For Pete’s sake call Thomas,” Gene added.

Pete’s sake? As in St. Pete? I took that as a “sign” he was serious and felt strongly about it. As he headed out the door, I thanked him, told him he was the best friend, and asked him if he wanted to see Garrett this morning.

“I don’t think Garrett needs to see me like this,” he said, stepping off the porch and heading down the walk toward his car. “I’ll call you tomorrow or the next day. Go get your boy up. And then call Thomas!”

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Things still weren’t pleasant with my ex. We were indifferent toward each other, though amicable in Garrett’s presence.

I realized that we never really knew each other, except physically. I felt like I had grown by leaps and bound in the years since we met. I felt like she hadn’t; she was still high-stress and was defined by her job. That wasn’t my problem anymore, for the most part.

However, I respected the fact that she hadn’t introduced any of her boyfriends to Garrett yet. She obviously wanted to make sure it was going to work out before she brought him into Garrett’s life. She called me at home from her work one morning after I took Garrett to school.

“I’m thinking of introducing him to Juan,” she said.

Juan? I knew David and Jonathon. But I hadn’t heard of Juan.

“He was a model in Brazil,” she continued.

“Well then, that’s good because he must have his own furniture,” I said smugly, referring to her Italian model/roommate who had robbed her blind.

She didn’t take the bait, and I regretted offering it as soon as it came out of my mouth. If I

was going to be a “model dad,” I shouldn’t be sarcastic with my son’s mother.

“Anyway,” she said, brushing it off. “Juan is here working with our company. He wants to open a satellite branch in Brazil.”

And model computers? Paint a keyboard on his washboard ab muscles? No, I kept those thoughts to myself. Well, Juan sounds like he’s handsome and has money. If she’d have started out with what a good natured guy he was, that he helped underprivileged children or something, I’d have been much more impressed and secure.

“Good for you,” I said. “As long as you are happy.”

“I just wanted you to know,” she said. “But don’t ask me anything else. I’m not going to go into depth about our relationship.”

Whatever. Like I cared. I really didn’t. She was his headache now.

“I’d like to spend more time with my son,” she continued. “He’s always with you. When he’s at home (she meant her home, of course), he can’t wait to get back and see you. I’d like that to change.”

Not unless your personality changes.

“Listen, that’s up to Garrett, in my mind,” I said. “I’ve been working my butt off to make ends meet. You get to claim him and you get child support – which I can barely afford – and I haven’t complained one bit. Any court in the world would give me custody, or at least shared custody.”

“Go down that road, and we’ll find out,” she said sternly. “You want to go to court? File, and we’ll go at it.”

I didn’t want to go at it. I didn’t deserve a medal for how I’d handled the whole situation, but I did deserve some respect, something Janet would never afford me. The truth is, I had thought many times about going to court. But that would be stress on Garrett. The child support helped keep her in the house, which was really for Garrett’s sake – I didn’t want her, when we split, to have to move into a small apartment, because at the time of our breakup we were all under the impression he’d be living mostly with her. It didn’t work out that way. Yet it had worked out perfect. I wasn’t going to stress Garrett by getting into a legal battle with his mom. If I had to pay her to have practical, if not legal custody of my son, then I’d just stay the course. She would never give me credit for what I was doing or what a good dad I’d become.

But I didn’t need her approval. Just my son’s love.

“Don’t you have a girlfriend yet?” she asked.

“No comment,” I said.

“I think I was respectful enough to let you know what’s going on because that’s best for Garrett,” she said.

“No, I’m not seeing anyone,” I said. “Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, I’m a full-time, stay-at-home, self-employed father. I’m happy being a dad. It’s what I’m best at in life, what I’m meant to do.”

She paused. She didn’t care or was tuning me out.

“So,” she said. “That’s all I called for.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m glad you let me know what’s going on. Garrett is very secure and very happy. If you want to see him more, and you can make time, then I guess you’ll do whatever you want to do. All I’m asking is you not upset him or his routine.”

“Whatever,” she said, and hung up.

Was I really ever married to this woman? I couldn’t remember ever kissing her, ever holding her, ever confiding my deepest fears in her, my grandest goals, my vision of the future.

And in a way, I suppose I was glad for that.

With my first manuscript, tentatively titled, *The Letter I Should’ve Written*, edited into shape, I finished rewriting a key chapter in *Breaking Ranks*, my “second” manuscript that was a murder-mystery about an Air Force officer who pinned a series of murders on his friend. The lead character, Officer David Jones, wrote a fictional murder-mystery about a serial killer, and it was based at his Air Force base. When he emailed it to six friends asking for suggestions for an ending, the murders started happening in real life, with startling similarities to the killings in the book.

“David Jones’ ‘anniversary,’ of his wife-to-be leaving him at the altar, is coming up – I’m worried about

him," said Carl Manson, a captain in the physics department at the Academy. Manson was standing in Fairchild Hall, the main academic building at the Academy.

"Anniversary?" asked Major Katy Beckett, a friend of Manson's who had met Jones when he arrived at the Academy six months earlier. "He's not married. Never has been, right?"

"Right," answered Carl, a 5-foot-9, 175-pound fire hydrant of a man with broad shoulders. "But if Janice hadn't left him, today would be, I think, their third anniversary – at least that was the planned wedding date."

Katy's brow furrowed. Jones had always been quiet, if a little withdrawn. He had gone with Carl and her and a group of other people to Air Force Academy football games and even to a country music concert in Denver. But she didn't feel she knew him that well, certainly not well enough to offer condolences or even support on this twisted sort of "anniversary."

"Has he spoken to anyone about this?" asked Katy, who stood an inch or two taller than her friend Manson. Katy had the build of a tri-athlete – fitting since she did a couple of triathlons each year, and even qualified for the U.S. Olympic Trials for the 2000 Games in Sydney, the first year triathlon was an Olympic sport. She was strong but more wiry than athletic. She was still known at the Academy from her time as a cadet, when she did 25 pull-ups during the freshmen physical fitness test, or PFT.

"Let me just tell you what this involved because Dave has poured out his heart about it to me at least twice," Carl said, stepping into Katy's cubicle from the hall, where he had stood leaning on the entry frame.

Katy raised her right hand, her palm facing Carl.

"I think that's something better kept between friends," she said with a smile. "Not that I don't want to hear this or don't want to know. I think that's just a friend-to-friend secret, not a friend-to-another-friend-of-the-friend's kind of secret."

"I follow," Carl said. He went back to his cubicle, three down from Katy across the small hall walkway. He gathered his syllabus for his afternoon class, logged on and checked his email before he went to class.

The phone rang.

"We need to talk."

Actually, talking is something Janet and I don't need to do. It's something we once upon a time should have done more of. But now, it's mostly perfunctory, about Garrett.

"About Garrett?" I asked.

“Yes, and listen, this is really important,” she said. “Meet me—”

“Hey, I’m really working hard right now,” I said. “I’m writing like there’s no tomorrow.”

And with her next statement, there is no tomorrow.

“I’m moving to Brazil with Juan to run the company, and I’m taking Garrett with us,” she said. “We’re going to get married.”

I can’t speak. I have been punched in the solar plexus with an anvil, a wrecking ball. I can’t breathe.

“Like hell you will,” I said.

“I knew you’d say something stupid like that,” she said. “And I’ve got my lawyer ready to serve you papers. You can make this hard or easy. But I will win. I’m taking my son with me.”

“Garrett said Juan doesn’t even talk to him,” I said.

“That will change,” she said. “He’s just very reserved. He doesn’t have kids. He’s still finding his way.”

“Well, that’s not my son’s problem,” I said. “No way. No way are you taking my son away from me!”

“You will still see him plenty – two weeks in the summer, maybe every other Christmas if you don’t piss me off too much over this,” she said condescendingly.

“No way!” I repeated.

I hang up and go to the phone book. This time, I call my lawyer and ask him to find me a lawyer who specializes in this kind of thing.

“Yes, well, that’s certainly not my area,” he said. I pass up the chance to point out divorce law isn’t his area either. “Let me put you on hold. One of the partners here will know.”

While holding, my mind is going through every possible scenario. There’s no way I would lose in court. I’m a good dad, a great dad! One of my recurring nightmares was that she’d move. She’d been to her company’s headquarters in California for training and to a subsidiary in Florida, and from our brief exchanges, I gathered she liked both of those places so much she wouldn’t mind living in either. I was prepared to move anywhere in the country to be with my son. But I hadn’t pondered the possibility of moving to South America. Would I have to get a green card? Could I just go there? Do they speak Spanish there? Somehow, I remember from school they speak mostly Portuguese. I’d learn either for my son, if I have to. But I won’t have to, I am certain.

“Got a name for you,” said my attorney, finally back on the line. “This woman, Marjorie Rickey, is excellent, perhaps the best. It will cost you an arm and a leg, though, just so you know that up front.”

I’m down to one arm and one leg because of this guy. But I’ll chew off my remaining arm and leg if I have to, to keep my son. I call Marjorie and her assistant tells me she’s in court. I explain my case and the woman sympathizes with me.

“She’s absolutely swamped,” she told me. “We have an associate who might be able to take your case if Marjorie can’t.”

She can’t get me in to see Marjorie until tomorrow. I was thinking 10 minutes would be better.

When I hang up, I cry like I never have before. My son is my life, and if he’s taken away from me, I don’t know what I’ll do, if I will even live. I pick up his nighty shirt and breathe in the little guy’s smell – his shirts always smell better after he’s worn them, and this is what it’s like to really love someone. And I really love my son with all my heart, all my being.

As I wait in the school parking lot to pick him up, I am still crying. I do my best to dry the tears when I hear the bell ring. As usual, most of the kids come running out. My son waits, not liking the clutter and banging around that ensues as the kids scurry out of the school. He is walking toward me, his skinny little body and radiant face looking my direction. He is smiling, as he always is. I feel like I am about to begin sobbing, my shoulders throbbing. But I hold it in.

“Hiya, Dad!” he said, running, finally, the last 10 yards to me. I take his backpack, as I do every day, and we get in the car. I want to ask about his day, but the lump in my throat is making it hard even to breathe, much less formulate a sentence.

“Why are you sad?” he asked. I can’t tell him what’s going on. I don’t want to stress him out. If my lawyer decides to, I will go against everything I ever thought and let my son speak in court, about how he is his father’s son, not his mother’s, about how he’s lived with me for four years now, and seen his mother sparingly. It will be hard on him, no doubt, and I wish it wasn’t so, but going to Brazil will disrupt his life beyond belief. I can’t let that happen.

“Dad’s all right, just some big people stuff going on,” I choked out. I put on my sunglasses even as the clouds cast shadows across the parking lot.

He tells me about his day and shows me his math test results, 10 out of 10. I tell him how proud I am of him, and he smiles, but he’s still concerned about his dad because he knows

something is wrong, very wrong.

I turn off my answering machine and don't answer the phone that night. It's probably his mother calling, but until I've seen my new attorney, I can't deal with her, and I don't want him to hear that he might be moving to Brazil from his mother tonight.

The next morning, I go into wake him up. I watch him sleeping, so peacefully, his stuffed Scottish Terrier "Angus" still wrapped in his arms almost exactly as it was when he fell asleep almost 10 hours earlier. Lucky Angus.

Since I can't stop the emotion that is overtaking me, I let him sleep an extra 15 minutes while I gather myself. When I drop him off at school, I go home to wait an hour for my meeting at the law office. There's a knock at the door. I am served with papers. The court date is only a week away. Amazing. His mother's thoughtlessness level has reached a new low, her manipulation and cunning levels a new high.

I head to the lawyer's office, papers in tow. Bad news. Marjorie takes 10 minutes to meet me. She invites in a guy who looks 18 years old, pimples on his neck where he shaved that morning. It looks like the first time he's ever shaved. This is not good. Marjorie goes through the papers and talks "Brad" through it. He offers his thoughts, and she nods, offering advice on how she'd handle it.

"The good news is Brad is very affordable compared to me," she said smiling. I can't smile, not even fake one because this isn't about money, not by any stretch of the imagination.

"The first thing you need to do is apply for an extension on the hearing," she said. "This is crap. We won't be ready next week."

Brad and I retreat to his office, which is actually a cubicle out front by the secretaries.

"I just started," he said. I want to leave right then. But I'm short on both options and time. I'm putting my eggs in Brad's baskets and I see yolk on my face.

The next two days are hard. On Friday, he calls me.

"I don't think I can get an extension," he said. "But we'll make the best of it. Can you come in Saturday and Sunday? I think we can get everything together in time. We can game plan and get all of our ducks in a row."

I don't need clichés. But I need Brad. Garrett is going to his mother's this weekend, where he will hear of her plans. I decide to tell him myself that night. After school, we head home. We sit in the living room. I tell him to go ahead and put the Legos up because this is serious.

“This is why you’ve been so sad, isn’t it, Dad?” he asked.

I tell him yes. I motion for him to sit next to me, but he climbs on my lap. He’s probably too big to be doing this, being a third-grader and all, but it feels natural to have his warm little body so close to my heart because that heart is his as much as it is mine.

“Listen, Mommy and Juan are moving to Brazil and are going to get married,” I said. “They want to take you with them.”

“No way!” he said, standing up. I pull him close.

“I’m going to do everything I can to keep you here,” I said. I am crying and he starts to cry, too. I didn’t want this to happen. But I suspect it was unavoidable.

“I won’t do it, I won’t go!” he said, and I hug him.

“I’ll do all I can, buddy,” I said, holding him close. “If I can’t stop it, then I’ll move to Brazil too.”

“But I like my school, my friends, our house,” he said, pleading. He thinks Dad can stop or change everything. He thinks Dad is Superman. But his mother is my kryptonite, and I am weak.

We do the best we can. I offer a Happy Meal for dinner because this happy little boy is way too sad. He doesn’t want to go out. I make some dinner and both of us only pick at it. His mother shows up at 7:30, two hours later than she said she’d be.

“I’ve got some exciting news, Garrett,” she said.

“I’m not going to Brazil, no way,” he said. “Mom, I don’t even like Juan!”

She grabs his arm and tugs him, very hard, out the door.

“Dad, no!” he cried out. I start to follow him out the door, and she turns around.

“Just fuck off, Bob,” she said. “You’ll get yours.”

Garrett is crying, I am crying, and the heartless bitch that I conceived this beautiful little boy with is putting him in the car I bought her to take her to the house where, I suspect, Juan is now living, the house I basically paid for, with the child who is now my life.

That night I sleep in small chunks, maybe 30 minutes at a time. I am bleary and teary-eyed the next morning. I go into see Brad, and I am optimistic that he has more than just an idea of what’s going on and what our case will be.

“You’ve been a responsible father,” he said. “We’ll push the primary caregiver angle, and that she’s basically been an absentee mother the past four years.”

“We can put Garrett on the stand if need be,” I said. “Whatever it takes to keep him here.”

Brad shakes his head.

“I’d like to, and we will if we can,” he said, “but he’s under 10 years old. If the judge decides she wants to hear from him, she’ll ask.”

I didn’t know we had a woman judge. If she’s a feminist, I’m sunk. If she’s a loving mother, I should be all right, Brad tells me.

“Marjorie rolled her eyes when I told her we had Judge McClendon,” Brad said. “But Marjorie said the judge does know the law well, so we’ll just do the best we can.”

Garrett comes back Sunday night. I take him to school Monday and Tuesday, spending most of Monday at Brad’s office going over our plans. Tuesday, he cancels our final meeting because he’s in court on another case Marjorie deferred to him.

I ask my mother to come to court Wednesday. I had to fill her in on everything quickly Tuesday night. She cried, too. She wasn’t extremely close to me, but she had spent some quality time with Garrett and, like everyone who knew him, just fell in love with the little guy. She agrees to keep him outside of the courtroom unless he is called in to talk to the judge.

It never got that far. Janet’s lawyer took me apart. I was “irresponsible financially” and hadn’t been “gainfully employed” in four years, he points out, producing tax returns – I had no idea how he had gotten these, or that they’d be an “exhibit” – heading into the hearing. Thanks, Brad.

Her lawyer points out that Garrett and I slept on a “pull-out sofa bed” for several years, and wonders if that’s a suitable home for a child. The judge asks me about my finances.

I stood and answered, “I did this to be a good dad, to be there full-time for my son.”

Janet’s lawyer “would like the court to note” that I have been “well below both the state’s and country’s poverty line” for three years in a row.

“That hurt,” Brad whispered to me. “I can’t believe he played the poverty card.”

Later, Brad puts me on the stand. I talk about volunteering at school and point out that his mother has never, NOT EVEN ONCE, picked him up at school or attended a parent-teacher conference.

“This isn’t a character assassination symposium,” the judge warned Brad. “Stick to the facts.”

“But those ARE the facts,” I pointed out.

“Mr. Lambert, please limit your answers to the questions posed by counsel,” she scolded me.

“If it would please the court, the minor child is in the lobby,” Brad said.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Judge McClendon said.

“If you would like to meet with the child in chambers, with only counsel present,” Brad suggested.

“Denied,” she said. Janet’s attorney whispers something to her, she smiles and puts her arm around his back.

There is a recess. A short recess. The judge comes back. We rise. My heart sinks.

“Full custody of the minor child, Garrett Paul Lambert, resides with his mother,” the judge said. “She has had full-time, gainful employment far above the poverty line. She has provided insurance coverage for the minor child.”

I wanted to point out that her company had a blanket policy, something they offered to lure employees – which meant the premium never went up, whether as the company literature stated, there was “one or one-hundred” members of the family needing coverage. I’d have put Garrett on my policy in a second and his mother knew that. She’s the one who pointed out it would have been an unnecessary expense for me.

“Custody remains with the mother,” the judge continued. “She is granted permission to move intra-continently with the child. Child support is hereby postponed until the custodial parent repetitions for it, or returns to U.S. soil. Visitation will be revised for the father, to include one month each summer. Cost for transportation of the minor child to be split, evenly between the parents. Holiday visitation, again, the cost divided equally, is to be decided by the mother as to the best interests of the child.”

“A child she doesn’t even know!” I said, standing.

“One more outburst, Mr. Lambert, and you will be in contempt,” she said. “My ruling is complete. I hope both parties can work to ensure what is best for your child.”

“No way!” I said, again standing up. Brad is pulling on my sports coat. “He is NOT going to Brazil with a mother who doesn’t know him, a man he doesn’t even like, to a country so far away!”

“Contempt!” the judge said, glaring at me. “Bailiff, please place Mr. Lambert in custody.”

I am grabbed by the arm and taken out the front of the courtroom.

“I’ll have you out in 15 minutes,” Brad says as the bailiff leads me away.

Janet hugs her attorney and heads out the back of the courtroom. She will take our son that

day. She will take him forever.

Three hours, not “15 minutes,” later, Brad gets me out. I am fined \$300 for contempt of court, but I get a suspended sentence of one day in jail, credit for “time served.”

“This is absurd,” I said.

“I filed an emergency appeal,” Brad said.

He does – with Judge McClendon. It goes nowhere. Janet knows she has pushed me to the edge. She had left me a message – while I was doing “time” waiting for Brad – that they will be leaving for Brazil in two days. The appeal was formally denied the next day – whatever happened to the court taking its own sweet time? – and Janet is free to “do as she sees fit with the minor child,” according to the ruling Brad shows me in his office. I owe him \$4,500 for losing my son.

I don’t care about that. I ponder taking Garrett with me, heading to Canada or Mexico. But Janet had thought this out, and planned – schemed – the whole thing. As Juan’s legal wife – they planned to marry the very day they landed in Brazil – she’d be a legal resident. After she dropped Garrett off at school Friday, for his “last day” of school in America, she came by my home.

“Can I come in?” she asked. “Can you be an adult?”

I have nothing to say, but I have to listen because that’s best for the “minor child” formerly known as my son.

“We’re actually not leaving until tomorrow,” she said. “We’re flying out. The movers will be there Sunday, after we’re gone, but just for Garrett’s toys and some of my stuff. You’re welcome to the furniture, the washer and dryer.”

She rambled about a few other things of hers that I could have. All I wanted was my son.

“I’d rather you said goodbye to him tonight,” she said. “It will only be harder tomorrow. I want him to start getting excited about this. Juan got us first-class tickets, so I should be able to coax Garrett into seeing how much better this will be for him on the way down to Brazil. He’ll be in the best, private American school. Several of the kids from that school have gone onto Harvard.”

“He’s a 9-year-old, little boy,” I said. “He needs his father.”

She looks at me, disgusted. How can she not be feeling any of my pain? Or any of my son’s pain?

“I’ll be moving down there,” I said. “I don’t know how long it will take, or how I’ll make it happen. But I’ll be down there. Keep the washer and dryer. I won’t need it. Or ship it to Brazil, and I’ll pick it up down there.”

She laughed quietly and shook her head side to side.

“I thought you might be thinking that,” she said.

Of course she did. She’d thought of everything. Without even consulting me, she’d planned to uproot my son and take him out of my life. To rip out my heart and stomp on it.

“Well, count on it,” I said. “We might not be neighbors, and I might be living in a box under an interstate – do they have interstates in Brazil? Anyway, I will be there.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” she said.

The nerve.

“You can’t keep me away from my son,” I said.

“Listen, this will be very hard for you,” she said, almost in a tone of compassion.

“It’s already been hard on me,” I said.

“No, I mean, if you come to Brazil, it won’t be good for you,” she said.

“I’ll make it work,” I answered.

“No, you aren’t getting what I’m saying,” she said. “Juan’s a powerful man down there. He has millions and his family has more. When I told him I thought you might come down there to be close to Garrett, he said he didn’t think that would be a good idea.”

I want to rip this guy’s heart out and then choke him with it.

“I don’t care what Juan thinks is best,” I said. “Juan doesn’t know crap!”

“But he does know the authorities in Brazil,” she said. “His family is big money. They own the cops. If you come down there, you’ll find life very hard. He’ll have people all over you from the time you ‘set foot on Brazilian soil,’ is how he put it. You’ll either be on your way back home, or heaven forbid, worse, before you know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“You are threatening my life for wanting to be with my son?” I asked incredulously.

“Juan just thinks –”

“I don’t care what Juan thinks,” I said. “I’ll call the American Embassy. I’ll do whatever I have to do to be with my son.”

She leaves, ignoring my attempts to “talk about this a little more, if you don’t mind” and heads to her car.

“I’ll leave the keys in the car at my house,” she said. “And the title. It’s yours. You can have it. We’ll come by at 7 tonight so you can say goodbye. But don’t be dramatic and don’t drag it out. Don’t make this any harder on Garrett than it already is.”

Harder than it already is? And who made it that way? She doesn’t even know this little boy.

Yet I don’t say a word. There’s nothing left to say. I realize I am dying inside. I don’t know if I will ever eat or sleep – or even breathe normally – again. I can’t imagine getting up and seeing the sun each morning, not without my son in his perfect bed. Who will make his lunch for school? What about raft night?

I call Marjorie at Brad’s law office, and after being told I’ll be transferred to her, I am told she will call me back before she leaves for the weekend. She never calls. At 6:30, I sit out front, waiting for Garrett. I think about what I’m going to say. Are there any words for this? I will just tell him that I love him, to believe in God, and that somehow, some way, we’ll be together again someday. I don’t care if it makes Janet mad.

Seven rolls around, and then 7:30. I call her house. No answer. They are probably out for dinner. I hope they get him a chicken kid’s meal because he’s not into burgers. She doesn’t know that. I hope she gets him root beer for the drink because caffeine is not only bad for him, it keeps him awake into the night. I know this because when she’s given him caffeine on the weekend before bringing him back home, he’s wired and up until almost midnight.

Finally, at 8:30, I pack up some of his stuff – Angus included – and go by her house. There are no lights on, only instructions for the movers in an envelope.

“Son of a bitch,” I say. They’ve probably gone to a local hotel. I’ve only seen Juan’s car a few times in the driveway, but it was usually in the garage that was once mine, and I never got a clean look at the make, much less the plates. Still, I drive around to the ritzy hotels because I figure they decided to hide Garrett from me instead of letting us say goodbye. Juan must have decided that was best.

I make a mental list of all the hotels in towns, or at least the ones that Juan would “think best.” As I pull into the first hotel, I realize I don’t even know Juan’s last name. I give a description of Garrett and his mother to the front desk clerks. I get dirty looks. One tells me, “Sir, I think you have a problem.” She is right, but if she understood everything, she’d help me all she could. All the others just tell me, “No,” that there’s no one here matching who I am describing. One threatens to call the police after her initial brush-off didn’t send me for the automatic front

door.

At 11:30, I go home. There's a message.

"We thought it would be best just to go," Janet said. "Garrett will call in a half hour, at about 9:30, and say goodbye. You can talk to him then."

There is another beep, and then the voice that means the most to me of anyone in the entire world.

"Hi, Dad, it's Garrett," he said, softly, hurting, I can clearly tell. "Dad, please pick up...well, I guess we're going, and I don't want to. Please, Dad, come get me, we're at –"

At that point it sounds like Janet has grabbed the phone, and there is a click. Do I save the tape? It's the last time I will hear my son's voice until summer, if Janet honors her obligation to let him spend time with me. But I have no doubt she will not follow through on that, scared that I will take Garrett and keep him. Which, of course, I would.

I stay home, hoping he will call the next morning. I can't sleep, so I work on *Breaking Ranks* until 4 a.m. I take the emotion I am feeling and rewrite/add to the book's final chapter. Twice in the first 90 minutes I stop to vomit, sick at the turn my life has taken – or, what's being taken away. So I get lost the only place I can, in the written word.

Carl Manson pressed the steel barrel of his 38 revolver against his throat, pointing the gun upward underneath the inside of his jawbone – about underneath his tone.

Then, Manson pulled the trigger. Gray pieces of brain and red blood splattered up onto the door and out of Carl's face as he fell into the door. Just as soon as the shot rang out, the police again banged on the door. Had he waited another minute – hell, another 30 seconds – it would have been the truth, not his brains, spilling out of Manson.

David Jones saw the blood squirting out of Carl's eyes and nose and the pieces of brain all the way up to the ceiling. Jones dropped to his knees by the window, falling onto all fours as he gasped for air. The police knocked in the door, which toppled over the already fallen Manson as the police stepped over the door and in.

"Dead?" Detective Arnold Darnell asked as he picked up the door with the help of two others, lifting it off of Carl. "Did he shoot at you?"

"No, no...I'm...I am...I'm all right, maybe," Jones choked out.

Darnell came over to Jones. He squatted down, like a catcher in baseball, next to him, clutching his

arm just like he had at the mountain lake on the day of the Stanley murder.

"What did he say, Dave?" Darnell asked, working his way up to shoulder him, equal parts keeping Jones upright and getting his attention. "We know it was him. We thought it was you because we had taken mud samples off of your truck's tires, and it matched that at the base of Stanley's parking area. Then, when we asked Carl to account for where he was the night before, Carl let the cat out of the bag – that he had borrowed your truck that night."

Jones just listened, stunned. All Carl had done was borrow his truck to pick up a roll of film after the last murder. He had no idea he was driving the truck Jones had just used for the killing. Get off the hook for one murder? Maybe. But for a half dozen?

"Listen, let's talk about the pertinent shit: What did Carl say before he blew his brains out?" Darnell asked. "He confessed, didn't he? He killed them all, right?"

Jones paused, and then looked up. Did Darnell know about the cadet and the car accident, or was he pinning all of the murders on Carl? He started a series of lies. A series that took on a life of its own, while freeing him to live his own life. All this as his friend was sprawled out, various bodily matter and fluid, including blood, spilling from his fresh corpse.

"Yes, he confessed," Jones said. "He killed them all."

"Thank God it's over," Darnell said. "Thank goodness, it's finally fucking over. And you have the perfect ending."

"What are you talking about?" Jones asked.

"I can see the headlines now," Darnell said. "Manson the mass murderer. The media will have a field day. They will be coming from far and wide to talk to you, the networks, Time and Newsweek, you name them – you'll be a celebrity. Name your price. But make no mistake, your military career is done. Hell, mine is probably done, too. But at least this whole thing is over. Thank God it's over."

Jones couldn't believe what he was hearing.

God, they really believe this, Jones thought, his mind spinning. *I am off the hook...*

He had reconciled himself to facing life in a military prison at hard labor, or the electric chair – knowing he could be tried in a civilian court because two of the murders were committed off base.

Yes, he had lost his friend. But he had gained his own freedom. He knew damn good and well that it wasn't Carl who did the killings, but Jones himself.

I hit save and shut the computer off. Tom Petty's *Greatest Hits* has played – what? Five, six,

10 times – while I’ve been writing.

Knowing the sun will probably rise – though my heart was so broken, it certainly didn’t feel like it was a guarantee – I went to sleep downstairs, hoping against hope Garrett would come by or at least call.

By noon, the phone hasn’t rung.

And, I realized, it’s not going to, either.

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I shower and turn on my computer. I don’t want to log on and tie up the phone line. I catch a few typos in the manuscript.

Finally, about 5:30, I decide to go out and splurge for dinner. I haven’t eaten all day, though I had enough of something in me to vomit throughout the early afternoon. Before heading upstairs to shower, I leave the front door unlocked, in case Garrett comes by. I stand under the water for what seems like forever, but it’s probably only about 25 minutes. Then I brush my teeth and see Garrett’s little toothbrush and toothpaste. I can’t touch them because that’s where he left them.

Angus and some of his other stuff are sitting on my couch. His Legos are where he left them on the floor, including the new underwater ship he was midway through building when his mother tore him out of our home a few days earlier.

The phone rings at 6, and I jump.

“Hey, buddy,” Gene said. “I heard what’s going on – Ralph caught on the scanner that some hotel clerk had called the cops on you after you came looking for Janet and Garrett. He put two and two together and called me. That sucks. Have you eaten yet?”

“No,” I said. “I was going to grab something.”

“How about we meet for pizza?” he said. “That always cheers you up.”

It used to. Nothing could cheer me up now.

“Hey, could you just bring something by?” I asked. “I think they’ve already taken off, though

she never told me when the plane leaves, I'm sure because she thought I'd show up and make a scene. I should've gone to the airport, but I honestly thought she'd bring him by, and I didn't want to miss him."

Gene agrees to pick up a couple of sandwiches and a six pack – "A 12-pack would be all right, if you're not headed back to work tonight," I said – and he agreed. He'll take the rest of the night off to help me survive.

"I'm worried about you," he said. "Ralph's going to come by your place in an hour or two. Lucy's due next week and he's a basket case."

One of my buddies is going to become a father, just as I am stripped of my fatherhood. Ironic.

"Fine," I sighed.

Fifteen minutes later, there is a knock at the door. Gene, I think, must've called ahead and had the sandwiches ready because he made record time.

I open the door, and my son jumps into my arms.

"Dad!" he said, hugging me. I hug him back.

Tears are running down my cheeks. I hold him tight, taking in his perfect little boy smell. He showered that morning, I can tell because he doesn't smell like the "Watermelon blast!" shampoo that we have.

"Thanks," I said to his mother. "I thought I wasn't going to be allowed to say goodbye to my son."

She is holding a suitcase and has a backpack slung over one shoulder. Juan's car – I can see it, is a black, or at least very dark-colored, Cadillac. Of course.

"Listen," she said, walking in and pulling the door behind her. "There's been a change in plans."

"Yep, I'm not going!" Garrett cheered. "I'm staying with my Dad!"

"No, Garrett, I told you that's not how it is," she reminded him.

She sets down the suitcase and hands me the backpack, which I toss toward the couch. It bounces off, and lands on the floor. Garrett stands in front of the couch, picks up Angus and gives him a long hug. And then a kiss on his nose. Then he carries Angus with him to the Legos, as if nothing has happened.

"A change of plans?" I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Juan’s not sure...well, Juan’s not sure he wants kids now, at least not his own kids, until he gets settled. I’ll see what happens. I’m starting work down there in 36 hours, and I’m a nervous wreck.”

Poor thing, I think. You reap what you sow.

“So Garrett’s going to stay with you,” she said, because she always makes all the rules. “I’ll send for him as soon as I can. I hope it isn’t long. Didn’t you get my message – messages, actually?”

I turn and look at the machine. It is blinking three times. She must’ve called when I was in the shower because I never heard the phone ring.

“No, I was, uh, in the shower, but I was home all day,” I said.

“Well, Juan just thinks it best to leave Garrett behind,” she said.

As if you haven’t left him behind his whole life, I think.

“Juan’s not very nice,” Garrett piped up.

“Garrett!” his mother scolded.

“He isn’t, Dad,” Garrett said. “He wouldn’t let me take any of my toys. He said ‘toys were for little boys’. I told him I’m not a little boy, but I like toys.”

“Screw, Juan,” I said.

“Knock it off!” Janet demanded. Juan honks, twice.

“I have to go,” she said. “Garrett, come give Mommy a hug.”

He looks at me and I nod. Let’s make this as smooth as possible. She hugs him, his arms dropped to his sides.

“Mommy loves her little guy,” she said.

“But I’m a big boy,” he pointed out.

“I’ll call as soon as I get there,” she said.

“That’s nice,” I said with a little sarcasm. Juan leans on the horn. What a classy guy, I think listening to the seemingly never ending beeeeeeep.

“One more thing,” she said. “When we divorced, my attorney fucked up.”

I can’t believe she has once again said that word in front of our son.

“He didn’t get the house turned over to my name only,” she said.

“So?” I asked, wondering what this meant.

“I’m going to cut you a break – part of the money was yours anyway, though you’ll get far

more than you deserve,” she said. “I’m putting the house up for sale, unless you want to buy me out and move back in.”

“No way,” I said. “Couldn’t afford it if I wanted to. And I don’t want to.”

“Well, anyway,” she said. “It should sell pretty quickly in this market. You’ll get half, and they’ll send me a check for the other half.”

How kind, I think sardonically, not saying a word.

She runs to the car and never looks back. When she opens the door, Juan is yelling about how they have less than 30 minutes to make their flight. Thirty minutes or whatever, I’m not waiting. After the car pulls away, Garrett and I head out back to our car. Gene pulls in alongside me.

“Hi, Garrett!” he said. “Change of plans?”

“Screw, Juan,” Garrett said. I would typically let him know not to use that language, but this happy dad can only smile like Tweety temporarily safe from sneaky Sylvester.

“Let’s meet at your place,” I said. “That all right?”

“Sure,” Gene said. “We’ll call Ralph and tell him to come over. Garrett, you hungry? We’ve got sub sandwiches.”

“Yeah, I’m THIS hungry,” he said, spreading his arms as wide as they go. “You have turkey?”

“You betcha, buddy,” Gene said. We ate with Gene, and Ralph showed up later. Ralph was shocked to see Garrett – Gene apparently hadn’t mentioned it on the phone – but was ecstatic for me. And Garrett.

“Thought you’d be in the pokey after what I heard was going on last night,” he said. “That’d be twice this week.”

I shrugged. I’d take a bullet for my little boy. Doing a little time to save him would be a small price to pay if it kept him safe.

When I get home, I have another message. Who in the world would be calling on a Saturday night? G-day, as I would remember it.

I hit play, and there was a series of messages from Janet, though Garrett’s voice started out the first message, until Juan could clearly be heard in the background yelling, “Garrett doesn’t want to go, and I don’t want him to go!” I felt bad and hit stop, saving that message and the other three from Janet. I’d listen to them later. The last message was from Marjorie.

“Hi there,” she said. “Listen, I was just brought into the loop on what happened. Brad

should've told me sooner. We'll get an emergency hearing Monday. I'll take care of this myself. I'm at home, here's that number and my cell, 578 . . ."

I copied down the numbers. Garrett was back, as though he'd never left. After I walked Gene out the front door, Garrett came down the stairs with his Hot Wheels track and some cars.

"Can I set this up?" he asked.

"You bet," I said. "Can I make a call real quick?"

"You bet," he said smiling. I hugged him long, and he squeezed me with the strength of two Garretts.

I called Marjorie's cell.

"I am so sorry I didn't get involved sooner," she said.

"My ex, she's gone – to Brazil," I said.

"Already? For crying out loud!" Marjorie said, genuinely distraught. "Christ...well, I...I have a contact that used to work at the embassy down there..."

"Listen, a lot has happened," I said. "Garrett is here. Last night she deprived me of saying goodbye, and then today she said Juan didn't want to bring Garrett."

"So she just left? Without him?" she asked.

"She's gone," I said. "She said she'd send for him in a month or something like that."

"We...will...not...let...that...happen," she said, enunciating each word slowly. "You don't have a surveillance cam out front or anything? I mean, you didn't catch her on tape saying she wasn't going to take your son along, or that Juan didn't want to bring him, did you?"

In this neighborhood, surveillance equipment? I'd suspect anyone who could afford renter's insurance probably only was granted it with the provision they have alarms – but, no, surveillance cams weren't in the budget for those of us renting small townhouses, I told her.

"Too bad," she said. "That would be the clincher – to get you full custody. I mean, I can get the initial ruling thrown out, very easily, especially now."

"Wait!" I said. "She told me she left me messages on my machine, explaining the whole thing. Each message space on my tape is three minutes, and she filled up three of them, I think. I haven't listened to them yet. Want me to hit play and we can listen together?"

"No!" she said. "Take that tape out right now, and put it in a safe, dry place, out of the sun. Bring it by Monday. You don't think she'll come back and try and take him before then, do you?"

“No way,” I said. “She and Juan were cutting it close to make their flight to Brazil. He peeled out of here like Mario Andretti.”

The rest of the weekend was like a dream. I was re-energized like never before and had several 3,000-word nights working on my two main manuscripts. We went for walks during the day. We had raft night. I let Garrett stay up late Saturday night, and on Sunday, before he woke, I called his teacher at home. Since Janet had executed her plans so clandestinely, the teacher wasn't told until Friday after school that it was Garrett's last day.

“We didn't get to have a cake or anything, or even get to say goodbye,” she said.

I know that feeling.

“He'll be back Monday,” I said. “And he'll be there to stay.”

“His mother changed his mind and stayed?” she asked. “You know, I never met her until Friday.”

“Changed her mind, in a manner of speaking,” I said. “She's gone. He stayed. So is it all right for him to be back Monday?”

“Of course!” she said. “You don't know how I cried Friday night. Seeing her after school, leading him around by the arm. I wanted to call you, but she threatened me with legal action. She never went through the dis-enrolling process. Just go by the office, explain to the principal that he's staying, and as far as he's concerned, pretend this didn't happen.”

“It won't be as easy as that,” I said, knowing pretending anything wouldn't erase the past few days, or weeks. “But thank you. I know he'll be thrilled to be back.”

“Don't worry about a thing,” she said. “It'll be like he never left. Because he never really did, when you think about it.”

We hung up. Garrett and I decided to go to the mall. We deserved it.

Garrett and I saw Lynn, my former editor at the Herald, at the mall. He explained the bag he was holding contained mouse pads for the computers. The roof of the old building was prone to leaks, and this time rain had soaked the copy desks.

“Thankfully, everyone's been putting their dust covers on the keyboards and monitors, so that damage was minimal,” he said. That's what he had to be thankful for. What I had to be thankful for was holding my hand.

I had received that memo, along with dozens of others, before I quit. Boy, among the things I didn't miss, memos were right up there with meetings.

“But the standing water on the copy desk from last night,” he continued. “Well, we needed these, so here I am. How’s it been with you? It’s been FOREVER since we’ve spoken!”

Where do I start, I think to myself. My son and I are working on writing cursive at home, though they won’t start teaching it at school until next semester, I’ve been told. We talk in the car each morning for 10 minutes before the bell rings. After school, I wait at the top of the hill as he says goodbye to his friends who are headed for the school’s daycare or to the school buses. Then we sit in the car and talk for another 10, 15 minutes about his day until the chaos of the school parking lot and the surrounding streets, subsides. On Friday evenings we have “Raft night.” We take all the pillows from the couch, the comforters and sleeping bags from upstairs, and build a huge raft, to which I bring popcorn and a thermos of milk. We watch “Cartoon-Cartoon Friday,” and if we have to get off the raft for anything (more “supplies” or to go to the bathroom), we have to build a “rock path” with pillows to the bathroom or kitchen. Garrett has already earned his yellow belt in judo – I thought, since he’s a bit small for his age, having a way to defend himself would be good. The confidence and toughness that came out of it was bonus, too. He pushes himself on the merry-go-round at the park now, after three years of me providing energy for the spin. At home in the evenings he makes these incredible things with cardboard, scissors, crayons and glue – when we aren’t building Legos (a green and yellow Statue of Liberty was his most recent creation from scratch). He kills me so bad at checkers that we’re playing chess exclusively now, but the speed he’s picking it up at, well, I’ll have to introduce him to Monopoly before long. The training wheels are off his bike, and if the tires have enough air in them, he can do two laps without stopping on the sidewalk that winds around and through the park. My son and I walk almost every day and talk about the sun and the clouds, and if it’s evening, the stars and the moon – he is convinced there is life out there, if you are curious. We wrestle almost every night before he goes to bed – about the time you all at the paper are editing stories and writing headlines. And me? What have I been up to? Being a dad. In relation to “work”? Hmm, oh yeah, I’ve put together several manuscripts, and I’m making a living as a free-lance writer.

While these thoughts went through my mind, there was a pause. A long, uncomfortable pause, in which me standing there, holding my son's hand, said everything that I was thinking. Everything that Lynn, and the others like him, had missed. Forever.

"Just, you know," I said and Lynn nodded. He didn't know but he understood. I felt my hand being tugged.

"Dad, I'm hungry, can we get some lunch?" Garrett asked. My son and I communicate with our eyes - mine said yes, and his answered that he was pleased. This conversation without words spoke volumes to Lynn, I think. He patted Garrett on the head, commented on how much taller my boy had gotten, and wished us well.

So Lynn took his mouse pads back to the office, and I took my son to lunch. He got a kids' meal and explained to me how he thought tops were able to twirl as he spun the one that came with his meal. He was learning about life. I was learning about him, and myself. Sometimes I was the teacher, sometimes the student. Mouse pads or a happy meal with my son? Not a tough call. Too bad families couldn't write memos, about memories missed, thoughts unexpressed, questions never asked, much less answered.

Monday, I dropped him off at school, just like I always had. I took the tape to Marjorie, who had two people in her office. She cleared the office and brought me in right away when she was told I was in the lobby.

"Pro-bono," she said. "This won't cost you a dime. I've been over the ruling. We have a solid case on appeal."

"The appeal was denied," I pointed out.

"This one won't be," she said confidently.

She called for Brad to come in.

In the meantime, she told me about how she had been in the Marine Corp. as an attorney. When her husband made General, he decided to go overseas. She decided to go her own way, took her 20-year Marine retirement as a Colonel, and opened a law office here six years earlier.

"I turn 47 next year," she said. "I want to retire when I'm 50."

I was impressed. Her front teeth were obviously capped, gleaming white. She had two long incisors on each side, and I had to keep myself from staring. Yet when she stood to get a file, her figure was striking. She was at least six-feet tall, and her breasts, if real, put most 25-year-old's

to shame.

Brad finally came in, peeking in the door as if waiting for permission to enter. She motioned to a seat but gave him a smile as if to ease whatever pain she knew he was feeling over my case.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “You were entitled to competent counsel.”

She looked at Brad. “This one was my fault,” she quickly pointed out, and added. “We’ve waived your entire bill, of course.”

“No problem – at least not now, considering what happened,” I said.

“You will learn from this,” Marjorie told Brad. “In the long run, it’ll make you better.”

She got the tape, copied it twice, and then played it. I had heard part of the first message. When Juan could be heard in the background, she paused it. Listened again. And played the other messages. Janet went on, several times with Juan yelling at her in the background about their situation. Brad smiled. Marjorie did not.

“I’m just sorry your son had to hear all of this,” she said.

“Me too,” I said. Brad stopped smiling.

“Myself as well,” Brad added.

She finished the tape.

“I don’t know if this will be admissible as evidence until she comes back,” Marjorie said. “But when she is back, we’ll hit her with it like a ton of bricks. She just won our case for us. For now, at the hearing this week – yep, this week, we’re going in Thursday – we’ll be able to play the tapes for the judge, and her counsel, though he’ll object. But, his client left the country, so he won’t have a legal leg to stand on.”

“I’m all for leg removal,” I said, smiling.

“Brad,” she said, “get your paralegal or my assistant. I want transcripts of these tapes made. Send one to his ex’s attorney, by courier, today.”

I had Gene drive me by Janet’s house to pick up her car. The house had a For Sale sign in the front. A couple pulled up, and a “Mountain Crest Realty” vehicle pulled up alongside. I took her car to my house and thought about what to do with it. I called Ralph’s buddy, the car salesman. He had some “like” new Blazers in stock. With Janet’s car and mine, I could get an almost new one for less than \$1,000. I did it. And picked up Garrett at school that day in our “new” Blazer, which had temperature control, a DVD player and a third seat, as if we needed it.

“Cool!” Garrett said. “Where’s Mr. Toyota, the race car?”

Mr. Unconditional Love, for anything and everything we shared, missed the Toyota.

“Well, we could take this back and get the Toyota,” I suggested.

“Just kidding! But Mr. Toyota was a good car,” Garrett said, using the electric window switch to open, close, open and again close the window. I showed him the DVD player, and he was out of his mind. We’d have to get some DVDs, and soon, because this thing was too cool not to use.

Did we need a Blazer? No. A DVD player? No. But were we entitled to a little spoiling after all the crap his mother had put us through? Absolutely.

I realized I probably deserved all of this. Garrett didn’t, to be sure. But I did. I had been so selfish, for so long, that my comeuppance was overdue. I deserved to suffer, I had to be accountable and responsible for my part in it all. That said, I felt like the bill had finally been paid, in full.

The house sold in eight days. I was trying to figure how much we’d clear after paying off the loan. It was a 30-year, and I didn’t think she had re-financed when the rates came way down – but I had no idea either way.

Ten days after “G-day” (Ralph’s term, which Gene had picked up and not let go of since), and there was still no word from his mother. She might’ve called and gotten screened out, and I felt bad for that. But Garrett was at school, and if it was Janet, she could tell time, and she and I had nothing to say to each other. The check for my share of her house, after getting nailed for the realtor commission and housing inspection, was \$54,800.

Fifty-four thousand, eight-hundred dollars. I haven’t been that shocked by numbers since the scale told me I weighed 200. Only this was a good kind of shock.

I didn’t want to call the realtor and say something like, “There’s been a big mistake.” But I did anyway. This was the kind of mistake people were fired for, and charged with if they cashed these kinds of checks. As it turned out, Janet had, somehow, some way, paid the whole damn thing off. Amazing. I never knew she had it in her. Of course, she had Juan, he’s loaded, so maybe he paid it off. So maybe I was carrying some of Juan’s money in my pocket.

I loved it.

We headed back to court. Gene asked if he could show up, and I said yes. I wanted to bring Garrett, but Marjorie said no. Ralph said he’d swing by if he was in the office, which was in the basement of the courthouse.

“But we will bring Garrett if or when she gets back,” she said. “He should’ve been on the stand the first time.”

Brad’s tail was so far between his legs I wondered how he didn’t trip.

Janet’s attorney showed up, much to my surprise. He was asked where Janet was.

“Actually, your honor,” he said. “I have not heard from my client. I was notified by Counselor Rickey’s office and the court of today’s hearings.”

“So will you be contesting the hearing on her behalf?” the judge asked him.

“Please, God, let him say yes,” Marjorie said. If she had fangs, and I sensed she might, they were descending.

“I will represent my client’s interests, your honor,” he said. “To what extent, at least now, well...I’m just not sure.”

Marjorie asked to review the case, put me on the stand, and I told the story of what had happened the night she left. She asked the court to accept the tapes as exhibits J, K and L (A through I were provided by Janet’s lawyer, as Brad had been caught with his shorts down the first time). But when Marjorie provided a transcript to Janet’s attorney, he announced that he objected.

Marjorie never even looked at him, glaring instead at the judge.

“Sustained,” said the judge, who suddenly looked a little nervous. “But as a matter of directing the hearing, the transcripts can be viewed, and the tapes heard, but not admitted – at this point. Counselor, should Ms. Lambert re-file to open custody proceedings, then yes, the tapes will be introduced formally as evidence, and she can contest if she chooses, that it is her voice on the tapes. And we can proceed from there. Play the tapes, please.”

The tapes were played, and I was so glad Garrett wasn’t in the courtroom. Her attorney stared at the transcript the entire 10 minutes or so, the palms of his hand shielding his eyes like blinders on a racehorse.

“Request to play them again,” Marjorie said.

“I don’t see the point in that,” the judge said.

“Yes or no, your honor,” Marjorie said. “I am asking the court if I can play the tapes again. There’s a lot of emotion in those tapes. I have to admit that even I didn’t hear it all this time, though I have heard them before.”

“For crying out loud, counsel, we have a transcript,” Janet’s attorney said.

“My request stands, your honor,” Marjorie said.

“Very well then,” the judge said. The tapes played again. I realized Marjorie was doing this to make a point. To Janet’s attorney for not knowing his client, to the court for ignoring my case. Marjorie’s fangs were in full view, and there were a few asses about to get a little lighter.

The tapes ended.

“Your honor, I ask the court to play the tapes again,” Marjorie said.

“Denied,” the court said.

Janet’s attorney presented no evidence. I kept quiet about the HUMONGOUS check I had received for the house, not to mention the car, which led to our new ride. The judge said she’d be back with her ruling.

But the recess was almost an hour.

“She’s already decided what she’s going to do,” Marjorie said.

“And?” I asked.

“Oh, no doubt, we kicked them in the teeth – all of them,” she said quietly to me and Brad. “She’s just figuring out what she’s going to say to ME. Because I’m going to keep kicking some ass until I hear what I want to hear. What happened last time was a travesty. This judge won’t get away with shit like this ever again. Not on my watch.”

Go, Colonel Rickey. The National Guard’s been called in, to rescue and protect my son and me.

Finally, we were called back into the courtroom.

“The court hereby decides to grant temporary, full-custody to the minor child’s father. After 60 days, if there is no petition from the minor child’s mother, custody will be full-time. Visitation for the minor child’s mother and child support to be paid to the father will be decided upon at that time.”

“I don’t want child support,” I whispered to Marjorie. She only nodded, not looking back at me.

“Further,” the judge said, looking toward me. “The \$300 fine for contempt will be refunded to the father of the minor child, the father’s record to be cleared of the incident immediately.”

I wanted with all my might to control myself. But I couldn’t. I stood, and my mouth opened. It was like watching myself on film.

“You can take that 300 bucks and shove–

Brad stood and put his hand over my mouth. I kept talking, ran out of air, couldn't get enough through my nose, and sat back down as Brad pushed down hard on my right shoulder.

"Would you like to finish that thought?" the judge asked. "Stand, Mr. Lambert."

I started to stand. This time it was Marjorie's hand on my left shoulder.

"I ask the court not to address my client directly," Marjorie stated firmly.

"Then perhaps you'd like to speak for him," the judge said, sort of like a question.

"Why, yes, your honor, I would," she said. "I believe my client, based on information I provided to him, feels the 300 dollars should be shoved up the anal cavity of this court."

"You are in contempt!" the judge shouted at her. Brad or I should have pulled Marjorie down. But neither of us was brave enough to touch her.

"Bailiff!" the judge beckoned.

"Yes, arrest me and hold me in contempt, I beg the court!" Marjorie said. "And then when we're in front of the judicial board for review of your handling of this case, and others, we will get that – and the contempt you are about to hold me in – under full review. After that, I guarantee you, your honor, I will go after your license to even practice law in this state!"

The judge waived back her bailiff. Janet's attorney headed out the door. My feeling was he didn't want to go a round with Marjorie when she was through with the judge.

"This hearing is closed," the judge said, pounding her gavel hard enough to cause a ringing in the old courtroom. "This matter has been decided. I'll see you all in 60 days."

"I don't think so," Marjorie said. "I will make a motion in this court within the hour to have you dismissed from this case. Court-approved and sanctioned kidnapping doesn't cut it, judge."

"Fine," the judge said. "I hereby excuse myself."

The bailiff came over and shook my hand, and then Marjorie's. No words were said. None needed to be.

"We'll get either Judge Abraham Jones or Judge Ellen Markus," Marjorie said. "They are both fair, completely fair. We'll win because that's fair. I have no doubt we'd have won with Judge McClendon. But she blew it with how she handled the first hearing. I wasn't going to risk her blowing it again. The shitty part is, she knows the law – she knows better."

Brad and I just nodded.

"Thank you, so much," I said. "I don't know what to say."

"We owed you one," Marjorie said. "I'll let Brad do the legwork if anything pops up in the

next 60 days. Let me know the second you hear if your ex-wife will be in town.”

“Oh God, how I want you to have a shot at her,” I said.

“I’d enjoy that,” she said. “But to be honest, it would be best for everyone if she just didn’t show up. We’ll kick her ass, I promise you that. But it’d just be easier if she didn’t show.”

Janet called and talked to Garrett. He didn’t give her a complete sentence. She wanted to talk to me, but I didn’t give her much more than the time of day. I listened to her. I heard a little distress in her voice, but she was working 80 hours a week, making “more money than I could ever spend,” but her and Juan just “aren’t sure yet if we want the same thing” so they hadn’t married after setting foot on Brazilian soil, after all. I told her Garrett was happy, eating all his veggies and fruit, doing well in school, and had made friends with a couple of new kids who had moved into our neighborhood and also attend his school.

She told me more about her life down there, and I couldn’t regurgitate a full sentence of it if I were hit in the stomach with a wrecking ball. I said yes and no and hung up. I called her attorney two weeks before the hearing and gave him her number. It was the right thing to do.

“If she wants to call me, she can,” he said. “I’m to represent her, not track her down and beg her to come back.”

And so it was. We had Judge Markus, and as I requested, Marjorie waived child support. Visitation was not set because Janet did not show, nor did her attorney. She would have to petition the court for a hearing to get visitation if or when she returned.

Meanwhile, I had to get a hold of Thomas. I hadn’t been able to call him back with everything going on, and I was worried that he’d forgot that I needed to talk again.

“Hi, Thomas,” I say. “Bob Lambert. Hey, thanks again for all the work.”

“No problem,” he replies. “Thanks for the emails.”

I had been emailing him somewhat regularly, thanking him for each assignment he led me to. Almost each of those assignments led to another. I found out that the magazine world is very

corporate, in that each publishing house often owns several magazines. So I'd written a good story, making deadline for "Triathlon Today" and then picked up one for another of Trend-Ink Inc.'s magazines, "Men's Wellness." The editor of "Men's Wellness" went to "Managing the Managers" magazine and hired me for two more pieces.

"So," I said. "I'd like to talk to you about...listen, I hope I'm not bothering you. Because you've already done far more for me than I could or should have ever asked, it's just..."

"Come on, don't bury that lead, you've come this far," Thomas interjected, showing writing savvy I didn't know he had. "What can I help you with?"

I didn't want to get into it too deep. I just wanted a contact. But I'd have to open up a little. If I wanted something from this man, then I'd have to give something back, and I really had nothing to give.

"The thing is, I want to be an author," I said.

There was a pause. A shuffling of papers.

"Fiction? Nonfiction? Sci-fi...Horror? Mystery? Biography? What?" he asked, as if I was supposed to chime in as he rattled off the possibilities.

"Actually, all of those sound good," I said. "But I have started...well, I've written a few things, but I have completed a fiction manuscript."

"You're pretty comfortable with it?" he asked. "I mean, it's pretty cleaned up and everything."

Come to think of it, one of those English professors "the other Garrett" showed my manuscript to, might be a published author, so that might be a route if Thomas couldn't help. How could I have not thought about that possibility already, I scolded myself, before bringing my mind back to the conversation at hand.

"Oh yes, it's very clean, I went back and rewrote it several times, even developed the characters more, fixed some plot issues, that kind of thing," I said. I realized I was sounding anything but cocksure, something I sensed this situation needed. "Damn right, it's ready."

Thomas laughed. He really didn't want anything in return, just to help.

"Good man. Give me a day or two, make it the rest of this week, and I'll come up with someone for you to talk to," Thomas said. "I'm no expert in this field, but I do know some agents. The agents are the gatekeepers to the big publishing houses which is where you can actually make a living doing this. If you go with a small publisher, you'll probably get a book

deal fairly easily. But that won't get you in the bookstores. Distributors like me deal mainly with the bigger publishers for a lot of reasons. Those are the ones who get the shelf space in the book chains. They give us better deals on wholesale. They...let's just say there's an arrangement there that works for a lot of reasons. Small publishers, well they're convenient, so you can say you have a book out. But if you want it to do something for you, then, well, I'd recommend you go for the big publishers. And that, from what I know about the business, means getting an agent."

No doubt "doing something" was what I was ready for. And if Thomas wasn't an expert in this area, then I didn't know who was, because he seemed to know an awful lot.

My dating life was still at a standstill. Ralph called and asked if Lucy could set me up with one of her friends. I was ready for a date, any date. Without asking any of the pertinent questions, I said yes.

"There are a few things you have to know about her, I guess you could say some ironies," he said.

My other line – a luxury I had added two months earlier – beeped in.

"Listen, just tell me where and when," I said. "I'm ready for a date. As long as she walks upright and doesn't shave her back, I'm in."

"All right then," he said. "One of the ironies, real quick..."

"Shoot," I said.

"She's married, well, separated," Ralph said. "She's all but divorced. She's moving into her own apartment in a week or two."

And another date is scrapped.

"I don't poach – you know that," I said. "Maybe when she's actually divorced, but not until then. Don't need or want the headaches. I've got a kid to think about, you know."

A pause. A sigh.

"You're right," Ralph said. "Maybe some other time."

Another beep. Last chance to get the incoming call.

"A call coming in, buddy," I said. "Thanks anyway."

I clicked the phone line.

"Bob Lambert," I said.

"Hi," said a voice that I recognized as Thomas', "Thomas here."

"Hey, Thomas, thanks for calling," I said. "Manuscript is printing as we speak and ready to

go.”

“How about a steam tomorrow?” he asked.

A steam? Are you kidding me? What is this about? Me and Thomas in the steam? We’ll run into Fran – he’ll have rejoined, or something – I just know it.

“Uh, sure, tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yes, bring your manuscript,” he said. “One of the head honchos at Chase-Kohl Publishing is in town. He’s plugged in like a Christmas tree. We’re playing racquetball early. I told him about you, and he said he’d be glad to help however he can. 10:30?”

“I’ll be there with bells on!” I could hardly contain my enthusiasm.

Chase-Kohl had just merged. Kohl had already been the third-largest publisher in the country, maybe the world. When it merged with Kohl, which was number 5, it overtook the two biggies, landing in the top spot. Yes, I could make time for Chase-Kohl, no doubt about that.

“Fax me 30 or so pages of your book,” he said. “I can give this guy, Benny Brown, a sneak preview.”

I had no fax machine. Yet I had almost 55 grand in the bank. I decided we’d go get a fax machine at Best Buy that night and a dozen DVDs if Garrett wanted them.

“Could I just drop it by your office in a few minutes?” I asked.

“Sure, I’ll be in a meeting but just leave it up front,” he instructed. I picked out two chapters, stopped at the copy shop, said hi to Ralph’s mom. She bound the 30 pages for me, and it looked sharp. She asked if I wanted to copy the whole thing. I thought about it, and thought why not? She actually made and bound two complete copies. I couldn’t wait to read it. I thanked her, told her to give my regards to Ralph and Lucy, and dropped it off at Thomas’ office.

I slept in a state of bliss that night. Garrett slept peacefully as usual in the home and bed he loved. He made it each morning without even being told, though the night we put his bed together and stacked up my box spring and mattress in my room, we did go over how to make a bed. Still, I was proud of him. His room was always picked up before bedtime. The place had always felt like home, but now it even looked like one.

The next morning, I printed out a full manuscript and after dropping Garrett off at school, went by the copy shop where Mrs. Soderberg (“Please, call me Elise!”) neatly bound it for me. I confidently held it under my arm as I left. A book. My book. And, hopefully, a book that will some day be in real print, with a real cover and everything. I was doing all I could to keep my

hopes from getting too high. I had heard story after story on book television programs, and read online and in magazines, how hard – almost impossible, really – it was to become a published author. I felt like I had something working on my side – that I knew what good writing was, and was not. I knew it was about developing characters, applying adjectives as lightly as possible, and keeping an appropriate pace to the story. My manuscript met all the criteria for what I thought was good. But how that would translate to someone “in the know,” well, I had no idea.

Rejoining the gym had been a good investment. I loved getting on the scale, even though I was up 10 pounds to 165. I wasn't hungry all the time, and I was able to maintain that weight. Besides, staying at 155 was too tough, too stressful. I had tired of watching what I ate every meal or feeling guilty after a filling dinner. I just tried to eat smart, and the workouts seemed to boost me like never before in the mornings. I'd come home ready to write. I'd knock out any free-lance assignments first, and then work on my main manuscript, or another I'd gotten pretty far along, perhaps as much as three-quarters done.

As I walked and then ran on the treadmill, I stared at my backpack containing the manuscript, among other things.

“Is it good enough?” I asked myself. “It has to be. Be open to criticism though. Be humble and grateful, but don't fawn all over the guy, or needlessly kiss up. Act like you know what you are doing. You do know what you are doing.”

The pep talk made the time fly by. I finished on the treadmill at 10:25 and headed to the steam room at 10:30. Thomas and Benny came in. They looked like the odd couple. Thomas had enough hair to do the walls and floor, and Benny had almost none, save a wisp of gray on each side of his head. He was very thin. Oh, to have that metabolism!

“Don't you eat anymore?” Thomas asked me. I remembered I hadn't seen him in at least a year or two, and 40 pounds ago.

“I've got my life together,” I said. “Part of it was dropping my gut.”

He smiled.

When I pulled the manuscript out of my backpack, four paperbacks hit the soggy ground. I quickly reached down.

“I did this one,” Benny said, holding up *Gone in a Heartbeat*. He handed it back to me.

“If I'm not writing, I'm usually reading,” I said. “I'll bet I read six or seven books a month.”

“The best writers are insatiable readers,” he said.

Benny handed me the book and we finally shook hands. For a skinny fellow, he had a grip that could break bones.

“So,” he said, as I handed him the full version of the manuscript, “you’re a writer.”

Damn right I am. A damn fine one. A best-selling one if I get a break.

“It’s one of my most passionate loves,” I said. “It gives me a sort of high. I find myself so engrossed that I’ll write until daylight. Sometimes, well, this is kind of silly—”

“No, go on,” Benny said, smiling.

“Well, it’s just that, when I decided to leave the newspaper and write full-time, we – my son and I – were pretty strapped financially,” I said. “I’d bundle my son in a sleeping bag and two comforters because I couldn’t afford a big heating bill. I’d be shivering, writing - just lost in the craft. So now, even though we’re making a living and doing pretty well – thanks in no small part to Thomas, here, who hooked me up with a lot of magazine work – when I put my son in bed at night...you see, we were broke, so we slept on a sofa bed downstairs for two years. Now he has his own bed upstairs. Anyway, I’ll go down to write once he falls asleep. I’ll open the downstairs windows and let the breeze chill me. I did some of my best work when I was struggling. So, I guess, I just want to remind myself of what it took to get here.”

“And where’s here, exactly?” Benny asked.

“I’m making a decent living as a working writer, and I’ve come into a pretty healthy sum of money that will keep me solvent for another two years, if I play it right,” I said. “But what amazes me is that I write, and I get paid for it! It’s so different from newspapers. I enjoyed that job, don’t get me wrong. But the deskwork, laying out pages, managing a staff – all of that wasn’t for me. It was writing. Meeting people, stepping gently inside their lives, hearing their stories, and then telling it to 40,000 people.”

Benny raised his eyebrows.

“Then you’ve made a wise career choice,” he said.

He opened the manuscript and handed me the version I had dropped off for him at Thomas’ office, just the evening before.

“This,” he said, “is good. Very good. It needs a little work though. I made some notes, but to be honest, I couldn’t put it down. I almost called you last night and had you bring over the entire thing. I wanted to see where it goes, how it ends.”

Had I not been wearing only a towel, I would’ve jumped up Toyota style!

“Thank you,” I said, sweat dripping off my brow and landing on my chest.

“I can’t buy it though,” he said.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know if this meant it wasn’t good enough, or if he wasn’t interested personally, or what?

“The way it works is you need an agent,” he said. I knew that, and no one, believe me, wanted an agent more than I did. I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions because I wanted to let him finish his thought.

“In the version I read, the one you’re holding,” he said, pointing toward it as it sat on my lap. “I put a couple of reputable agents’ numbers in the back. Give me a week or two when I get back to New York. Once I unbind this—”

He laughed as he flipped several pages.

“This is put together really well,” he said grinning. “You should be complimented for your presentation manner.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“So I’ll copy this and send it along to the two agents I listed,” he said. “I’m pretty confident – well hell, I’m all but positive – that one of them will represent you, since they know I’ve read it and like it.”

And this means?

“Thanks, you don’t know how much I’d appreciate that” I said.

“Hell, yes,” Thomas said. “But dammit, Bob, you’re as hungry as anyone I’ve ever met. You deserve this.”

And “this” that I deserve...is what, exactly?

Benny had drifted off, lost in MY BOOK.

“Good!” he said, thumbing through chapter 15. “You have that element of danger. Your lead character sticks his neck out! I like that. That’s good. Very good.”

He sat and read for 10, 15 minutes, as though he were alone. Thomas smiled at me and leaned back, soaking in the steam. I hope that’s not cashmere, I thought to myself, as his chest hair swelled with perspiration and steam.

“All right!” Benny said loudly, startling me. “You didn’t go for the easy out. ‘Jake’ has a fork in the road. Both are appealing and risky. What will he do?”

He looked at me.

“Actually,” I said. “He chooses one, but fails, starts to go back—”

“The other path?” he asked.

“No, no, he decides that he has to commit, so he stays the course and weathers the pitfalls because he’s not ready to start over,” I said.

Benny nods, and continues reading, smiling the whole while. He folds the corner of a page, sets it down, and leans forward, wiping his forehead on the towel.

“You might have to cut that part down, it gets a little wordy,” he said. “Let the reader get there quicker. I like the first-person narrative – even the idea that a dead man is narrating it is eerily appealing. The important thing is the characters and story are good, captivating. I just can’t believe this is your first manuscript.”

“Actually, it’s not,” I said. “I wrote two others, the first one so crappy I wouldn’t show it to anyone. The second one moves along better. I had about 200 pages on it. Then I realized I wasn’t working hard enough – it was too easy. So I erased 80 pages and picked it up. Now I’m at about 250 computer pages. I had to do it the right way.”

“That,” he said, “is excellent, the mark of a true novelist. Before ego sets in, of course.”

He leaned back, joining Thomas with his head against the wall. We sat for maybe 15 more minutes. He looked at Thomas, who was taking on water like the Titanic.

“That,” he said, poking his finger toward Thomas’ chest, “better not be cashmere.”

They laughed. I smiled. Benny and I were on the same page, though I didn’t have the courage – or audacity – to point out I had the cashmere thought 20 minutes earlier. We stood up slowly, as if the steam had done more to wear us down than refresh us.

Ever since that night at the bookstore, I knew I was going to call her. So I might as well do it. I called Gene and asked him to have Samantha call me. After she called Janet (the FedEx lady – I was hoping for a last name as well as her phone number), Samantha called me.

“She was never judging you, I hope you know,” Samantha said. “She just didn’t understand.

I mean, come on, Bob, you were having porn delivered by the gallon!”

“Yes, and thank you very much for telling Gene,” I said.

“Well, actually I did help you on that one,” she said. “I told him he couldn’t tell Ralph. That should save you some grief.”

Ralph had enough grief – but exponentially more happiness. His most annoying habit, chewing tobacco, had fallen, with his racist views, along the wayside. Yet no one there would ever forget one night when Gene tasted Copenhagen. He showed up to work the desk one night, taking a plethora of basketball game calls. Ralph sat at Gene’s desk, as Gene moved over to lay out a page at a special machine across the newsroom.

About a third of a can of Mountain Dew was sitting on Gene’s desk. After confirming it was Gene’s, Ralph downed it and in the next hour used it as a “spitter” for his tobacco juice. He spat rather discreetly, so aside from the smell when he “took a dip,” it didn’t really bother me. It did Gene, though – he’d ridden Ralph about it. In defense, Ralph had actually convinced Gene he had quit. This was pre-Lucy, and Ralph had anything but quit. He started another “dip” and then went to wash his hands after getting it all over himself when the phone rang and caught him off-guard.

While he was washing his hands, Gene came back to his desk. I saw him reaching for the Mountain Dew and meant to stop him.

“Hey, don’t drink that,” I cautioned.

He picked it up and looked at me.

“I don’t care if it’s warm,” he said. “I’m about to drop-off here. I need the caffeine.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not–”

Gene took a huge swig, grabbed his throat and looked in the can.

“That son of a bitch,” Gene said, loud enough for me to hear. For Gene to swear was really something. Usually it took something major for a “gosh darn” or “hell,” but this, this, well, it was a swallow or two of tobacco juice. He thumped an unsuspecting Ralph on the chest as he ran back to the bathroom, which was down the hall off the break room. I went after him, waiting outside the bathroom door. Ralph soon joined me, “What’s up?” he whispered to me, my ear against the bathroom door, as Gene heaved what had been in Ralph’s lower lip into, I hoped, the toilet.

“He drank the Mountain Dew,” I whispered.

“That wasn’t Mountain Dew,” Ralph said. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“I tried,” I said, giving Ralph a look.

I pulled Ralph away from that evening’s drama and back to the desk. In weeks to come, we’d laugh until it hurt about what happened that night Gene drank “Mountain Doo-Doo,” but that night, it wasn’t funny, Gene was pale, and we had a rapidly-approaching deadline to meet. I’d find out later that Ralph had sprung for a pitcher of beer for Gene (and then driven Gene home) and ordered in pizza later at Gene’s house to make up for the mishap.

I thought of all of this while Samantha told me how lucky I was to have her and Gene as friends. Only a pause – she had to breathe at some point during this story – prompted me to speak as I finally came back to the conversation when she said, “By the way, it’s Lynden. Her last name.”

“So you’re okay with me asking her out?” I asked.

“Yes, and so is she,” Samantha said. “She has a little girl, a year older than Garrett, I’m pretty sure. Listen, she hasn’t been dating for about a year. The guy she thought was going to marry her just up and left with another girl.”

I hope she hasn’t tried the Internet.

“And, so, she’s a little wary,” Sam continued. “Just take it slowly.”

“Slowly? I haven’t had a date in years,” I said. “I’m driving in a school zone when it comes to dating.”

“Huh?” Sam inquired.

“I’m all into going slowly, slower even than the posted limits,” I answered.

I called Janet. She couldn’t talk – she was making “O’s” for her daughter’s dinner.

That’s funny, I told her. I had been a regular “O’s maker” for years. She told me to call back later. After my son and her daughter had turned in for the night, I called her. We talked for more than an hour. She only mentioned the guy who had dumped her once, dubbing it a “relationship that had taken a turn I wasn’t prepared for,” and though she shared my porn-review employment with Sam, who in turn shared it with Gene, I didn’t divulge that I knew anymore than she told me.

We talked about the town, how it had grown – she wasn’t a local so I filled her in on what I knew, pointing out that history and fiction never merged in this particular case. Actually, we talked 90 percent of the time about how rewarding it was to be parents. She had a younger

(“Way younger,” she said) sister in town – that was how she ended up moving here, living with her sister after her divorce (her ex was in Texas, in their “old” house) before she hooked up with FedEx, and could afford her own “small but quaint house.”

Her sister, “Angela’s” aunt, watched her in the afternoon until Janet got off work.

“She wasn’t able to have her own kids,” Janet said. “But she’s been like a big sister to Angela. They are best buddies.”

We decided it would be best for the first date (she didn’t sound optimistic that there would be more, but maybe that was just me) if we didn’t bring the kids along. Without going into detail, I totally agreed. We didn’t need to be introducing dates into our kids’ lives if there was a chance they’d never see them again.

That Saturday night (she worked late Friday so she could go to Angela’s school for a program) we had a delicious shrimp dinner and saw a movie. She said she wanted to pick her daughter up before it got “too late, at least before she falls asleep” which I also understood. I told her I had the same agreement with my mother that night.

I thought about her Sunday and Monday. She stopped by, “Just in the neighborhood, for work, you know,” and we decided to meet for lunch the next day. That went well. On Friday, we met again for lunch.

At that point, things were going so well, I didn’t want to mess it up. I wanted to see her that night, the next night and the night after that. I wanted to take her partway up Cobbler’s Peak, about 1,500 feet, to a small lake. I wanted to bring sandwiches and a blanket, and listen to her talk, watch the wind take her hair this way and that, hear her talk about her love of motherhood, and though she had it rough, “I’m actually quite blessed because a lot of people have it way harder than me.”

Actually, I wanted to marry her, I thought to myself – probably best to keep that one a secret, so as not to scare her off.

She proposed we take the kids to “Marvin’s Funhouse” Saturday night for pizza and kiddie games. It had only recently opened. Garrett had mentioned it a week or two earlier, and we had planned to go there. Janet had already taken Angela there twice.

We agreed to go together, reasoning the drive – it was out past Wal-Mart on the east side of the interstate – would give the kids at least a chance to become a bit familiar with each other before descending into the “ball pit” or other exciting things that, Janet said, “Marvin’s

Funhouse” offered.

On one hand, I was excited – in just about every sense of the word. But I was concerned about Garrett. I wanted him to like Janet – and Angela – but I didn’t want to push him. We talked about it that night at dinner, and he, perhaps because of the mere mention of going to “Marvin’s,” pronounced it a fine idea.

“And besides, Dad, I get to make a friend,” he said, and I hugged him.

We picked them up at their house. Angela thought it was the neatest thing in the world that we had a DVD player in the Blazer. After getting a look from Janet that it was all right to put in a DVD, we agreed upon “Bug’s Life,” and the kids talked like fast friends about their favorite parts of the movie. A couple of times, Janet turned back, smiling toward the two. Garrett had shared a Lego creation with Angela, and she was smiling broadly, questioning him about it – which he clearly was enjoying.

Once we arrived, Angela took Garrett by the hand – at that point, I almost cried – and said she was taking him to all the “really coolest things” at the Funhouse. I had to be careful not to get too excited.

“They seem to have hit it off,” Janet said. She was sitting across from me, and I wished she were next to me. Already we had had three “dates,” and I hadn’t the courage to do anything more than hug her yet. With the kids here, I think neither of us was ready to be so bold as to try and kiss the other.

Instead, she reached across the table and took my hands.

“About all that stuff I said when you were...reviewing those tapes,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re a very decent man – a loving father. I jumped to a conclusion I shouldn’t have.”

I smiled. Her hands were warm, which I took as a good sign. For someone who spent her days hauling packages, they were surprisingly soft.

“That’s okay,” I said. “If the shoe was on the other foot and it was me delivering adult films to you, I’d have thought–”

“That I was the coolest girl on earth,” she said laughing. “Don’t lie, that’s exactly what you would’ve thought.”

A sense of humor. Beautiful. A good – no, a great – mom, from what I had seen.

“Actually, no,” I said seriously. “Maybe the old me, maybe that person would’ve been turned

on by that. But the person I am now – the one my ex never really knew – isn't like that. I respect who you are – what you do, the kind of mother you are.”

“Your ex,” she said, “Sam told me a little about her. She's in Mexico?”

“Brazil,” I said. I filled her in on what had happened the past few years, the divorce, going back to court. I feared it was sharing too much. But when she grasped my hands more tightly when I related the more emotional experiences – losing him in court, at least momentarily – and everything, I felt sharing was the right thing to do with this woman.

“Tomorrow I have to make some final changes, print out and mail my manuscript off to this New York agent,” I said. “I'm a basket case about it. I'm confident in the manuscript, but the final sprint is, to say the least, pretty daunting.”

Finally – a whopping 50 minutes after we had ordered two kids' packs and a small pizza with “everything” except onions (my ex was a vegetarian, though she ate turkey and chicken – anyway, it was comforting to know that with every bite of meat I wouldn't be reminded it was “animal flesh”) – our number was called. I wished the cooks would have taken another hour. We decided I'd go get the pizza, she'd get napkins, plastic forks and paper plates, and round up the kids.

My little boy ate like he hadn't in ages – Angela, though thin like Garrett, had a lion's appetite. They finished and looked at their respective parents.

“Can we go play?” Garrett asked as Angela nodded toward her mother. Janet and I were still finishing our first pieces of pizza, yet the kids' packs were wiped out.

“As long as you take it easy,” I told Garrett. “You've got some food in your belly. Don't be flipping and sliding for a little while 'til it settles.”

“The same goes for you junior miss,” Janet said to Angela.

Angela smiled, both she and Garrett promised no back flips, and after we coughed up three quarters each – Janet spotted me one, so each child would have equal – the kids headed out.

“That's odd,” Janet said.

“What's that?” I asked.

“Usually, if I call her by her nickname in public, I get the kiddie version of a scolding,” she said.

“I know that one,” I said. “He calls me on that whenever I do that, too.”

“She must be very comfortable with you guys,” Janet said, smiling.

“I think that goes both ways,” I said.

We had to all but wrestle the kids to get them to leave that night – we had no choice, it closed at 9, and Janet and I talked for 90 minutes while the kids, save a few breaks came to us for drinks from their sodas (Janet and I both shared no-caffeine policies with our kids).

“Maybe you can come in and play,” Angela suggested to Garrett.

“A little late,” Janet said, verbalizing my thoughts – though I’d had waived any of my rules to spend more time with these two wonderful girls.

“How about tomorrow?” Janet asked.

“Yeah!” Garrett said.

“How about you bring him over, say noon, I’ll make them lunch, you can take care of what you need to, to get your manuscript out, then come over when you’re done, and we’ll have dinner,” she said.

“Only if you let me bring dinner,” I said. “How about Chinese?”

“Ugh,” Garrett said.

“Gross!” Angela added.

“Well, I like Chinese,” Janet said.

“And I’ll bring Subway’s kids’ packs for the kids,” I said.

“Yeah, turkey!” Angela said.

Garrett nodded. Turkey was his “Subway bird” of choice. So it was a date. Another date. Another step closer to...what? Where would this end? It had begun, right? Where were we going? I realized these would be the kinds of questions that would probably scare off a settled, secure person like Janet. Still, as I scooped Garrett up off of Janet’s porch, I realized that we had made two new friends, no matter what, and that regardless of where this led – or didn’t lead – we were going to be all right.

The light was blinking on my answering machine when we got home. I decided to get

Garrett to bed first. How nice, I thought, of Janet to call to say they had a great time, and were looking forward to seeing us tomorrow.

“Time for bed,” I said.

“Dad, it’s a weekend!” he said. “It’s only 9:30.”

I offered a trade, offering to read Harry Potter with him in bed. He read a page, I read two, and so on. I kept reading until he motioned that he didn’t want to read again after my two pages were up.

“Too tired,” he said, hugging Angus, “but I want to hear what happens.”

By the time I finished two more pages, he was out like a light. I gave him a kiss on the head, made sure he was covered, and turned out his light, his humidifier quietly humming as I walked out of the room. I headed back downstairs and hit the message button.

“Call me. Ralph,” the message said.

I called Ralph.

“She’s back,” Ralph said.

“She?” I asked.

“Janet,” he said. “Also known as the mother of your son. Ring a bell?”

“Wow,” I said. “How do you know?”

“Listen, don’t get pissed at me,” he said. “But I saw her earlier this week, Tuesday, at the courthouse.”

“And you’re calling me now?” I asked irritably.

“I wanted to give her a chance to call you,” he said. “Clearly, she hasn’t.”

“Clearly,” I replied.

“There’s some things you should know, first,” he said.

“Like that she’s already at the courthouse filing to rip my son away from me again?” I asked.

“No, actually – Christ, don’t you think I’d have called you first if that was going on?” he asked.

“Don’t you think you should’ve called the minute you saw her?” I asked.

There was a pause.

“She was in, getting a restraining order,” he said.

“Jesus, against me? For what?” I asked.

“No, against Juan, her boy from Brazil,” Ralph said.

“For what?” I asked again.

“No idea, from what I heard from the clerk who I tapped to tell me about it, Juan’s still in Brazil,” he said. “But you need to know this: When I saw Janet on Tuesday, she had a black eye – a bad black eye.”

“Oh my God,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I only saw her from a distance, and she didn’t see me,” Ralph said. “But the clerk who filled me in said when she took off the dark sunglasses she was wearing to sign the restraining order form, even the blood vessels and everything were broken.”

“Did the clerk say what she filed for? The grounds?” I asked.

“I couldn’t get that,” Ralph said. “He hasn’t been served. The file will be open as a public record Monday, so I can follow up if you want. But now, no. Not yet. Sorry.”

“No, man, I’m glad you called, and I guess I respect why you waited to call,” I said.

“I really, really thought she’d have called you by now,” Ralph said. “At least to see the little guy. I was going to call you that day, but Gene said you were out with ‘the other’ Janet at lunch or something. I didn’t want to ruin it.”

Gene knows, I thought. Samantha must have told him. Oh well, I had bigger fish to fry now.

“One would think a normal mother would,” I said. “She was pretty beat up though? I mean, when you saw her Tuesday?”

“Actually, no,” Ralph said. “She told the clerk the eye thing had happened two, three weeks earlier – that it was just ‘taking absolutely forever’ to heal. Thinner than I remember – as if she needed to lose any weight – and a tight black dress. To be honest, she looked like a million bucks – 900 grand if you deduct for the screwed up eye.”

Only Ralph.

“Okay, well, thanks,” I said. “I appreciate you filling me in.”

We hung up. I typed the changes in my manuscript that I had received from Gene and two of my magazine editors. I printed it out and I felt completed about that. But still, I couldn’t get the thoughts of my ex being back in town out of my head. I turned restlessly in bed through the night. Why was she back now? I had finally gotten my life moving along – it wasn’t like I wasn’t over my ex because I very much was. But my son was starting to get over her. We had a new life started, and it was only gaining momentum. Nothing like the ex back in the picture, in the same city, to take the wind out of the sails.

The next morning, I acted like nothing had gone wrong. I was tired but forced myself to run on the treadmill in the kitchen for four miles. I felt better when I was done. Garrett slept late, until 9, watched some cartoons, did some coloring, and I took him to see Angela and Janet.

“You all right?” Janet asked. I had tried to keep my best face on, and I didn’t want to tell her my ex, Garrett’s mom, was in town, first of all, because I didn’t know what it meant, her being back.

“Yes, just excited about getting this thing done, that’s all,” I said.

I had the manuscript in the car but had forgotten copies of the magazine stories and a couple of the newspaper stories I’d written that won awards, at home, that I wanted to include in the package with the manuscript. So I headed to the townhouse. As I pulled up, I saw a gorgeous black Lexus, new plates on it, in front. On the porch was the other Janet, ankle length running tights and a State U. sweatshirt.

“Hi, stranger,” she said.

“Well, hello,” I said, heading toward the door with my key out.

“Mind if I—”

“No, of course, come in,” I said.

“Where’s Garrett,” she asked.

Where’s Garrett? He’s in a happy place. He’s progressing in school like you wouldn’t believe – like you wouldn’t know because you’ve haven’t been there, not this year, not ever. He’s with a wonderful woman who I might be falling in love with, if I haven’t already, and her adorable daughter.

“He has a play day with a friend, just for an hour or two, until I go back,” I said.

She pulled the door behind her and walked into the living room.

“Thought you might have gotten a place – a house – since you came into some money once my house sold,” she said.

“Our house,” I said. “And don’t start. Or leave.”

“I don’t want to fight with you,” she said.

She took off her sunglasses – a small discoloration, a half circle under her eye that could’ve passed for a sleep ring if I didn’t know her better, remained under her left eye, but aside from that, didn’t look that bad.

“I’m back at SunWest,” she said. “A promotion – management.”

“You’ve always been good at your job,” I said. “You know, you were gone 10 months. And didn’t call our son. Missed his birthday, if you recall.”

“You have no idea what I was going through,” she said.

“A lot has happened here,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Went by and saw my lawyer this week. He told me about what you did – you were only looking out for you and Garrett. I understand. I’m not mad. Besides, I don’t know if I could change it right now if I had to.”

Not mad? This from a woman who nearly made me insane.

“Look, I will work with you, your parameters,” she said. “I want to get my life together again. I want to see my son. I’m not looking for anything from you.”

“It will be good for him to see you,” I said, not knowing if I meant it or not. She was still his mother, for better or worse, and for all the worse so far, there had to be some better on the way.

“I didn’t come out of it too bad,” she said. “I transferred the \$300,000 I made down there up here before I left. It took two weeks to get the hell out of there. Anyway, I think it’s all going to work out all right now. Juan’s branch of SunWest down there isn’t going to make it the way they run it – especially now that I’m gone. I mean, I know you probably don’t believe me, but I kept that place together.”

I just shrugged. As if it were true or not. As if I cared or not. I didn’t. This, I thought, really is the opposite of love. She must not have wanted anything from me. Especially since she mentioned the 300 grand and the promotion.

“You know I have full custody,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I heard it all,” she said. “I don’t have a chance in hell, or so my lawyer told me, of anything, at least for a few years. I know leaving wasn’t the right thing to do. I was finding my way.”

And that’s led her back here. How un-fortuitous. For me. For Garrett. Maybe, even, for her. Who knows.

For some reason, I didn’t ask about Juan or her eye.

“You’re probably curious about what happened – why I’m back,” she said. “And this” she added, pointing to her eye.

“Only vaguely curious as it relates to the mother of my son,” I said.

“Well, Juan’s a son of a bitch,” she said. “He’s abusive as hell. His family’s just as fucked up

– thinks women should be these submissive little gophers.”

“Well, then he shopped badly in the women’s department while he was here,” I said.

She took off her sweatshirt, and I did a double take at her in her sports bra. She looked different. Better – though she looked just fine before she left. Then, she did something I never expected: She hugged me.

“I missed you,” she said. “I missed our son.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” I said, pulling back.

She stepped back and put her hands below her breasts as if cupping them.

“Notice anything?” she asked.

“They sell new support or push-up or whatever the heck you call them, bras in Brazil?” I asked.

“No bra,” she said. “They were a gift.”

I looked puzzled, I suppose.

“I had my breasts done,” she said, pulling up her sports bra over her head and tossing it on her sweatshirt. “They look real, don’t they?”

Well, yes, I thought, my eyes transfixed, unable to look away. I started thinking about Indiana Jones telling his female compatriot not to look at the light as the Lost Ark was opened in the movie. Sometimes, you can’t help but stare. I mean, come on, even the sun won’t blind you if you don’t stare for that long.

“My ‘old’ breasts, I put a pencil underneath, and my sagging boob kept it there,” she said.

“So that’s what happened to our missing pencils,” I said, referring to one of our past tiffs.

I looked at two nipples that I had, once upon a time, been very familiar with. “These, well, I can put a quarter under it ...”

She reached into her sweat top, and pulled out a quarter. Either this was planned, or she meant to get a newspaper on the way over...

“And look,” she said, as the quarter fell to my floor. “Can’t even hold a quarter.”

I snapped to my senses or sense of humor.

“But what if you need to make a call from a pay phone? Better hope you’re not counting on your breasts to be holding your quarter for you. I’ll get you a change purse,” I said.

I didn’t want to be turned on. This wasn’t a woman I loved, or even liked. I felt like even getting aroused would be horribly wrong, but I couldn’t tell that to the guys south of my border

who were scurrying and making their presence felt below my belt – thank God it was laundry day, and I was wearing constricting biking tights beneath my jeans.

“Listen,” she said, moving in close, her hands around my waist. “Maybe we won’t get back together. Maybe not now, maybe not ever, but –.”

She swayed back and forth. She could tell I was turned on, at least down there, and I was ashamed – both for being turned on, and that she knew it. She had been the last person I’d had sex with. No doubt Juan had ridden the Janet-go-round until he snapped.

She reached down and ran her hand along my swollen penis. My jeans and biking tights didn’t conceal anything from her touch.

“Well, what’s this?” she asked lustily. She started to kiss me and I turned away.

“Come on now, Bobby-boy,” she called me, as she had the first time we’d made love.

I turned my head, back and forth, as though I was Ray Charles in the middle of an encore. But this wouldn’t be an encore.

“You don’t have to love me,” she said. “You don’t have to like me. But right now, I want you to fuck me. Fuck me like you used to. Make me moan. Make me scream.”

I reached over her to the couch and grabbed her sweatshirt.

“Not today, not ever,” I said. “I’ve moved on, just like you did. Put this on.”

“You are insane,” she said. “I don’t care if you’re seeing someone or not. Are you seeing someone, Bob? Because if you are, I don’t care. I just want you, right now.”

“Not going to happen,” I said. “For your information, I have a friend that I see. It’s nothing more than that. Not yet, anyway, though I wouldn’t mind if it was. As if you need to know. I’ve only been seeing her a few weeks, maybe a month.”

Why am I telling her this?

“And you still haven’t fucked her?” she asked.

“Haven’t even kissed her,” I said.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she said. “You know, we did it 72 hours into our relationship.”

Yes we did, in the backseat of her car. Then that night at my apartment in the bathtub, after we did it twice in the bed.

“This isn’t like that,” I said.

“She doesn’t turn you on?” she asked smugly.

She didn’t deserve an answer at least not in the terms of her thinking.

“You couldn’t understand what this is,” I said. “This woman is only like you in that she is physically beautiful. Inside she’s even more beautiful than she is on the outside. She’s a strong woman, a devoted mother. She’s well read. She’s kind. She loves kids. She cares about me. She makes me want to achieve my dreams even more than I already do. She understands me.”

I hadn’t realized until that moment that I felt all of that for “the other” Janet.

I went back over to Janet’s and felt more than a little guilty for not reacting faster to my ex’s breast display. But I knew in my heart that I wouldn’t have done anything. We went to the mall with the kids, and Angela had me carry her piggy bank as Garrett explained to Janet how the new Harry Potter set of Legos in the display at the toy store would fit together.

Angela doted on me a little when we stopped to eat at a restaurant in the mall, and Garrett didn’t mind at all. He was talking math with Janet, and as she quizzed him on the spot, he had all the right answers. Soon Angela asked to switch places with me, “Cause I want to sit with Garrett.” We switched places, and Janet and I held hands the entire time we ate. I was anything but graceful eating with my left hand.

And I didn’t mind one bit.

Garrett was sitting, doing math homework. He had money problems – something I was familiar with at one time. He was solving problems dealing with purchase price and change.

“Want me to check those as you get them done – they’re not easy, I looked at them,” I said.

“No, but thanks, I can do these, I just have to think a little bit more,” he said. He finished them, and as he got ready for bed – this was an early night, 8 p.m., but he said he was tired, and I appreciated him knowing when he needed extra rest – I checked them over. All correct. My little boy, the math whiz. He didn’t get that gene from me.

After a short story from one of his old Disney books, one he had long outgrown, but still occasionally picked for a bed-time story – which I loved because in so many ways he wasn’t my “little boy” anymore, he was a big boy – he nodded off. I went downstairs and the phone rang.

“Did you sleep with her?” Ralph was asking.

“What? Who?” I asked.

Beep-beep.

“Other line, hold on a minute,” I said.

Click, to the other line.

“Hello,” I said.

“What is going on with Janet?” Gene asked.

“What’s all the concern about Janet all of the sudden?” I asked, unaware which Janet he was asking about.

“Sam, well, she filled me in,” Gene said. “I just wanted to—”

“Hold on, Ralph is on the other line,” I said.

Click, to the other line.

“Ralph?”

“Still here,” he said. “I heard you and Janet got together, and I thought I’d make sure you were all right.”

“Yes, well, Gene is on the other line and has the same concerns,” I said.

I heard a click, knowing that meant Gene had hung up.

“I lost Gene,” I told Ralph. “Janet and I have been out a few times, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, if you’d call me once in a while, maybe I wouldn’t have to call you and ask you what’s going on in your life,” Ralph said.

Point taken. I had been so consumed by “the other” Janet and caught so off guard by Janet, my ex, that I probably hadn’t talked to Ralph in a few weeks. Gene and I had only talked once in that time when he called to tell me he was transferring to news where he’d report on courts and law issues. He asked my opinion, and I told him it was a wise move for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was that he’d be home at a reasonable hour - sports writer’s hours were grueling. Plus, I told him, I thought he’d grow as a writer.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” I told Ralph. “It’s just, Janet, well, I think I love her.”

“Again!” he said. “Do you not recall what she put you through? Are you crazy?”

“Okay, okay,” I said, finally realizing he was talking about my ex. He obviously had some misinformation, and I was about to clear that up. Until...

Beep, beep.

“Hold on a sec, Ralph,” I said.

Click, to the other line.

“Are we not going to talk about this?” Gene asked.

“Thanks for hanging up,” I said.

“Well, this is important,” Gene said.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I said.

“What’s the deal with you and Janet?” he asked.

I wish I had these conversations on tape: Who’s on first? What’s on second? I don’t know is on third?

“First of all, which Janet?” I asked.

“Oh no,” he said. “Ralph said your ex-wife was in town. You didn’t...you couldn’t have...you wouldn’t...did you?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I did see her. She has new breasts – spectacular. But no, nothing happened.”

“Good,” he said. “Because I called about Janet Lynden. Samantha says she told her, ‘He’s the one.’ Are you okay with that?”

“Cripes, are we a couple of women?” I asked. “Should we, maybe, go to the bathroom together and talk about that cute girl who likes me?”

“I just wanted you to know,” Gene said, “that Janet – Janet Lynden, that is, the sweet Janet – likes you. And if you have to know the truth, yes, I was a little concerned with your ex being in town. Oh heck, Samantha made me call–”

“GENE!” a voice in the background yelled.

“Anyway, just be careful,” Gene said. “You know how Janet – Janet Lambert, she still has your last name, right?”

“For all I know, yes,” I said.

“You know how Janet L. can be,” he said.

“More specific, please,” I said. “Both are Janet L.”

“Well, SWEET Janet,” he said, “really likes you and all that. Sam is just worried that you might hurt her friend. I mean, heck, I understand that your ex is the mother of your child and all that. She’s gorgeous. I mean, no one would fault you if–”

“GENE!” Sam bellowed.

“I know what you’re saying Gene, and I appreciate the call,” I said. “Listen, I have to go deal with Ralph.”

“Okay, just be careful,” he said.

“Got it.”

Click, the other line.

“Go ahead, let Gene tell you his life story and then you tell him yours,” Ralph said. “Just forget about me sitting here holding the phone. And Field of Dreams is on...”

“This is progress for you,” I said. “Mr. Impatient holding to check on one of his buddies. Sure you’re not gay?”

“If that was remotely funny, I’d laugh,” Ralph said. “I just want to know how in the hell you think this shit is going to fly again with Janet.”

“Obviously, Lucy isn’t home with that language,” I said.

“She’s at a school function,” he said. “Teacher-Parent thing, meeting, something. I forgot what it’s called.”

“To answer your question, I’m not back with my ex, not thinking about it,” I said. “In fact, I’m seeing the other Janet, very regularly in fact.”

“Thank God,” he said. “I was so worried.”

“She, my ex, is putting her life back together,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to take mine apart and build it back up with her.”

“Things good with her seeing Garrett and everything?” he asked.

This man, my friend, had grown so much, by leaps and bounds. And he thought enough to ask about the welfare of my son.

“Yeah, man, he’s doing great,” I said. “She’s back in his life, doing fun stuff with him. I think the big thing is for them just to get to know each other again.”

“That’s not confusing him, is it?” Ralph asked.

“Not that I can sense,” I said. “None of those, as Gene would say ‘signs’ that are pointing to trouble. He’s not sleeping over at her house or anything.”

Beep, beep.

“Okay, I hear it, I’ll let you go,” Ralph said. “Just checking.”

“You’re a good friend,” I said. “Talk to you soon.”

It was Gene on the other line.

“Hey, is the little guy okay with Janet, Janet, his mother, being back and all that?” Gene asked.

Yes, I told him, giving him the same explanation I had given Ralph. I also thanked Gene.

I realized that I had two of the best friends in the world. And that they cared about my son made me realize these two men were the brothers I’d always wanted growing up.

23

Garrett was off at school, I had spent the morning looking at small houses that we could rent – Garrett wants a dog, he’s earned one, but I explained to him that it would be unfair to keep a dog in a small townhouse. A dog deserved a yard, a yard with room to run. Garrett, who had always resisted the idea of leaving our little townhouse, now was amenable to finding a house. So I looked at several places and had narrowed it to two, pending Garrett’s approval.

I was on a short timeline. I had snuck in a workout for 45 minutes which left only 25 minutes to shower and meet Janet for lunch – it wouldn’t be long because she was working. I had made it out of the shower. I put on underwear and sat for a minute in deep thought. This was an important lunch. We had left both kids with my mother and spent an evening together. An entire evening. We skipped going out, she made dinner, and we ended up in bed, deciding – wisely – and mutually that we’d stop short of sex, though it was all over my mind, and I suspect – and hope – was on hers, too.

“I love you,” I said to her as we walked hand in hand to my car to pick up the kids.

“I love you, too,” she said.

I was hesitant to introduce Janet to my mother. She had always found a reason when I was younger to dislike each girl I dated. The girl I went to Homecoming with as a sophomore talked too much and too loudly. The girl I went to Senior Prom with wasn’t planning on going to college, a cardinal sin in my mother’s book. I never introduced Janet before we got married. That happened afterward. I figured it was like wearing a pair

of shoes after you bought them – no return. Whether my mother liked Janet or not, a week after we were married, was of no real concern to me. Yet it seemed she learned to like Janet almost immediately – as soon as she overcame Janet’s initial (initial?) abrasiveness. In fact, when I mentioned that we were growing a bit apart, it was my mother who urged me to work it out with her. She pointed out that Janet had made my life complete by giving me a son, and what would it tell my son if I turned tail and ran away from his mother. Maybe it was the fact that my mother never had a chance to grow old with my father. There’s been more than one time where I laid in bed late at night and wondered if my mother thinks she and my father would’ve been able to work things out and stay together. Or if they would’ve headed for a divorce. Even though my father had no problem leaving the house, I wonder if he would have really left her, gotten a divorce, which wasn’t as common in the early 1970s. I do think that that no matter what my mother felt on that issue, that she’d have at least liked the chance to see where things would’ve gone with she and my father. And I think she blamed him, maybe even blamed herself, when I told her Janet and I were having problems. Of course, while I was telling my mother this, my wife had already contacted a lawyer to file for divorce against me, so what the hell do I really know when it comes to women, anyway. This time, I wanted my mother to like Janet. Heck, I was convinced she’d like – love – Janet Lynden from the first moment they met. It didn’t matter to me, I told myself, no matter what she thought of this woman who had a wonderful daughter and was a wonderful mother. Yet it did matter: Even approaching middle age, I realized my chances of success in love were on the downside as every year passed. I think my mother realized I was thinking something along those lines. I wondered if my mother would be concerned about Garrett having a stepmother or me being stepfather to Janet’s daughter. But my mom seemed to embrace it right away, and once Janet’s daughter opened those huge eyes and smiled ear to ear, she became the granddaughter my mother always wanted from me.

The previous month had been spent almost exclusively together, Janet and I. Mostly we took the kids places, but we did sneak away for picnics, a hike up to Cobbler’s Shelf – halfway up to the Peak – I never knew a woman could be more beautiful when she perspired – helping each other the whole way. We talked at the peak – we had only a few minutes before we had to head

down because it was past noon – about our lives, which were quickly merging.

“You know, you are always so self-conscious about your townhouse,” she said.

“You’ve done so well for yourself,” I said. “My place is nothing compared to your house.”

“Don’t compare,” she said. “I hope you know me well enough to know that money, the materialistic things, don’t mean a thing to me aside from me being able to take good care of Angela. You’re a loving dad, a caring person. And you are ambitious. Honestly, to quit your job to be a dad and strike out on your own to be a writer – you’re the bravest person I know.”

I was feeling brave. Her knees were together, her running tights hugging her legs as I had for the first time recently. She had pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt down over her hands to stay warm as the breeze on the peak belied the 85-degree temperatures 5,000 feet lower.

She looked into my eyes and kissed me. If it’s possible to be lost in a moment, I should’ve been put on a milk carton. I felt things I had never felt before, not even with my ex. I felt CLOSE to this woman, not just when we kissed, not just when we held each other. All the time. When we sat and watched movies with our kids, when we played checkers, when we went to the library or bookstore.

“The bravest person you know?” I said. She nodded.

“Then how about this: I want to marry you,” I said.

She hugged me so tight it actually hurt, in a good way.

“Is this a proposal?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t have a big rock or anything, but I will get you one, we can formalize it tonight,” I said. We hugged. Just held each other, 5,000 feet away from the world, but in a world that was almost perfect – the only thing that would’ve been better was if our kids were there.

“The answer is yes – or will be yes,” she said. “And I don’t want a big rock. Just something that means something. I wouldn’t wear something big. Besides, you don’t go breaking open your piggy bank or anything over me.”

“I do have some money put away – from when the house sold,” I said. “A pretty big chunk, actually. I’m just so used to living frugally that I haven’t really gone out and spent much of it.”

“That’s another reason I love you,” she said. “But I honestly had no idea you had some money socked away. See, you’re doing better than me; I probably have a dime and nickel in savings. Well, more than that, but not much.”

I went over to the side of the shelf. Some of the rocks that lightning had knocked down had

been moved down by some ambitious city officials to mark the shelf formally. I picked up maybe a 10-pound rock and brought it back.

“Your big rock, madam,” I said.

“I’ll keep it forever,” she said. “After you carry it down the mountain.”

And so we were engaged to be engaged. I shifted the rock back and forth from arm to arm the whole way down. She offered to carry it. But I wasn’t about to let Janet’s Knight in Shining Armor carry her big rock, though I could’ve been smarter and gotten a smaller rock.

My ex was back in her grind, working ridiculous hours. She had bought an expensive house, and I hoped she was dating again – a nice guy this time, I hoped, one I wouldn’t worry would be anything but wonderful to my son. We had met for lunch – I had cleared it with Janet Lynden in advance, she thought it was “admirable” that my ex and I were taking steps to be civil, something she says she never had the chance to become with her ex – and talked about Garrett. She didn’t bring up the breasts preview she had given me the last meeting, and I didn’t bring it up, either.

We decided she’d see Garrett on Saturdays, and have him over for dinner once or twice a week, if he was comfortable, and her schedule allowed it.

The first time he went to his mother’s after she was back, he wasn’t looking forward to it. He wasn’t exactly against it, but he did ask, “Why can’t I just stay here, and maybe she can, you know, sit and talk to me or something, and then leave?” I told him if he got to his mother’s, and he didn’t like it, he could of course call me right away. He did not have to stay overnight if he didn’t want to (his mother and I had discussed this, and she agreed she’d let him call if he really didn’t want to stay at her place – though she did sound miffed that I’d even consider that a possibility).

I told him I’d be working on my manuscript, but I’d stay offline in case he called, keeping the phone line open.

When my ex showed up, she said they were going to get some dinner first. She asked if “there’s anything I should know about Garrett. I picked him up some clothes, by the way.”

Where to begin, I thought to myself.

Is she talking about dinner, about food? *He doesn't like crusts on his bread. He won't eat mashed potatoes if there's any sign of lumps. He likes his milk as cold as possible – if it sits out more than 10 minutes or so, toss the cup back in the fridge and let it get cold again. If you're getting him a sandwich, it's turkey and cheese and the world's thinnest strip of mayonnaise – if there's too much, it ruins it for him, and if there's way too much, his stomach gets sensitive. If you're going to get him a fast-food burger, it has to be plain, and with cheese. He doesn't like French fries, anywhere. He doesn't drink anything with caffeine, ever. Ever. He loves ravioli, but the sauce has to be on the side – he dips them in the sauce.*

Was she asking about what she should know if she takes him home? *He doesn't like shows that have bad words. He won't watch "Friends" because they say "ass" and "bitch," and that offends him. He won't watch "Everybody Loves Raymond" (my favorite show) because they say "crap." He also considers "suck," "crap," "butt," and "shut up" to be curse words. He likes cartoons from my era (Bugs Bunny, Roadrunner) but just a few of the new ones (SpongeBob, Ed, Edd and Eddy). He loves "Animal Planet," especially Jeff Corwin and the Croc Hunter – any Croc Hunter show where he's looking for snakes is the best because he leaps back in fear and laughs like a hyena when the snakes lash out toward the Croc Hunter.*

Was she asking about clothes? *He doesn't like socks with the reinforced toes, those are so uncomfortable to him that I'd never have him wear them. He likes the tag out of T-shirts – completely and cleanly – or it bothers him. He doesn't wear underwear like the ones he used to – no more Scooby, Power Rangers or Batman – it's all Hanes, plain white. And cut off the overrun of thread where the crotch is sewn together; that irritates him. If you are going to let him wear a nighty shirt as he does here (I packed one just in case), turn it inside out because he doesn't like the seams in the neck and armpits grabbing him at night in bed – and it needs to be a men's medium which comes down just above his knees. If it has a logo or something on it, the seams better be small because he'll only wear that right-side out; he doesn't like the logo or writing rubbing against him. He only uses the blue-colored Crest kids toothpaste, nothing else, and his dentist (whom you've never met) said it's fine for kids. He doesn't mind the dark but likes the bathroom light on all night in case he has to get up. He likes to have his back rubbed*

each night – not like a massage; just gently scratch each shoulder blade (“Oh yeah, Dad, right there, hubba, hubba!” he says each time which he knows makes me laugh) and then run your hand over his soft little back, up and down for a few minutes, and he goes right out. Bring Angus (also packed) with him from his bed in the morning for breakfast – Angus is a perfect pillow on the couch. He is not deathly afraid of bugs, but he’s not wild about spiders. He won’t so much as step on an ant though – once we had some ants on the kitchen floor near the trash. I reached for the Raid, and he looked at me as though I should be on death row myself for what I was about to do. It was only resolved when I carried the dozen or so ants, one by one, out to the back porch and freed them.

“Uh, well, just call if you need anything – or ask him, he’ll tell you,” I said, forgoing the thoughts racing through my mind.

It was all for naught. He was home at 7:30 p.m., thanked his mom for dinner. “In time he’ll get used to it,” I whispered to her as he headed for his Legos box. She frowned, and I actually felt badly for her when she went over and hugged him goodbye. Until she said, “Oh well, at least I have time to go out and unwind and have a few beers.” *He doesn’t like drinking, I thought, or even the thought of it. If he knew I ever had a beer, I’d be in deep doo-doo until I swore off drinking forever and ever.* After the door closed, he announced he was starving. I cooked some chicken strips that he devoured, two glasses of milk that he drained one after the other, followed by a bowl of vanilla ice cream with chocolate syrup (poured around the edge of the bowl, so he could decide for himself how much he wanted on each spoonful of ice cream).

Maybe in time she’d know this wonderful little guy who was my world. But I thought that, like me, she’d have to find herself first.

I knew there was no humanly possible way I could make it to lunch with Janet, my wife to be, on time. Especially when the phone rang. I was tempted to let the machine get it, but I decided to answer in case it was Garrett’s school, and he was sick, fell, got hurt, or something. I thought about trying to grab my pants and get dressed while I talked, but it was on its third ring by the time I hesitated, and I didn’t want it to get to the machine.

“Hello?”

“Bob Lambert please.”

“This is Bob Lambert,” I said, sensing the deep female voice was a telemarketer.

“This is Angie Bennett,” the voice said.

I knew that name. It was one of the agents Benny had listed. Three months ago.

“I’d like to represent you.” she said, “Your manuscript is excellent. I can’t believe this is your first try. I talked to Carol Tomlinson—”

That was the other agent Benny had listed.

“— and we agreed since I had some success with this genre, I might be a better fit,” she said.

“Though I suppose I should point out Carol thought she could sell the book too, if I hadn’t basically sold it already.”

What? I took a deep breath.

“Okay,” I said, flashing the brilliant vocabulary I clearly had.

“We have to sign some stuff first,” she said. “I get 15 percent, that includes film rights, foreign rights, basically 15 percent of everything...”

She listed some other things, none of which made much sense to me. The 15 percent, I knew, was standard. It was a big chunk, but I’d long realized that 85 percent of something was better than 100 percent of nothing.

“If I can fax you this, and you can get it back, I could have some pretty good news for you by the end of the week,” she said.

Fax away mamma! I thought. One of the things I had treated myself to was a fax machine. I had used it all of two times, once to fax Thomas a thank-you note for the meeting with Benny and again for all the free-lance work.

“I can do that,” I said.

“Fax it to me, but then overnight it back to me so I have the original, and I’ll then get a copy right back to you,” she said. “I’m pretty certain I can have a book deal on the table for you by Friday. Usually these things take longer. But I shopped it a little informally, I hope that’s all right.”

“Absolutely,” I said, liking especially the “pretty certain” assessment of my chances.

“Ironically, it won’t be with Benny and Chase-Kohl,” she said. “It’ll be with Blackstone Brick Publishing if that sounds all right, and I can get the I’s dotted and T’s crossed.”

I looked at my counter. Two Blackstone Brick books stared back at me, both of which were on the top 10 on Barnes and Noble’s website the last time I checked late last night.

“No, yes, I mean, that’s fine, whatever you think is best,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean we rule out Chase-Kohl in the future or anything,” she said. “But Blackstone, I’m relatively certain, will give a better advance. I’m thinking about 85, your share.”

Wow! Eight-thousand, five-hundred dollars? That would boost the nest egg and be more than just a start. I’d have, after the spending spree, paying rent for the last three months, and putting first and last month’s rent down, more than \$55,000 in the bank.

“That would be fine,” I said, trying to stay calm. “I can last six months on 85.”

“We couldn’t make a month on that,” she said with a laugh. “But Blackstone does some really aggressive marketing with titles like this. I think you’d make more than a 100 within the first year.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I’d make \$100,000?”

“Well, at least,” she said. “It certainly wouldn’t be unrealistic to hope for a royalty check for at least \$15,000 within the first year.”

“That means, the advance, you meant \$85,000,” I said, “not \$8,500.”

“Bob, I wouldn’t get out of bed for an \$8,500 advance,” she said. “Of course I meant 85k. To be honest, I’m hoping to put together a film deal too – this kind of book lends itself well to a script. Maybe nothing big, but who knows. If we get it optioned, it would mean another considerable check for you, too, if I can get it done. And I’m relatively certain I can – to be honest, that’s why I decided to take you on.”

I was stunned. Apparently not stunned enough.

“If we get raving reviews, maybe Oprah or Kelly Ripa or USA Today likes it, then the sky is the limit,” she said. “Then we’d be looking at a paperback rights auction. That could go through the roof. But I don’t want to get ahead of myself. At the same time, I’ve got a good feeling...”

I couldn’t speak. Mainly because I couldn’t breathe. I looked down. My underwear was on inside out. These are things my new agent doesn’t need to know.

“I have another manuscript – I think it’s as good as the one you have, maybe even better in some ways,” I said. “It’s a third-person narrative. And it’s not the same genre – it’s a murder mystery.”

“Send it with the contract,” she said. “Crossing over to other genres is much easier if you do it out of the gate. Who knows, maybe I’ll pitch it to Chase-Kohl. Let’s get it in the pipeline. If it needs any work, we’ll let you know, and we’ll go over what we think needs to be done. We’re a

full-service agency, and if our writers send something that needs some work, we're not afraid to tell them."

"That's the way I want it," I said. "I need that feedback to get better."

"Benny said you were amenable to criticism," she said. "Frankly, it's refreshing."

"This all sounds very exciting," I said. "Fax that thing. I'll sign, fax it back to you, and FedEx it back right away with the other manuscript."

"Wait," she said. "Let me give you the agency's FedEx account number."

She faxed the letter, 20 pages, and I dressed as I watched it come through the fax machine. I had goose bumps head to toe, and if I'd understood or at least processed the entire phone call, I'd have bawled like a baby. I signed the contract and faxed it back. It took forever, but I had a lot to think about. When it was done, I took the contract, put it into a folder, grabbed one of the two copies of *Breaking Ranks* and headed to lunch. By the time I got to the sub-shop I was 40 minutes late.

"Everything okay?" Janet asked, looking adorable in her purple FedEx outfit. "I mean, Bob, I only have about 20 minutes until I've got to get back to work. Your ex isn't a problem I hope."

"Oh my God!" I whispered into her ear.

"Here, you get half," she said, taking her half of the foot-long onto a napkin and pushing mine in the wrapper to me. We liked the same subs, too, "if that just isn't the cutest thing in the world," Sam noted when Gene and I ate here with Janet last week."

I pulled out the folder containing the contract and handed it to her, along with my second manuscript.

"Here," I said. "FedEx account number is on there. Can you take it?"

"Sure," she said, not opening it.

"So tell me what's going on," she said. "It's so unlike you to be late – or to not be 15 minutes early. Is Garrett all right?"

She smiled. My tardiness was forgiven without even giving a reason. I loved this woman. And I knew she loved me.

"That's from an agent," I said, "one of the better ones, from my limited knowledge."

"That's great," she said, leaning across and kissing me. She had gotten mayonnaise on the sandwich, I could tell when her lips meant mine, and I hated mayonnaise. But we could work through that.

“That’s not the half of it,” I said. I told her what Angie Bennett had told me, that I could have a book deal by the end of the week.

“I’m so happy for you! So proud of you!” she said, and people in the sub shop started to stare. “Wait until you tell Garrett! He’ll be so happy for his Daddy.”

I took several bites – realizing I was starving. I told her to look at the contract, and as she did, I woofed down the rest of my sandwich.

“You know if you eat that fast you’re going to get gas,” she said.

“Yes, dear,” I smiled.

She excused herself, went out to the FedEx van – for some reason, and I hoped it wasn’t something weird – her in her uniform was sexy to me. Not as sexy as the miniskirts or the tight jeans she wore but very attractive in a working girl kind of way. She brought back in the slip.

“You should fill this out,” she said. “And you should enjoy every letter of it.”

I laughed and pushed it to the side.

“Something I haven’t told you yet,” I said. “The money – even the advance itself – is ridiculous! It’s Monopoly money. And they want this.”

I held up the second manuscript.

“They might be able to sell it, too!” I said, trying to contain myself. I turned my head and forced out the quietest burp I could. Janet didn’t notice, or pretended not to, at least.

“My writing man,” she said. “I love you. You deserve this.”

As long as I deserved the woman I was sitting next to, as long as I deserved to be Garrett’s father, and a stepfather to Angela, I had all I wanted.

But the pending book odyssey was an exciting bonus.

“**Got a minute?**” Gene asked.

“Sure, shoot,” I said, cleaning up from dinner after Janet and Angela had headed home. It was 9:30, and Garrett had, to my surprise, gone to bed after they left even though he had to be

wound up still after the excitement of “our girls” being over.

“There’s going to be a big, front-page, copyright story in the paper tomorrow,” Gene said. “And I wrote it.”

“Congratulations!” I said. “What’s it about?”

“This is so cool,” he said. “You know, it’s still kind of hectic here. Can I come over and talk to you about it? And is it okay if I give the copy desk your number, in case they need to reach me?”

“Yes and yes, of course,” I said. “Get over here.”

Gene showed up with a 12-pack. I hadn’t had a beer in my townhouse, and the idea of drinking with Garrett home didn’t excite me. But Gene was off the wall, so I agreed to a beer after he had downed one and started a second.

“This,” he said, putting down a huge folder.

“This,” I asked, “is what?”

He pulled out the folder. On top was some sort of court document.

“This is unbelievable!” Gene said, rifling past the top packet, which looked to be a series of thick packets, which appeared to be copies of older documents.

“It’s Dolores Cobbler’s diary!” he said. “All kinds of other stuff, too. Some newspaper clippings circa the early 1900s from over in a tiny city in Utah, Latter Day Saints Country.”

“I never knew it existed,” I said. “I didn’t know Peach was the writing type.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” he said. “Make a long story short?”

“Or the long story,” I said. “There’re nine beers left.”

“The Mormons collect documents like no one else,” Gene said. “They have all these diaries from the settlers who traveled the Mormon Trail, settled Salt Lake, the surrounding areas in Idaho and western Wyoming – basically, every written document they could get their hands on.”

“I’ve heard about that,” I said. “I read a book once about a woman who had traveled the Mormon Trail – number 11 of 12 wives of some guy who helped build the temple in Salt Lake City.” “Right, right!” Gene said. “One of the smaller towns out there, the small daily in that town, was doing a series on how there area was settled. Since it’s a Mormon-owned paper, the church opened its vault. This reporter guy stumbles across this collection of papers about Pete Lackey. He dictated his life to some reporter in 1904 before he was hung for stealing cattle.”

“Ol’ Pete Lackey was a cattle rustler?”

“Big time, not a very good one, though,” he said. “Those settlers who ran into Peach Cobbler on the hill, they took her diary after she jumped.”

“Or was pushed,” I pointed out.

“Whatever,” he said. “They settled in this town and took the diary with them. Since it wasn’t a Mormon-related, they just buried it in a vault with a bunch of other diaries, not giving it a second thought. When Pete Lackey was sort of chased out of town here, he ended up landing – or at least getting busted – in Carel, Utah – the same town that was holding Peach’s diary! He of course never knew that – no one did, until 2002, when this small town newspaper man uncovered it.”

“Incredible,” I said, finishing my first beer and feeling brave enough to have just one more.

“This guy calls the paper to see if we’d have any interest in it,” Gene said. “And guess who answers the phone?”

“I’m hoping, at this point, it’s you,” I said.

“Yes, yes, of course!” he said. “I asked him to overnight me everything, and he did. I couldn’t believe it! This thing literally fell on my lap two days ago. Lynn gave me one day to get something together on it – I’m starting a four-part series on it next week – but I got the first part cranked out. Bob, there were so many papers to go through. About 90 percent of it is legible – maybe more. I’ve been able to fill in the holes where it’s faded. The Mormon people who had it kept it safe, dry – amazing. I guess with all the experience they have, the pride they take in their history, they’re good at preserving documents.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“I’ve got the first and second parts done – those will start Sunday, the story tomorrow is just kind of a news story about the diary existing, and us having it,” he said. “It’s amazing. I’ve lived with this thing the past 48 hours. It’s unbelievable stuff!”

I knew at that point that if it were done right Gene would win every award in the business, maybe even a Pulitzer. For crying out loud, this was network TV stuff – nightly news, and then a TV news magazine piece. Gene would be all over the national media. He deserved it. I was happy for him. And as a native of the area, he knew enough that he wouldn’t make a silly error that a non-native would be prone to making.

“These,” he said, “are my copies. Alan wasn’t too happy. He said he spent six hours copying

it for me!”

“I’m so happy for you, buddy,” I said. He hugged me. If only Ralph were here, I thought laughing, he’d have a comment.

“So I brought these, for you,” he said.

“For me?” I asked. “Why?”

“This,” he said, “is your next book.”

A wave of excitement overtook me. No doubt there was a worthy, historical, nonfiction piece here. I picked up several pieces of paper. Dolores had a lovely cursive, and someone took a lot of pride in preserving this thing. Then it hit me. I hadn’t told Gene about my pending book deals. I was on my way. But this thing, this gift, he had placed before me wasn’t mine.

“There is an awesome book here,” I said.

“I knew it,” he said, leaning back on the couch, smiling.

“But it’s not my book, Geno,” I said.

“What?” he asked, stunned. “This stuff, Bob, this stuff is hot! It’ll be a bestseller. You’re telling me you can’t get a book out of this?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I just told you there is an awesome book here.”

“But?” he prompted me.

“But not my book, buddy,” I said. “This is a ‘sign’ – come on, you are Mr. Sign, you should see this; it’s your book.”

“Of course, yes, a sign,” he said, smiling, thumbing at the pages. “A sign. Indeed. Yes, it is a sign.”

I didn’t want to rain on Gene’s parade that night by telling him about my big news.

But when he showed up the next day at noon, I went ahead and filled him in, starting with the fact that Janet and I were going to be married. He was as excited as I was.

Then I told him about the pending book deals. He hugged me again. Twice in a day, what’s this world coming to? I had done some checking online after he left and found that most books like the one he was going to write were often done through university presses.

“I’d bet my bottom dollar that the Colorado A&M University’s Press would jump on this thing,” I said. “If you want, I could refer you to my agent – it might be mainstream enough to go with a big New York publisher. But I’m no expert, so keep in mind that I’m just guessing.”

“The A&M press would be perfect, I think,” Gene said.

“Just write a proposal and fire it off,” I said, flipping him a book on how to write book proposals. It had worked so far for me.

“Will you check it out for me after I’ve written it?” he asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

25

“**You sitting down?**” my agent is asking as I stretch the phone cord to the kitchen where I’m taking care of some chores. I had planned by now to be in a house, and Garrett having his dog. But since things were moving splendidly, albeit fast (though neither of us was uncomfortable with it), I felt like getting a place when I planned to marry Janet soon wouldn’t serve a purpose. So I was still in the townhouse.

“Because if you’re not, you’d better,” Angie said.

Three weeks had passed. I would’ve been getting anxious, but Angie had told me the last/first time we talked that my first book was all but sold.

“I’m sitting,” I fudged, turning off the water in the sink and stacking dishes as quietly as I could.

“Eighty-five, like I predicted, for *The Letter I Should’ve Written*, hardcover,” she said. “No bites yet on film rights, paperback deal is still 60 to 90 days away, I guess.”

“Eighty-five, just like you thought,” I said. “I can’t ask for—”

“Just keep listening!” she said.

I know that tone of voice, I thought. *Sure your name’s not Janet?* Just what I’d need, another Janet.

“Okay,” I said.

“Forty-two grand advance – your share after my fee – for *Breaking Ranks* from Chase-Kohl,” she said. “To be honest, I’ve done nothing for film pitch on that or paperback, either. But it’s a start. I’m relatively sure we’ll get paperback soon enough for *Breaking Ranks*. Though I can’t honestly say it has film potential – just not sure at this point.”

I bumped the frying pan into the dish rack, tipping it over - plates, pans and silverware crashing to the ground.

“Everything all right there?” she asked. “God, I thought I told you to sit down first!”

“No, I hadn’t sat,” I admitted. “Dishes – just getting some dishes done. Angie, that’s amazing. Thank you. Thank you so much. I don’t know what to say...”

“Thank you is good,” she said with a deep, almost unsettling, giggle. “Hey, doing your dishes by hand?”

“Always,” I said. “Though it’s the only option.”

“Now you can afford a dishwasher – or even hire someone to come in and wash them for you,” she said, again laughing. “There will be book tours, of course, but I’ll make sure the publishers set it up completely to our liking. First-time published authors are always the best to give this kind of news to. *Breaking Ranks* is in good shape. Their editor will get a hold of you, just a few areas you need to fill out, answer some questions. I’m not sure what Chase-Kohl will ask of us for *Breaking Ranks*, but I was surprised at how clean it was – no holes that I saw.”

I was proud of that one, maybe even as proud as *The Letter I Should’ve Written*, because on *Breaking Ranks*, I hadn’t sent it to Garrett McCombs and his English professor friends. I did have *Breaking Ranks* proofed by my magazine editors and did add some detail and background to fill out some of the characters, adding about 5,000 words if I remember correctly.

“I’ll overnight the contracts to you,” she said. “If you recall, I can sign on your behalf. But I always want my clients to have copies of everything as soon as I do – it’s just smart business to do it that way. I’ll fax you these now, and then overnight them before 5.”

“Great, thanks so much,” I said.

“I don’t want to shoot your ego through the roof, but this was very easy,” she said. “Keep it up. Keep writing. This is a phenomenal start. But it’s just that, a start. We’re going to be riding a wave of momentum – a first-time author with two decent deals from two different publishers. They’ll be a lot of media headed your way. We’ll get you out here and do some media coaching. Your background in newspapers and everything should help you. But you still need to know some standard answers that we need you to be well versed in. You don’t want to leave any holes for the media to climb into, or the next thing you’ll know, you’ll be pleading that you’ve been taken out of context, and writers will be merciless with you.”

I had seen this happen first hand. I knew the media could be vicious – I was probably guilty

on several occasions with college coaches who took umbrage with something I had written. And yes, I had told other writers. So now I'd have to avoid a trap I had helped perpetuate.

"Got it," I said. "Whatever you think is best. You're the boss."

"This is going to work out then, very well," she said. "Start writing. Get me proposals on another book – or two, when you're ready. Even if you only get two or three chapters written, get those to me as soon as they're cleaned up and ready. Maybe a good follow up title to *The Letter I Should've Written* would be a sort of modern day Kramer v. Kramer kind of thing. You know, a single dad trying to make ends meet."

"No problem there," I said, not telling her that I was already 22,000 words into another book, another murder mystery. But I had set my heart on writing the kind of book she was describing, relying – but only vaguely – on my own experiences as a single dad who had gone through a trying divorce and custody battle.

"And be sure to get a cell phone, please," she said. "I'm going to be needing to get a hold of you, and I'll need your time right away. Or the editors at the publishing houses will need to reach you."

I had an almost religious belief against cell phones, watching the dads who occasionally picked up their kids jawing loudly on their cell phones in the schoolyard, practically broadcasting their work problems to the other parents who were waiting quietly for the bell to ring. And drivers on cell phones were another gigantic pet peeve. If I had a nickel for every time a driver with a cell phone cut me off, didn't signal or sat at a green light, my financial challenges would've been over long ago. But Angie was the boss.

"I'll take care of it today," I said.

"Email me the number as soon as you have it," she said.

I suppose there wasn't anything wrong with a cell phone. I would give the number to only those who really needed it – Angie, the editors and the Janets'. I wouldn't answer while I was driving, and it would be turned off when I was at or around the school.

Janet let me put the ring on her finger as Garrett and Angela watched, beaming. I didn't base it on two months of my current salary which had gone up 100 fold with the book advances. But I didn't skimp, either. I paid \$3,400 for a ring that I had designed myself – well, a crude sketch on paper – and the jeweler created a spectacular ring. There was a small stone on each side to symbolize our kids and a diamond three times that size in the middle.

“Maybe you could get me a ring like that?” said Angela, who always rose up an octave to make suggestions sound like questions.

“You can look at mommy's whenever you want,” Janet said to bail me out of having to answer.

She had delivered my contracts FedEx a couple of days earlier, showing up just before her lunch break on Tuesday. Though unplanned – I had rice and chicken breasts on the stove – we had consummated our relationship, her FedEx uniform draped over my bedroom door as we lie in bed for an hour. It wasn't sex, though. It was love, making love. There weren't the acrobatics or dirty talk that I'd had with my ex.

This was a connection, a physical, mental and even spiritual connection. We only stopped kissing when we both needed more air as we climaxed. It just felt right. Perfect. She wasn't on the pill and I didn't use protection. We never talked about it. There was nothing that we needed to protect us from each other or to prevent something as we shared our souls and became one – anything artificial would have taken away from the reality of this love, this passion, these feelings.

“I never thought I'd do this again,” she said. “When I swore off men after my last relationship, I figured that was swearing off sex.”

Never do this again? Welcome to the club. I thought dinosaurs would be roaming the earth again before I did this. She had to leave in 15 minutes, so we got up and she ate quickly. I had butterflies in my stomach, my heart was throbbing.

“Next time you positively, absolutely have to stay overnight,” I joked.

“Best FedEx delivery you ever had then?” she asked.

“Making love to the woman who once brought me porn?” I said. “And she brings book contracts? Perfect.”

She tickled me from behind, setting her plate in the sink. There was an irony to all of this –

that she had brought me adult videos to review, that I had felt an immediate... something for her when I first saw her, that she had been the one to bring me my first book contracts, and that we'd ended up making love for the first time on that particular day.

Janet jumped in my shower and asked me to come sit and talk to her. I leaned against the sink, handed her a towel when she got out – her hair was dry (“Don’t have time for that”) – and she dressed to return to work.

“We’re going to have to talk soon,” I said.

“Got what you want and dumping me already?” she said giggling, hugging me.

“Well, I never told you how much money this involves,” I said. “It’s a lot, a whole bunch. I have money in the bank, about \$50,000.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said.

“No, I really do,” I said. “And with what I’m getting – about \$100,000 – up front for the two books, we can afford a luxury place after the wedding. Or before, if you’d like to do it that way.”

“What’s wrong with my house?” she asked. “Garrett can have the room next to Angela’s. We can make the small bedroom downstairs into an office for you. I mean, do we really need a new place?”

I was offering this woman who deserved the world at least a part of what was due her. She was telling me she was just fine. She was working her tail off, and she was telling me not to spend my money, a huge sum that I had, in my view, practically lucked into.

“Then I’ll buy you a car,” I said. “You know you want one – need one.”

“Need one? Maybe down the line,” she said. “Want one? Nah. Not now. We’re fine. We can take the Blazer when we go out. Put money away for Garrett, for down the line. Unless you’re sure I’ll be delivering a hundred grand to you several times a year.”

I smiled. She was right, at least with the idea that I shouldn’t spend for the sake of spending.

“The honeymoon,” I said. “At least let me pay for that.”

“Okay,” she said. “As long as you plan it, too. And nothing expensive.”

We had talked about taking the kids. Her sister and her husband offered to come along to serve as daycare in the evenings and if need be at night.

“We’re still set on South Dakota – the Black Hills?” I asked.

“Love it,” she said.

“We’ll take the kids to Rushmore, Crazy Horse, that natural hot springs water park in the

south hills,” I said. “We’ll pay for your sister and her husband’s room.”

“I can hardly wait,” she said, “but I’m paying for their room. And we don’t have to worry about squishing everyone in the Blazer. They’re planning to go up a day or two earlier.”

“Good idea,” I said.

Gene had something on his mind. Ralph and I were sitting in the Cobbler’s Nook Bookstore’s lounge – the retail book warehouse giant was out by the interstate, too far for a meeting when both guys had to hurry back to work. When Gene showed up, the consternation on his face made it clear he’d been doing some thinking – or at least not enough sleeping.

He had moved to his news reporter job a few weeks earlier. He had written a respected feature piece on a three-generation law firm in the city. Another story, he told us, about the illegal dumping of car batteries by a local garage, had fallen through. The company was a major advertiser, and the publisher scrapped the story, warning Gene – who wasn’t the kind to ruffle feathers anyway – to steer clear of Cobbler’s Motors in the future. The local DA had caved in on prosecuting when the owner agreed to stop the dumping, and vowed to clean it up – eventually.

“That’s the price of working at a small paper,” Ralph said.

“I think it’s the price of working at a family-owned paper,” I said. “It’s not a chain – I liked that part of it. But it’s family owned, so there’s more hands-on management, the one downside.”

“Look at you guys,” Gene said.

I looked at my clothes, thinking I had spilled something and swiped a napkin across my mouth, just in case. Ralph just looked at Gene.

“What?” Ralph asked.

“You two have come so far,” he said. “Bob, you’re with the woman of your dreams, and you’re a responsible dad. And you broke out of this newspaper grind. You’re making a living as a writer! Ralph, look at you. Look how far you’ve come. You’d have been voted Most Likely to don a White Robe when you first got here. Now you’re a different person – a changed man, I

mean. You're so much more low-key now – so less negative than you used to be.”

“Thank you, Dr. Gene,” Ralph said. “I’ll look for you on Oprah next week – maybe you can analyze people who give a shit about your prognosis.”

“I’m telling Lucy you swore,” I laughed.

“Me too,” Gene added.

“Go ahead,” Ralph said. “I’ll deny it.”

Gene reached for each corner of the table, as if encroaching on our personal space to make a point.

“And look at me,” Gene said. “Where have I gone these past few years? I was bypassed for sports editor. I’m at what is basically an entry-level news reporting position. What have I done? Where’s my growth?”

Ralph spoke up. Gentle Ralph. The Ralph we were glad to meet, though we’d never thought that side of him had existed before Lucy.

“Don’t you get it, Geno?” he asked.

“Get what?” Gene replied.

Ralph looked at me as if I knew where he was going. I had no idea. He looked at Gene, and shook his head back and forth as if Gene should’ve been able to put one and one together on his own.

“You had the least distance to travel,” Ralph said. “Our writing hero here had a long way to go, with his messy divorce and eating enough macaroni and cheese to drive its stock through the roof.”

“Raman noodles,” I said. “Six for a dollar. Mac and cheese was out of my league until it went four for a buck.”

Ralph waived me off.

“You were already there – already here, Gene,” Ralph said. “You’ve always been the one who needed the least work. You’ve always been the compassionate one, the one who never judged – hardly ever swore, and when you did, you screwed it up – and the one who encouraged Bob and me. You were already in a good place. And I don’t want to speak for Bob, but I think you helped us both get to where we’re at.”

I only nodded in affirmation. Gene had bent over backward to help me get free-lance work – though Ralph in a fit of meanness construed Gene’s movement as “bending over forward” and

questioned the reason and motivation for such a pose; thank God the old Ralph was almost long gone. Though I had never confided my financial woes to him, Gene had to know I was in dire straights for a long period, and he was always trying to pull me through.

“You found your soul mate in high school – how many guys would’ve liked to avoid the whole ‘search for their other’ because they’d already found their match?” the new, improved suddenly-with-feelings Ralph continued.

“Samantha,” he said – I smile because when she was going through a particularly heavy stage, Ralph referred to her, at least to me, as “Spam” – “is the girl for you, and you knew that when you were, what, a kid, basically. She’s good hearted like you. You two would trip and break a leg to avoid stepping on a bug. You two are good people. Sam is going to love being a mom, and you have enough heart to raise a baseball team of kids.”

Gene leaned back in his chair, as if in thought. Ralph, the one who once said, when I told him that Gene and Samantha would grow old together, said they would “grow large together” was now pulling Gene out of the doldrums. Go Ralph.

“Though I wouldn’t have chosen those exact words, I have to agree with Ralph’s sentiment,” I said. “You think I’d have had the time or the means to write a couple of books had you not hooked me up with the free-lance work? And if you hadn’t hooked me up with Thomas—”

“The human sweater guy?” Ralph interjected.

“Yes, Thomas,” I said. “Had you not gotten me with Thomas, I wouldn’t have made all these magazine contacts. And don’t forget, it was Thomas’ friend who got me an agent. You helped put food on my table, Geno, and helped keep a roof over my head. I’m indebted to you. You’ve edited my manuscript and didn’t get a dime for it. How many friends would do all you’ve done, and ask nothing in return? You gave up a dead-end job in sports – think about how horrible the hours would be if you’d have been named sports editor – to help your relationship with Sam. By the way, how come you two aren’t married yet?”

That was a question I, and I’d suspect Ralph, had always wondered.

“Her parents don’t think I’m ambitious enough,” Gene said with a shrug.

“Who gives a shit what her parents think?” Ralph asked.

“I’m telling,” I said.

“Me too,” Gene added.

“I don’t care,” Ralph said. “Listen, Gene, you’re the most giving, most humble guy I know,

so much so it makes me want to puke up my guts half the time. If you want to marry Sam, and she wants to marry you – and I’m of the belief she does – what’s stopping you?”

Gene didn’t answer. Maybe he didn’t have an answer. Maybe he was in deep thought – Gene got that way. While Ralph shot from the hip – thank God he didn’t have a real badge (and a real gun, I’d thought in his pre-Lucy days) – Gene was the reflective one of us. Gene was, as Ralph said, the one most likely to make a friend every time he met someone. I remember a time at the gym years ago when Gene and I worked out together – when I was still Captain Confrontation, Mr. Bridge Burner. All guys in gyms think they are the Alpha male. They stare down other guys just because they are there. A guy had come into the free-weight room and started to chastise Gene for using the bench press.

“I was using that!” he snapped at Gene.

“Oh sorry man, I just got here, didn’t know,” Gene said, replacing the weight that had been on it.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “We got in here 10 minutes ago. You’re name wasn’t on it – you weren’t even in the room. How the hell was my buddy supposed to know you were working out here? Was he supposed to run around the gym and ask, ‘Hey anybody using the bench? Anyone using the bench?’”

I proceeded to strip off the weights – the guy had been working with 185 pounds.

“What the hell are you doing?” the guy asked. “You got a problem?”

“I don’t like assholes who think they own the place,” I said. “You got a problem with that?”

He sized me up. I was overweight at the time, but I was as strong as I’d ever been. I put two 45-pound plates on each end and did six reps – without warming up, a fact I’d be reminded of the next morning, or two or three, when I tried unsuccessfully to raise my arms in the shower to shampoo my hair. The guy didn’t want to fight someone who benched 225 six times, yet he was willing to pick on Gene. That made me fighting mad. The guy must’ve figured I’d either kick his ass or at least give him a fight he wasn’t really looking for, so he headed to a different part of the gym to work out. Gene shot me a look of disgust.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Gene said. “The guy was working out on the bench. I took off his weights. That’s all.”

“That’s not all!” I said. “He’s a bully, a punk. He needs a shot in the mouth.”

“Maybe he just needs some friends,” Gene said.

I looked at him and couldn't help but smile. In this situation, I found a reason to almost get into a brawl, and Gene saw it as a lost opportunity to make a friend. As we sat in the coffee shop, I realized how right Ralph was in his assessment of Gene as a giving, humble person.

Ralph, raised in a household ruled by the hate of his father, was offering Gene love. I appreciated that.

"Good things happen to good people," I said.

"Nice guys finish last," Gene offered in response.

"Your ship has come in," I offered in matching cliché responses. "You just haven't unloaded it all yet."

Gene shook my hand and stood. He went over to Ralph and hugged him.

"Jesus Christ, do you have to do this in public?" Ralph asked.

"I love you man," Gene said loudly, with a big smile, kissing Ralph on the cheek. Ralph turned eight shades of red and looked around to see who might've been watching as Gene headed toward the door.

"Why does he do that shit?" Ralph asked.

"My guess? It's a sign," I said, standing and pushing my chair in as I picked up my napkin and empty coffee cup.

"It's because Gene loves you – you two are meant to be!" I yelled, loud enough to catch the attention of the cashiers over in the bookstore.

Janet Lynden became Janet Lynden-Lambert a month later. The wedding party was small, much smaller than either one of our mothers would have preferred. But we had both had "first" weddings, and the meaning behind this one was more important to us than the theatrics of a full-blown wedding. Her sister was maid of honor, and Samantha was a bridesmaid. Outside of finding my soul mate, the highlight of the day was when Ralph told Gene "How beautiful Samantha is."

Angela and Garrett served as ring bearers. And of course Ralph and Gene stood in as my best men.

Her father and mother flew in from Vermont three days before the wedding. Dan and Nancy were really friendly people. They included my mother in everything they did while they were in town, which I thought spoke volumes about the kind of people they were. Nancy seemed to enjoy spending time just with my mom on several occasions – come to think of it, Dan seemed to like the idea, too, as we hit the golf course and even put down a few watching a game on TV with Gene and Ralph. Dan and Nancy talked about coming out more often, and I sensed they missed Angela as much as they missed their own daughter. For our honeymoon, Janet, I and the kids spent two days more than we had planned in the Black Hills.

By the time my first book was published, the second was already in galleys, and Angie Bennett had sold my modern-day (and probably too personal) *Kramer v. Kramer* manuscript. In that book, I wrote about a boy who had lost his father to cancer when he was just 8 years old. The boy grew up, married, divorced and became a single dad when his wife left with their Congressman. Through his experience as a single father, he painted a picture of what he imagined his own father to be, had he lived. It was my longest book to date, nearly 580 pages when I sent it in, though published it was 420 pages, as editing tightened it and sharpened the narrative's focus. As it turned out, the parts of the book that fell to the editing ax probably saved my own neck. Because in those pages, I had taken my ex to task a little too personally, so the cuts probably kept me from another unwanted courtroom showdown with her.

After movie rights were sold for *Breaking Ranks* and TV-movie rights for *Letters*, Angie struck while the iron was hot, selling a collection of short stories I had written, several of which were feature stories from magazines that I had expanded upon for the book. Both of those brought more modest advances, but I had more than \$200,000 in the bank. After much persuading, Janet cut back to part-time for FedEx and opted to work in the distribution center, since she was only putting in 5 to 10 hours a week.

I gave Gene some feedback, chapter by chapter at first, on his book about Dolores Cobbler. He did an excellent job after we went over his options on shaping the narrative. Colorado A&M signed on to publish it. He asked me about getting an agent, but Angie said it wasn't something he really needed an agent for – I sensed neither she, nor anyone she knew, would have been terribly interested in something of this genre, especially since its appeal was primarily regional.

So I referred him not to my agent but to my lawyer, Marjorie Rickey. She negotiated a top notch deal and even got him a \$10,000 advance, and billed him not for 15 percent, but for one hour of legal advisement - \$150. Gene was ecstatic. He and Samantha went into a holding pattern in their relationship. I still sense – or maybe just hope – they will get married someday. He didn't take off much time from work to write his book, so he was either working at the paper, or staying up until all hours of the night (I know this from several 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. phone calls) working on Peach's story.

My first book came out about six months before Gene's did. But my second one came out at about the same time – Chase-Kohl was a bit more deliberate in its production schedule than Blackstone Brick Publishing, so it took a while longer. But it worked out perfect because Gene and I went to Denver, Fort Collins, Pueblo and Limon to do book signings together. I had already had mine set up through Blackstone's and Chase-Kohl's publicity departments, so I had plenty of media attention which helped to draw better crowds for the signings.

The Letter I Should've Written hit the top 10 on the bestseller list a month before *Breaking Ranks* came out, and with all the newspaper stories and TV interviews I did, the crowds grew bigger and bigger for my signings. I signed 142 books in Denver, Gene did 11. In Fort Collins I had the best signing I could ever imagine, 156 books, buoyed by the local media pushing the "local college grad does good" angle. Gene did 22 and was so ecstatic that to look at him you'd thought he'd signed a thousand.

After doing the out-of-town signings, Gene invited me to do a signing with him for the local release, which in all honesty, should have preceded his state-wide signings – but Colorado A&M didn't have the promotions staff my publishers had. A&M didn't have any, actually, save a few college students who were majoring in marketing. At the Cobbler's Nook signing, A&M sent a ridiculous number of books, almost 500. Thomas showed up – his company supplied my books, and after I introduced him to Gene, he said he'd get in touch with Colorado A&M's press and see what he could do to push the book in the entire southern part of the state.

Thomas was as happy for me as anyone, and that meant a lot. I gave him a box in which he'd later find a luxurious cashmere sweater. Also included was a very special envelope. In it was a weekend in Aspen; airplane tickets for he and his wife and their two teen-age kids, three days and two nights in a condo "with all the amenities," fine dining, skiing, car service, everything. When I told Janet the whole thing, including the sweater, was \$3,200, she made me feel at ease

by saying it wasn't just appropriate, but the least I could do ("Sounds to me like he's really the one who cleared the path for you," is how she put it) which made me feel good. Thomas would leave a message on my machine that night saying it wasn't necessary but very generous of me, and that from that first fateful, hair-strewn, powder-filled meeting that he'd known I'd make it.

We had good local coverage for the signing Gene and I did in Cobbler's Nook – the newspaper did a whole weekend section front on the book, and Gene. Local TV interviewed Gene, and he did the local radio stations two days before the book event – which helped make the turnout for the signing a veritable mob. Gene signed 380 books over the course of six hours on the Saturday of the signing – it was supposed to be a 90-minute event. I did 180 books, more of *Letters* than *Breaking Ranks*. But I was ecstatic to see Gene getting more of the attention. I left after two hours, went home and had lunch with Janet and the kids, and came back to buy a dozen of Gene's book for my friends, my college advisers, and a few just to let him know how proud I was of him. He even mentioned me in the acknowledgements, something I asked him not to do, but you can't take the goodness out of a good person, so he did it anyway.

On our first anniversary, Janet found out she was pregnant.

"I'm 35, and you're almost 40, are we ready for another child?" she asked.

I was and she was. We didn't want to find out the sex of the baby until it was born. But when we found out we were having twins – a boy and a girl – we found out anyway. Garrett and Angela woke us up on Saturday by running bath water. They were washing all their old toys to give to their younger brother and sister, who were about the size of their own little fists at that point in our pregnancy.

When she went into labor a month early, I was scared out of my mind. But Doc Ward was on duty. Though he had to work hard and stay focused – a line of sweat ran along his brow (I didn't know Doc ever perspired) – he brought the twins into the world like a gunslinger would draw six-shooters from a holster.

"We're going to be fine," I told my wife. "We've got the cowboy doctor. He's the best."

Doc Ward was calm and cool, a little more gray around the temples – he was older than I remember, I'm guessing 50 or so – but the magic hadn't left his hands. When I brought Janet home from the hospital two days later – the twins, Daniel (after her father) and Mary Janet had to stay another week, but ended up just fine – we had a message on the machine when we got home.

“Just wanted to say congratulations to you two,” said my ex, Janet. “Really happy for you. Garrett will be a sweet big brother, and I’m sure Janet’s little girl will be an awesome big sister.”

That was a bit of a surprise. I called her back to thank her and asked her how she had found out. I didn’t think Gene would have called her, and I’m relatively certain that Ralph wouldn’t have called her, even in the case of nuclear holocaust.

“I’m sorry, I thought you knew,” she said.

“Knew what?”

“I’ve been seeing Dr. Loren Ward for about two months now,” she said.

That was a shocker. And more than just irony. Turns out the magic really hadn’t left his hands, in or out of the hospital. Ol’ Doc Ward had had his hands between the legs of both women I’d had sex with in my life. I wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that.

“Oh well,” my wife said. “If anyone can rein her in, it’s probably the cowboy doctor, don’t you think?”

Janet and Janet – Gene always found that funny – overcame an initial uneasiness. I knew it would work when my wife pointed out, “I’ve only heard your side – and there are two sides – so I’m just going to do what’s best for our kids, and work with her the best I can,” she told me. That was my Janet – and better than I’d ever done.

I had actually put a cowboy doctor, who I based on Ward, in my *Kramer v. Kramer* book, which ended up with the title, *My Father, My Son*. I had the doctor wearing a leather vest and cowboy hat in the delivery room (the hat was scratched in editing, a good call, looking back). The movie rights for that one sold before the hardcover was even published, driving the paperback rights auction through the roof. The movie and paperback rights brought us a half-million dollars, and Janet finally agreed that we could both stay at home so we could raise our kids together.

Ralph and Lucy had another child 11 months after their first one. She and Janet (my current wife) became close, as Sam was a bit out of the circle after she started working at home – lots of hours, starting her own business. When Lucy became pregnant within six months of having their second child (this one, like the first, was a girl), Ralph joked that Lucy was spitting out kids like a Pez dispenser. Ralph was a new person. But he was still Ralph. After Lucy gave birth to a bouncing baby boy, she convinced Ralph to make it medically impossible to have another. She told us he could use some cheering up the day he was, she said, “snipped” so Gene and I went

by. Ralph had no advance notice of our visit, and we walked in through the open garage to find the manliest man of us three lying on the couch, a jock strap packed with ice as his only clothing on a hot summer day.

“Have you guys never heard of a telephone?” he bellowed, scrambling for a quilt. “What kind of shit is this?”

“I’m telling Lucy,” I said.

“Me too,” Gene added.

Lucy had taken the kids to the mall that day, and then to her mother’s. We had brought along copies of our books for Ralph, who had since been promoted to division director of the probation department.

My mother and Mrs. Soderberg finally became friends – Lucy suggested they meet and chastised Ralph, Gene and me for forcing her “to take the lead on this one.” She was right. And they were a match as friends. Almost similar ages, they had both spent the best years of their lives alone; my mother a widow, Mrs. Soderberg dying every day until she up and moved to Cobbler’s Nook. They had coffee and joined the “Mall Walkers,” a collection of “mature folks,” my mother told me, who walked laps at the mall several mornings a week.

We all ended up with the best babysitting. My mother became the grandmother she always wanted to be. Though I never felt like she was ever a real mom to me, I realized she had been through a lot and while she’d made some bad choices, I had too – and I was thankful that I’d been able to discover my shortcomings, and address them, before I missed out on being a father to my son. She hugged me one morning, and I almost hit the ground. I could never remember her hugging me before, though surely it happened when I was younger. The reason for this hug was, ironically, Mrs. Soderberg. Her car was getting fixed when I was getting the Blazer serviced. I knew she was doing all right, but struggling here and there financially.

Ralph helped where he could, but with kids coming at every turn, he didn’t have a lot. I had heard from either my mother or Ralph that Mrs. Soderberg’s car was getting repaired, and I talked to “Lon” at the “AutoFix” to make sure it was her car. He told me yes, that he had just called her, and she seemed distressed that the bill was approaching \$700. I covered the bill, told him to put on new tires (obviously it needed tires), paid them to detail it, and put in new mats. I brought the guy from the adjacent building over to re-upholster the seats which had seen better days. It was a Corolla, the same year as the one I had. I felt like the least I could do for her was

this, especially since she had gone out of her way to make copies of my manuscript and bind them for me. She had a part in my success, so there was no reason she shouldn't reap some reward. Besides, this was a very small thing to do. Mrs. Soderberg had been so excited that she'd driven straight to my mother's house and told her what a fine young man she had raised. I don't think my mother had heard it before, maybe she had when I was really little or something. But to come from her new, best friend meant a lot.

I never did do anything huge, in terms of money, for my mother. I did take her car in for servicing and arranged and covered a house painting, and put an awning and screen room on her backyard deck, but she told me early on she was in decent shape financially, and could afford the things she really wanted.

Besides, she said, "Loving on grandkids was all I've wanted the past 15 years. I wish your father could be here to share." I thought about telling her he had never been there in the first place, that he'd never been a father, or even a husband. Then I realized that as we get older, holding onto the pain only hurts worse. Remembering the happy times, even if they were few and far between, leaves a much better feeling. I'd rather see my mother wearing a smile, so I nodded as if I agreed with warm conviction.

Angela was like my mother's right hand when she was at her house, and Garrett was the son she could love on, the little boy I never was, since I grew up as the man of the house from age 8 on. Mrs. Soderberg, according to Lucy, helped Lucy "keep my sanity. That woman is an angel!" she exclaimed when she returned to her jock strap-wearing husband, ending the heckling from Gene and me when she returned that day of the "snipping."

My mother and Mrs. Soderberg would take the kids to the county fair, the park, Cobbler Days and any other time they could get their hands on our children. Janet and I took advantage of the time alone, and went back to the Black Hills in South Dakota a couple of weekends, skiing in the mountains of Colorado and even Wyoming a few other times.

When my mom and Ralph's mom joined a bowling league at the behest of two local widowers they met mall walking, Ralph insisted upon a meeting at the bookstore for coffee. When we showed up, Gene was there, signing copies of his book – it was in its third press run by then – not a formal signing, just autographing books sitting with a store employee who placed fancy "Autographed Copy" stickers on the book and posted them in a huge display.

Gene came over and joined us – we'd been waiting in line 10 minutes for coffee – and

ushered us to the front when the guy behind the counter recognized Gene (but thankfully, not me). Getting “cuts” on account of Gene was pretty cool, and even Ralph, preoccupied as he was at the moment, couldn’t help but smile with raised eyebrows toward me.

We sat down, Ralph profusely thanking Gene for his clout at the bookstore’s coffee shop.

Ralph told him, “Our mothers are on the loose.”

Gene laughed and sat down as Ralph stared me in the eyes. I smiled.

“They are DATING these old farts,” Ralph said.

“We’ll meet them,” I said. “We’ll have a chance to check them out.”

“I already ran their names through my computer,” Ralph said. “They’re both clean. Dammit.”
Dammit?

“Had you hoped they’d done hard time?” I asked.

“For God’s sake, this is my mother – and your mother, I should point out – we’re talking about,” Ralph said.

How many times had Elise Soderberg gotten excited about something, only to have a man she loves beat her down – often literally – for it, I wondered.

“They both deserve this, you know,” Gene interjected.

“Gene, hear that?” Ralph asked.

“What?”

“You’ve just been paged,” Ralph said. “Dr. Gene, Oprah needs you on her next show, ‘Coping with change.’”

“I just think it’s easier and natural to share life,” Gene said. “Being alone stinks. I’ve found that out. By the way, I took Sam out Friday night. And Saturday. Saw her Sunday, too.”

“And we’re just now finding this out?” I asked.

“It’s true, you’ve never heard of a telephone,” Ralph said.

“I did tell her you got snipped,” Gene said. Ralph rolled his eyes and thanked him.

“I asked her to marry me,” Gene said. “But no big wedding here – maybe down the line we’ll recite the vows again. But we’re eloping in two weeks. It’s time.”

I hugged Gene, and Ralph offered a firm handshake, relenting for a hug after Gene nodded when Ralph said, “Okay, but no kissing this time.”

When Gene returned from his elopement, he was promoted to columnist at the paper. He could get out now and do what he did best – make friends, listen to their stories, and do what he

enjoyed the most, write about them. Plus the hours couldn't be beaten, and he actually ended up doing most of his work from home. That worked out well since Samantha was self-employed and made decent money selling candles and the like. (I know this because Janet dropped \$480 at one of Sam's "candle parties," and Lucy, Ralph said, came home with enough candles to "burn our damn house down 14 times.")

When the twins were two, we finally upgraded to a house on the hill. The hill.

"It's like the mother ship is calling you home," Janet said the day we closed, well aware of exactly where I lived from her FedEx days.

Janet pointed out that eight bedrooms and four bathrooms "are way more than we'll ever need," but even after paying cash for it (my hand shook writing the check), we still had \$350,000 in the bank and the promise of a steady stream of royalties since *Letters* was doing so well, and *Breaking Ranks* had cracked the N.Y. Times top 40. Presales of *My Father, My Son* driven by all the publicity of the movie rights sale and several favorable reviews, had landed it at number 45 on the bestseller list, two months before its scheduled release. Janet still wouldn't get rid of her car – but I bravely went over her head, getting her a minivan, which was parked out front most of the time as her rust bucket sat dry in the garage with the Blazer (turns out the third seat was a good move after all).

Mrs. Soderberg moved in with my mother which Ralph liked because it meant she was only dating, not planning to marry the gentleman she had been seeing. I didn't really have a strong feeling either way on the man my mother occasionally saw, though he seemed kind and gentle. Once we stopped by unannounced with the kids on the way home from a movie, "Wanna see Grammy," was their rallying cry – Angela had taken to calling my mother Grammy as she did Janet's mother.

I hesitated when I saw two cars out front, one of which I recognized as my mother's male friend. I cringed when Angela pointed out, "Gram's boyfriend is here!" We went in, and both she and Mrs. Soderberg were enjoying a game of bridge with their "dates." It was a celebration, it turned out, as Mrs. Soderberg's divorce had come through. I was surprised when Ralph finally opened up about it. He seemed happy about it, telling me, "My dad can sink or swim. It's up to him." He told me they had written a few letters back and forth. I thought that thoughtful on Ralph's part. He had also sent his father pictures of he and Lucy's children. I wondered what that return letter was like and hoped for the best. The one thing that bothered Ralph was that in those

letters his father had never asked how his mother was doing. Then again, I thought without telling Ralph, he had never been concerned with her well-being before, and now might be too late to start.

As the twins grew in their first year, Janet and I took to walking with the kids, with Garrett pushing Mary's stroller and Angela handling her baby brother. We lived at the top of the hill Garrett and I had viewed, and even ascended, so many times during our walks when we were alone. Our "big kids" were always helping, giving the babies baths, feedings – and lots of love.

We had a false alarm when the twins were two; Janet thought she was pregnant. She was relieved when she "started" a week later. She came home and rushed to the bathroom to take care of "this feminine moment." Ralph, Gene and I were gathered in the living room watching football that Sunday with seven kids and Gene – the biggest kid of all, who we'd hope would have kids of his own soon.

"I think we're going to have to make sure this doesn't happen again. I'm not having another child. Bob, honey, you'll take care of that, right?"

"I believe that's a sign," Gene declared.

"I'll go get the jock," Ralph said, standing as if to head to the door.

"And I'll make sure there's tons of ice," Gene said, heading toward the kitchen.

I grimaced, but Janet came over, put her arms around me and said, "You know I wouldn't do that to you, Honey," stopping Gene and Ralph in their tracks.

After the game ended, we followed the kids out onto the deck – which was gaud-awful to look at because Janet had insisted (after enlisting Gene and Ralph to help) that I run four-foot high mesh netting – with horribly bright orange rubber rails along the top and bottom – around the entire 108 feet of the wraparound deck's railing as a safety measure for the kids. Garrett looked toward the valley below and pointed out to everyone where we used to live. The tiny townhouse was a speck on the landscape, but had been a big part of our lives.

"You made it," Gene said putting his arm around my shoulder, "to the top of the hill."

Ralph stepped back as he always did when Gene got touchy-feely. I looked around, remembering the day we had moved into the townhouse. What a journey it had been.

"We're going light on dinner," Janet calls from the kitchen. That was no surprise. And I was grateful, since our shiny, new scale gave me a red readout of 170 pounds that morning – before the pizza, chips and dip that afternoon.

“Come on in,” she says. “I’ve made a pot of Ramen noodles – haven’t bought these since college, but too good a deal to pass up!”

I look at Garrett, who was grinning from ear to ear. We’d never told Janet we’d sworn off the “soup noodles” for life. Garrett leaned toward my ear, on his tip-toes, and whispered:

“I didn’t unload my school backpack yet, Dad – sorry about that. By the way, if you want, I’ll split what’s left of my peanut butter sandwich with you.”