

ONLY GOLDEN
FINGERS COULD PLAY
SO HEAVY

THE MISSING YEARS

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RoCeMaBra Publishing

This is dedicated to all the musical artists whose song titles
throughout the years have inspired this story.

1985 - MONEY FOR NOTHING

Retirement had treated I Mall very well. With royalties from continuing album sales and music publication, as well as his invested assets, his annual income was sufficient to build a nice nest egg to support Angela and him for many years to come. He supplemented his income by producing a few records for some friends, but it wasn't necessarily a new career choice. It was just a way of keeping at least one foot in the music business.

They moved into a new home, which I liked to call the "Mall Hall," and it was a bit of a status symbol. While not exactly a hermit, I and Angela did not entertain much, but enjoyed immensely their own company. As they began to settle into their life of comfort, children became the topic for frequent discussion.

"I'm not getting any younger, you know," said Angela. "My biological clock is ticking up a storm. It won't be long before I'm thirty. I should have had a couple of kids by now. All my friends are starting families. What about us?"

I agreed, "Back in the '70s I wouldn't have wanted to bring any children into the world, but these days, after the

world reform movement, I think we best do our part to provide for the continuation of the species.”

“Does it always have to be so clinical and exact with you?” Angela chided. “Can’t you just think about a family from a family point of view? Don’t you think having little ones about will be a great thing?”

“Of course, I do,” I returned. “The thought of sleepless nights, 3 AM feedings, changing diapers, cleaning up vomit and emptying their litter boxes is something I’m really looking forward to.”

Angela’s tone turned hostile. “Oh, yeah, you’re really committed to this idea, aren’t you?”

“I’m just joking,” I replied. “I think it’s a great idea to get a family started. Want to go upstairs?”

“Now you’re just being silly. It’s not something you schedule, it’s just going to happen when it happens. I’m going off the pill today. When the time is right, they will come.”

Weeks went by, and nothing more was said about having children, but when Angela began to wake up sick in the morning, I knew that something was up.

“Morning sickness, hmm?” he inquired.

“Oh, just a little too much to eat last night, I guess,” Angela defended. She burped, then declared. “There. All better.”

“Yeah, I suppose pickles and ice cream will not always be an agreeable meal,” I countered.

“You got me there,” she said, followed by her joyful admission: “I visited the doctor the other day. I’m pregnant!”

“Oh, no, not again!”

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Angela adopted a puzzled expression. “What do you mean by that? I haven’t been pregnant before!”

“Oh, that’s right. I guess I was just overreacting like those folks I sometimes see on TV. Actually, it’s great news! A boy or a girl?”

“I don’t know, it’s too early to even tell. But my heart tells me it’s a girl. We’ll know in another seven months. I remember only a little when my mother was pregnant with me. Well, not actually remember, but what she told me about it. Time went by for her like a gazelle. It’s like dad and her just met, and then there were the four of us.”

“We need to relish every moment, keep photos, maybe even do some filming. We have that Video Cassette Recorder and camera that we can start to document our journey. Maybe we’ll be famous filmmakers someday!”

“We can film some, but I’m going to draw the line at certain things. There’s only so much that I want seen about this whole thing.”

“Then what are we waiting for? We should be filming this as well. It’s all part of the process.”

“This isn’t the exciting time. Wait until I start to show, at least. Or maybe we can surprise our parents with the announcement. Yours will be very pleased, it’ll be their first grandchild.”

“Yeah, Spike and Emily beat us to punch with their little one. But now he’ll have a cousin to play with.”

The following weeks saw more changes. Clothes no longer fit. Moods were testy. Diets changed. Some food didn’t taste good for Angela; some she craved. She especially like roasted chicken. A lot of 3AM trips on roasted chicken quests. It didn’t matter that there were no

places open at that hour, she insisted they drive around “just in case.”

I finally found a place that served up a good roasted chicken, and made it a habit of picking up a few extra meals. When the 3AM craving came about, the dinner was popped into the microwave and “Voila!” Craving satisfied!

Soon, however, the cravings switched to lemon pie, and roasted chicken did not even get a second glance. Seven meals stocked into the freezer went uneaten for several months, until they finally had to throw them away. They even got a letter from the local restaurant asking if everything was OK. They were concerned because they hadn’t been seen there in some time.

But the local pie shop was the fortunate beneficiary of Angela’s new cravings, and she was eating a whole pie every two days. That particular phase lasted for two months, before she decided that only dark fudge chocolate chip cookies would satisfy her every need.

Angela looked in the mirror. I commented, “Are you sure we’re not having twins?” Angela had gained eighty pounds, and it was pretty certain it wasn’t all baby.

“How could I have let myself go like that,” she fell sobbing into I’s arms. Then, almost inexplicably, began beating him about the head.

“It’s all your fault! You shouldn’t have kept feeding me. Look where it’s gotten me! It will take years for this to go away. I hate you!”

“Now, now. Settle down. We’ll work through this together.” I tried to calm Angela down. She wept, inconsolably. “Let’s start with a healthy alternative. Try some salad.”

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“That’s rabbit food! I’m not an animal!” she screamed. “Give me a cookie!”

I grasped her firmly by the arms, and stared into her eyes. “OK, then how about an apple? You like apples, don’t you?”

It’s calm in the face of her hysterics was enough to stop the water works. “I guess so,” she sniffed. “An apple a day...” she giggled a bit.

Angela’s weight stabilized with a healthier diet, but didn’t go down. She struggled to move about as her due date approached. I called her his little hippo, in a affectionate manner, but Angela didn’t really appreciate his affection.

I became her chauffeur as she needed to make her “little trips” as she liked to call them, just to get out of the house for a while. But one “little trip” was a bit different. As they were out and about, a sudden pang hit her in the stomach. She screamed, nearly sending I off the road. “She’s coming! We need to go to the hospital now!” Angela still had herself convinced that the baby was going to be a girl.

I turned around and headed in the direction of the hospital and stepped on the gas. “Slow down, it’s not going to happen that fast. I’d rather arrive late, than not at all,” Angela warned.

I pulled up to the hospital doors and helped Angela out of the car. A nearby wheelchair was commandeered, and he wheeled her into the registration area. The nurse took one look at her and said “I’ll take it from here.” I stopped and began filling out paperwork.

“That’ll be \$100,” the receptionist said. “That’s the

standard fee for hospital admittance with your plan.”

I paid the \$100 in cash, and went to the delivery ward. The nurse was examining Angela, taking vitals, scanning for stress on the baby.

“Everything looks fine, she said, but she’s not quite ready yet. It’s false labor. Take her home, and let her have some rest. It’s going to be a couple of days still.”

They left without a baby in tow; the excitement had faded to disappointment. “Money for nothing,” I complained, grouching about the \$100 fee. “We should have at least got a refund.”

“We can afford it,” Angela offered. “I’m down, too. But she’s coming soon. I know it. It’s only a matter of time now. Soon. Soon...” Exhausted, she drifted into slumber.

As if on schedule, two days later, they were headed back to the hospital. This time, however, they were better prepared. Angela had packed an overnight bag and kept it handy. I comforted her through more false labor pains, but when the real ones arrived, they knew the time was near. When her water broke, it was into the car and off to the hospital. She was in pain, but knowing it was soon to end, the trip was much less hurried and anxious.

At registration, the receptionist noted that they had already paid the admittance fee, and both moved quickly into the labor room.

“You’re going to be fine,” I tenderly told Angela. “It’s all going to be fine.”

Angela let out another scream, “She’s coming!”

I popped his head out and called for the nurse. “I think it’s time!”

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Holding Angela's hand, I accompanied her to the delivery room, and thirty minutes later, Christine Elaine Mall, 7 pounds, 8 ounces, 19 inches long, came into the world.

Chrissy was a delight for her mother and father, and Henry and Juliette Mall and Buddy and Annette Jones couldn't be prouder as new grandparents. Henry had become a bit more worldly since the birth of his son; he no longer had to ask how old the baby was when it was born. Juliette looked longingly at her granddaughter, wondering what it would have been like if she'd had a daughter in addition to I. Buddy and Annette welcomed their first granddaughter with joyful tears.

It was December 3, 1985, I's 32nd birthday, and he was a father for the first time. He could not have asked for a better birthday present.

1986 - YOUR WILDEST DREAMS

"I'm going to write a book."

Angela looked at I as if he were crazy. "A book," she sighed resignedly. "What could you possibly write a book about?" She shook her head.

"I have a full life of experiences that I can draw upon," I defended himself.

"A full life," she countered. "You're only thirty-two years old. How is that possibly a 'full life'?"

"*All my life I've been so meek and mildly mannered*," he sang. "There's the first line already!"

"So you're going to release the lyrics of your songs as a book?" she inquired.

"No," he said. "I'm just going to pepper the text with a few poignant lyrics throughout."

"So what's this book going to be called?"

"*Your Wildest Dreams.*' It's a rags to riches story of my success, downfall and resurgence."

"That's already been done dozens of times. How will yours be any different?"

"No one knows the story better than me." He puffed up

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his chest a bit. "I'm an expert on the subject matter. Besides, I need a legacy to pass down to Chrissy. Someday, she'll have children of her own, and will want them to know all about their famous grandfather."

Angela was getting a bit worried that I was beginning to suffer once again from delusions of grandeur and a return to intense egoism.

"I hope you're not going to go down that dark road again. It nearly destroyed you."

"And you saved me. As I figure it, that will be Chapter 17. It has the making of high drama and pathos."

"Ok, you just get out your typewriter and start typing away. Let's see how far you can get."

"You have no faith in me," I complained. "You don't think I can do it."

"Faith is not the problem. Action is the problem. Take a look at all the unfinished projects you've got laying about. The 'picnic area' in the back, the 'Roman fountain' on the side. Our so-called 'Library'. A bunch of books in boxes does not constitute a library."

"Those are all physical pursuits. This is a pursuit of the mind. Pen to Paper. Typewriter key to Paper. Quill to Parchment. Even talking about it is poetic!"

"So now it's a book of poems?"

"No, but the art of writing is poetic as well as cathartic. See, I even get to use words that I would never use in ordinary speech."

"You know, you're more like your father than you think. He's always been one for hair-brained schemes as well, and this sounds just like another."

"Oh come on," I protested. "Give it a chance. I'm retired. I'm not making music. I need a way to channel my

creativity.”

“Why don’t you try writing a novel instead? That’s creative. Writing about yourself is hardly creative. As you said, you’re already an expert on the subject. How will you sell yourself to an audience who’s already heard everything about you through the press, TV, radio and fan magazines? If you ask me, it’s just a waste of time. Leave it up to someone else to tell your story. Maybe after a few years have passed. By that time, people will see you as a historical figure, and maybe gain a new fan base on top of the fans of yesterday.”

“The book must be written!” I declared.

“Yes, there is truth in that. Just not now. It’s not the right time. Trust me on this.”

I hung his head, dejected. He looked up at Angela with puppy dog eyes.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said. “Just think about it. You know I’m right. Now how about channeling some of that ‘creative energy’ into the Roman fountain. I’d really like to see that working before springtime.”

I abandoned his wildest dream, the story of his life, at least for a little while. “*Perhaps I’ll take on a collaborator,*” he thought. “*Someone who will tell my story, the way I want it told. Someday. Someday...*”

Carpentry and construction were not among I’s passions, but he did appreciate design and invention, traits that he likely inherited from his father. His father, Henry Mall, had gained some notoriety as a successful inventor over the years, and held a number of patents, providing a nice steady income stream. I called Henry.

“Dad,” he began. “I need some help in completing

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some of these projects around here. Angela complains that I start one, then abandon it to pursue another. I can't say that she's wrong about that. Can you help?"

Henry replied, "I'll get Buddy and come over to take a look. He's been itching for a project lately as well." Buddy Jones was Angela's father, I's father-in-law. "How's tomorrow?"

"That'll be great," I replied. "I want to finish our picnic area, then move on to some of the other projects. Looking forward to it!"

Henry and Buddy arrived early the next morning, with a truckload of tools to tackle some of the biggest jobs.

"I don't think you'll need all of that for a job as simple as that," I declared. "I thought more like a couple of rakes and shovels and we'd be on our way."

"This job is bigger than rakes and shovels, son," Henry said. "We're going to make this a first class destination, even if the only ones heading for it are the two of you and the baby. Years from now, you'll really thank me."

"So," I asked. "What's the plan? We going for a roadside rest theme here?"

"Nothing quite that big," Buddy added. "But it will be enough for small as well as large gatherings. They'll be plenty of those, once this is done."

The three of them began the work in earnest. First was grading the ground to provide a level surface for the picnic tables. An area of 20 feet x 30 feet was lined out with chalk, then they thought better of it and increased it by ten feet in each dimension.

"We need to clear out the grass in this area, put up some forms, and get ready to pour concrete." Henry was taking charge.

“That seems a bit sterile for a backyard picnic area,” I complained. “Don’t you think less concrete and more natural materials will make a better area for relaxation?”

“Of course we’re not going to pour the whole area in concrete. Just some pads for the table and barbecue area. You’ll appreciate the hard surface where the tables are going to be, and we need support for the outdoor kitchen. Remember, this will be an area to be proud of!”

Henry’s grandiose plans, for some strange reason, always had a way of working out.

Two months later, the extended family, I, Angela, Chrissy, Henry and Juliette, Buddy and Annette, as well as Angela’s brother Spike, his wife Emily and young Adrian Jr. all gathered to christen the new structure. And what a grand structure and picnic area it was! Within the massive 30 foot by 40 foot area were six 6 foot by 8 foot table pads, complete with custom-built redwood tables and benches, a 12 foot by 18 foot outdoor kitchen pad, with two built-in barbecues, sink, prep area and storage, two three-level fountains, and the entire structure was covered with a massive overhead shade, with motorized retractable awnings (with remote control, of course.) Multiple shade trees were planted around the area, and a gravel path wound around the tables, making every aspect of it as accessible as a walk through the park. Drop down temporary walls allowed for entertaining and enjoyment year round, when portable heaters could be brought in to take the chill off a wintry day, or a cool autumn evening.

“I love it!” was the common reaction of everyone, and before long, a grand feast was underway. Burgers, ribs, chicken, even a whole turkey was turning on the spit.

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Salads of every type: potato, macaroni, pasta, green, caesar, fruit. Plus loaves of bread, a few cases of beer, several bottles of wine, chips, dips, desserts. The celebration was both a family event as well as an exposition of gluttony. By the time everyone had eaten their fill, there was still enough leftovers to feed them all a second time.

“What will we do with all this leftover food?” Angela wondered.

“Let’s invite the neighbors!” I cried out, a bit drunkenly.

“We live on an isolated estate, at least a mile from anyone else. What neighbors are you inviting?”

But I had drifted off to sleep. While everyone else continued the conversation, I drifted into a dream. He discovered himself fifty feet in the air, overlooking the new picnic area. A sense of calm overcame him as he floated above, seeing everyone still partying below. The thought of inviting the neighbors entered into his dream state, and he saw lines forming outside the gate, where everyone was waiting to be admitted, hoping for a meal. I looked and saw even more lined up behind them, and realized that these weren’t just neighbors, but all the needy, who, compared with all his excesses, could barely afford to feed their own families. I shook himself awake, and remembering the dream, saw it as a vision.

“I must do something about world hunger,” he said aloud.

The others turned to him curiously, and collectively said “Huh?”

“I had a dream, and I saw many waiting to be fed, while we were inside the gates partying. It’s a message. It’s time once again to explore humanitarian options. I

thought my World Reform movement in the 70s was an end to it, but there's more, there's always more."

"Even in my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined entering into an effort like this again. But this is very important. It's something I must do."

Within three months, the I and Angela Mall Foundation to Eradicate World Hunger was established, and was beginning to make a real difference in the world.

1987 - I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR

As an organization, the “I and Angela Mall Foundation to Eradicate World Hunger,” (I AM FEW Hunger, as it was popularly known, despite not making a lot of grammatical sense) basically ran without a need for oversight by I or Angela. Their initial infusion of money to get things going was a great boost, but it was the people who ran the day-to-day operations who were the real stars of the show. I’s vision, and he truly felt that’s what his dream was, was fulfilled, if not in the manner he dreamed (no one was lined up at the gate to get fed). However, he still did not feel fulfilled.

“I still haven’t found what I’m looking for,” he complained to Angela one day. “I thought the foundation was going to be the answer to my longing, but now that it’s going on its own, I feel like we are back to just sitting idle; nothing to do.”

“The picnic area is available year-round,” Angela prompted.

“Well, I don’t mean there’s literally nothing to do. Of

course, I love spending time with you and Chrissy, and I think that now that she's 18 months old, perhaps we can consider doing some traveling."

"I'm afraid she'll be a handful at her age," Angela mused. "She's never traveled any significant distance. What do you have in mind?"

"Well, frankly, I'm thinking about a Mediterranean cruise." Angela looked at him quizzically, if not with total incredulity.

"I've seen that look before," I noted. "But hear me out." He paused, for a bit, then continued. "A cruise is just a hotel on water, in fact, more like its own little town on water. Every need is taken care of, and you barely have to lift a finger. They even provide babysitting services, if we want to partake in some more 'adult' activities."

Angela's skepticism began to fade. "You mean we might have a little time to ourselves?" She was warming to the idea.

"Within reason, of course," I continued. "We certainly don't want to abandon Chrissy to a stranger for the whole trip."

"I like the idea of a cruise," Angela agreed, "but I think it's better to get some time alone to ourselves. Mom and Dad will certainly look after Chrissy, if we ask them, and your parents would certainly help out, too."

"OK, then, let's start planning for that trip!" I was excited to finally have a goal.

Angela and I visited the nearest travel agent and got a number of brochures describing all of the wonderful Mediterranean cruises available. They chose the finest line at the time, La Voyage Princessa, a French-Italian

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company that had a reputation as the best overall. The cuisine was exquisite, according to the reviews, the service impeccable, the staff without flaw. They booked a package with a flight to New York, then non-stop to Naples, Italy, where the departure was scheduled. Stops included Monaco, Marseilles, Barcelona, Tangiers, Palermo and back to Naples for the flight back home.

“This is going to be the trip of a lifetime!” I was clearly exuberant. “This will be so much better than when the band did our world tour. We spent more time on a bus than anywhere else.”

When the day of departure finally arrived, suitcases lined the hallway leading to the home entrance.

“What’s all this?” I asked Angela.

“My clothes, and other things that I think I’ll need on the trip,” she countered.

“We’re only going to be gone for two weeks,” I cried. “This looks like we’re moving to another part of the world.”

“Well, in fact, we sort of are,” Angela offered. “I don’t want to be lacking for anything while we’re gone.”

“But the stateroom is only so big, with all this, we won’t have room for ourselves!”

“That’s OK, I made sure that we will have two staterooms, one for most of the luggage, and one for us. And if we have a fight, we still each have a place to stay,” she teased.

“That’s sounds excessive, but I guess it will have to do,” I accepted, “At least we won’t be needing anything else on this trip. What’s in these two large bags?”

“Those are my shoes. A girl can’t have too many shoes,

can she?"

"Two suitcases with nothing but shoes? How many pairs?"

"I've got twenty-five pairs in each case."

"Twenty-five! Fifty? That's four pairs for every day we're gone! How in the world can you possibly wear all those?" I was clearly getting upset.

"It's not so much 'How in the world?' but 'Where in the world?' You never know where I might need a fashion change, and I've got to be ready at all times."

"So, which one of these bags is mine?" I asked, indicating the vast array.

"Yours aren't packed, yet. I've laid out a couple of pairs of slacks for you upstairs, and your tuxedo is hanging in the hall."

"Do I at least get a suitcase to hold them in?" I asked sarcastically.

"There's a carry-on garment bag hanging in the closet. That should be fine."

I popped his hand against his forehead. "I should have had a V8," he complained.

When the cab to the airport turned up, the driver spied the numbers of bags and nearly fainted. "There's no way I can possibly fit all these into my cab. I'm going to need a bigger vehicle!" He radioed into HQ and asked for them to send over a stretch limo. "That's about all I can do, unless you want to call for a city bus!"

The limo arrived about thirty minutes later and everything was packed in, leaving only a small amount of room for the two passengers. Even I's garment bag had to find a space in the front seat beside the driver.

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“Is the moving van far behind?” he asked. “Should I wait?”

“No, this is it, thankfully,” I returned. “To the airport, and step on it. We’re going to be late!”

With the extra weight, the limo was slow on accelerating, but finally managed to hit the freeway and arrived at the airport about an hour before the flight was to leave. The driver unloaded the bags while Angela went into the terminal to check in.

“What did I tell you,” he said. “Plenty of time, you probably even have a while to relax at the bar before you board your flight.”

“I’ll need a drink after that wild ride!” I noted. “I just hope I have enough cash to enjoy the rest of the cruise. I just about went broke tipping the skycaps!”

I reached into his wallet to grab cash for the limo driver, only to find it bare. “What did I tell you, wiped out!”

The driver glared at him. “The fare is \$150! You’re not going to stick me with that!”

“Calm down, good fellow,” I adopted a faux British accent. In times of tension, he felt it offered a calming influence. “I have a check right here.”

“No checks, cash only!” The driver insisted.

“Do you take a credit card?” holding out his American Express.

“Cash only!”

I was in a pickle. He decided to play the trump card. “Do you know who I am?” He took off the sunglasses he was wearing, to make sure the driver got a good look.

The driver continued to glare. “Yeah, you’re the guy who owes me a hundred and fifty dollars! Cash!” No hint of recognition.

“Ok, ok, calm down. Here’s comes my wife. She’ll have the cash. I hope.” I was beginning to get worried.

“Honey,” I began as Angela arrived. “Can you pay the nice man? I used all my cash in tips for your suitcases.”

Angela reached into her purse. “Here’s twenty, keep the change.”

“ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS!” The driver began to turn a shade of purple.

“One hundred and fifty dollars,” I stated to Angela, a bit more calmly.

Angela looked at I, then to the queue of bags waiting to be sent into the terminal, then to the driver.

“Oh!” as she came to the realization of the situation. Reaching into her purse once again, she pulled out two crisp hundred dollar bills. “Yes, please keep the change,” she repeated.

As an aside, I whispered to Angela, “And don’t even consider asking for the twenty back!”

He noted the driver’s color returning to normal. “Sorry for the mix-up,” I declared to him. “All’s well.”

The driver stuffed the \$220 into his pocket, turned his back to get into the limo, but not before tossing off a parting remark. “You rock stars only look out for yourselves. Never think of the little guy.”

As the driver pulled away, I stared back at him in disbelief. Apparently he had recognized him, but also apparently, was unaware of I’s humanitarian efforts.

“Don’t let it get to you, I” Angela consoled him. “Some people can only see one side of the coin. Let’s cruise!”

The flight to New York was without incident, but for the long flight time. When they arrived at the departure

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port, after yet another limo ride (this time, they made sure that plenty of cash was available,) they boarded the ship. As recognition dawned on some of the passengers, the couple were mobbed and requests for autographs and pictures were honored for the next hour. I addressed the assembled crowd.

“I’m pleased that you are excited to be here with us, but please note: we are on vacation as well, and would really appreciate some privacy while we are cruising. I’ll talk to the cruise director, and if it can be arranged, and if they can get together a small combo, perhaps I’ll play a private concert for you, my faithful fans, sometime during the cruise.”

A cheer from the crowd went up, and attracting the eye of yet more passengers, the autograph session went on for another hour. Without looking, I had found what he was looking for.

1988 - SWEET CHILD O' MINE

"Where's that sweet child o' mine?" I asked as he was playing Hide and Seek with Chrissy. Chrissy shrieked as her father found her hiding behind the curtain. At two and a half years old, Chrissy was a real handful, but for I and Angela, she was their world.

"Daddy, no!" Chrissy shrieked again, as I began to tickle her. "Stop!" I stopped. "Again!" Her laughter filled the room.

Chrissy knew only a few words, but she loved using them as often as possible. Game time was perfect for increasing her vocabulary.

"Ok, then, you asked for it! Up in the air!" I grabbed Chrissy at the waist and tossed her into the air about two feet above his head. He then let her drop about three feet before reaching down and catching her again by the waist.

She screamed once again, delightedly, "Up! Up!" I threw her up again. Then Chrissy threw up, and this time it wasn't so pretty. The vomit streamed down from the heights and landed directly in the middle of I's face, as he was looking up to catch Chrissy. Missing her on the way

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down, she hit hard, and a distinct SNAP! indicated that there were to be consequences of his failure.

Chrissy sat stunned for a moment, until she realized the pain in her arm was not going to go away, and she began to scream in earnest, this time from the pain.

I looked down and also realized the horror of the situation. Chrissy had broken her arm in the fall. Scooping her up quickly, he rushed to call for Angela.

“Angela! Angela!” He panicked a bit as there was no immediate response. “Angela!” Chrissy screamed even louder.

Angela rushed down the stairs screaming herself, “WHAT IS IT?! WHAT’S HAPPENED?!” She arrived at the bottom of the stairs and quickly surveyed the situation: I covered in vomit, Chrissy screaming and holding her arm.

She tried to calm herself, “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I think Chrissy’s arm is broken. We were playing, and I dropped her on the ground. I heard a snap!” I admitted, leaving out some of the details.

“Then we need to get to the hospital emergency right away. Just calm down and let me have her. I’ll try to calm her down as you clean yourself up.”

I left the room to wash his face, while Angela took a look at the arm. Though the bone was not exposed, it was clear there was something wrong, and a kiss from mommy to make it better was not going to succeed. Surprisingly, Angela was able to remain calm in the light of Chrissy’s wailing and I’s panic.

I returned, ready to hit the road. He stopped to speak to Chrissy. “I’m so sorry, my sweet child. I’m so sorry.” The attention she was getting from her mother and father

helped to distract her from the pain, and Angela held her tightly, mindful of the injured arm and said, "Let's go!"

"I can't buckle her in," Angela declared. "I need to hold her. She needs her mother. Please be careful."

The hospital was a twenty minute drive away, alternating between cries of pain and whimpering sobs as the pain from the broken arm rose and subsided.

"We should have called first," Angela stated. "Maybe they could have told us what we could do for her in the meantime."

"If we'd called, we would have waited on the phone for longer that it would take for us to drive there," I noted. "You just keep her settled down, so I can concentrate on the road. I am not getting into an accident from being careless and distracted." I realized that what he said perfectly matched the situation which started this whole scenario in the first place.

They arrived at the hospital and I pulled up to the emergency room doors. Angela carefully got out of the vehicle, ensuring that Chrissy's injury was not further impacted by carelessness. She rushed into the waiting area and observed a short line awaiting services. Chrissy chose that moment to begin to scream loudly. The members in the line turned as one, and a nurse rushed to Chrissy's side. "What is the problem?" she inquired.

Angela quickly summed up the situation. "I think she's broken her arm. Her father and she were playing, and she fell. She's in a lot of pain."

The nurse tried to pry Chrissy from Angela's arms, but Chrissy held on even tighter. The nurse adopted a gentle tone.

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“Come on darling, we need to take a look at your arm. What’s your name, dear?”

Chrissy looked at her, tears welling, but, for the moment, the screams had stopped. But she didn’t respond.

After a moment, her mother offered, “Her name is Christine. We call her Chrissy.”

“All right, Chrissy, let’s get a good look at your arm.” The nurse touched her injury, only to send her into fits of wailing again.

“I know, I know,” the nurse cooed. “This isn’t going to be easy. But you’re going to be a good girl, aren’t you. You want to make it stop hurting, don’t you?”

To Angela, she remarked, “There’s no doubt about it, the arm is broken. I’m afraid there’s going to be more pain before it gets better. We have to set it, and that’s always a painful operation. You just need to keep her calm while we get a room ready for her. Gentle talking and soothing speech will go a long way to distract her.”

At that moment, I rushed in and his frantic arrival got Chrissy going once again. Angela quickly turned to I. “Shh. It’s going to be fine, but she needs to calm down. *You* need to calm down. The doctor is going to see her as soon as the room is ready.”

I caught his breath, and it was clear he’d been crying. He sniffed, “I’m just so sorry. It was an accident! I wasn’t thinking!”

With two panicky children at her arms, Angela was nearly worn out herself. “I don’t have time to take care of you and keep Chrissy calm,” she warned. “You need to get a hold of yourself and calm down. It’s important for Chrissy to see you as strong and supportive. She’s reacting as much to you as the injury. Perhaps, even more. You’ve

got to be strong for what's to come."

I looked at her quizzically. "What's to come? What do you mean?"

"The doctor is going to have to set the bone. That is going to be painful, but once done, the pain is going to virtually vanish."

"I've never had a broken bone, I can't understand what she's going through," I commiserated.

"Just imagine great pain, and the panic that sets in from the unknown. Most of it is the panic, the initial pain has probably subsided. The body works well that way. But her being calm is going to go a long way to easing the overall situation."

A few moments later, the nurse called them in to the treatment room. "Please bring Chrissy in here now, Mrs. Mall." Angela hadn't really noticed, but when called by name, she was surprised. She hadn't given anyone that information upon arriving. "You know me?" she stated.

"Of course I do. I've been a fan of your husband's music for years. I was a very active member of the Golden Fingers fan club in its heyday." She almost looked proud. Chrissy, distracted by the conversation, allowed the nurse to remove her from her mother's arms.

As they stepped into the treatment room, Angela turned around and cast a glance back into the waiting room. She began to notice secretive glances towards her and I. She really hadn't experienced a lot of notoriety and celebrity status during I's days with the band, so she was surprised at the recognition.

"It's not that I'm unhappy, but I am rather surprised to be recognized. I'm not used to it, nor do I understand it."

Now that Angela was distracted, the Doctor gently

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began to examine Chrissy, while Chrissy was still attentive on Angela's conversation with the nurse.

"You're famous in your own right," she explained. "I AM FEW Hunger has made you a star, whether you know it or not."

I, also distracted by the conversation, wasn't quite prepared when Chrissy let out another scream. Both I and Angela turned quickly to see what had happened, and the doctor looked guiltily their way. "I've just set the bone. It's best to do it while everyone is distracted by something else. You can help her calm down now, the pain is going to start to subside, and this shot here will also help." The doctor quickly injected a syringe into Chrissy's arm, and Chrissy barely made a reaction. "She'll be a little numb in a bit, and that will help us as we begin to apply the cast."

Angela reach out to Chrissy, wiped her tears with a tissue and stroked her hair. "It's going to be alright. The hurt is going away. The doctor is going to help you some more."

The doctor began applying a cast. "The break won't require us to place a cast beyond her elbow, so she still be able to move her arms freely, though it will be a while before she can pick up anything with her hand, as that will be restricted. In a few weeks, we'll be able to change it for even a smaller cast, and in about three months, it will all be healed."

"You'll have to keep the cast dry, so when she bathes wrap it in plastic, or try your best to keep it out of the water," the nurse offered. "It's going to be a lot of work for you, but she'll be fine, and at her age, she'll forget this whole episode in time."

As final paperwork began to wrap up, I confessed to

Angela. “I will never throw her up like that again. She’s too fragile and I don’t want to break her any more. I just want her to stay that sweet child o’ mine.”

1989 - SHE DRIVES ME CRAZY

“She drives me crazy!” I complained, as he watched Chrissy run in the yard. “That girl has no fear, it seems!”

It had been nearly a year since Chrissy’s cast had come off, and the injury, at least to her, was a distant memory, as the emergency room nurse had predicted. But I’s nerves, as he continued to watch her, were always on edge, fearful of yet another injury, or worse.

“I can’t help being concerned for her, it’s all I can do to keep up, to catch her when she falls, to nurse a scrape. Can’t she just settle down once in a while?”

Despite her so-called “dangerous” activity of just being a kid, I admitted to himself that he was happy to see her happy once again. The months of caring for the break and the cast were wearing on all three of them.

“I’m just glad she’s all I have to look out for. Can you imagine having another one to watch over. It would be a madhouse.” I, was nearly out of breath as he ran to scoop her up from some imagined danger. “I’m not a young man, anymore, I’m thirty-five years old, and it’s nearly all I can do to keep up!”

Angela, strangely silent though I's complaints, slowly began to turn a bit red, and a guilty look crossed quickly over her face. I failed to pick up on it, but Angela began. "Uh, I..." them trailed off.

I cast her a quick glance, then refocused his attention upon Chrissy. "What is it?" he asked distractedly.

"About being able to keep up," she said. "You might want to think about taking better care of yourself, eating right, maybe exercising regularly. It will help..." She trailed off again.

"Fitness! It's overrated. I'm doing fine. Sure, I've put on a few pounds. What, maybe twenty from where I was back when we got married, but I'm still fit as a fiddle. I can keep up with her. She's not going to wear me out just yet."

"I think you're going to need it when the next one comes along." Angela sneaked it into the conversation.

"Next one? And when will that be?" I eyed her suspiciously.

"Remember when I went to the doctor the other day? Well, it wasn't just an upset stomach I had. I found out that I'm six weeks pregnant. We're going to have another early next year."

I sputtered, "Another? We've got a handful right here!"

Angela's countenance was crestfallen. She thought I would be as excited as she was. "I thought you'd be happy."

"Oh, I am! It was a bit unexpected. We hadn't even talked about another one just yet." I tried to look a little bit more excited.

"You're the one who is saying how 'old' you're getting. Well, I'm not pushing middle age just yet, but now that I'm in my thirties, it's a good time to get ready for a

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playmate for Chrissy. Maybe that will take some of the effort off of you.” Angela’s attempt at a reward for I took a bit of edge off the surprise announcement.

“Of course, of course, I’m delighted, ecstatic, overwhelmed with emotion.” I wasn’t making this any easier on Angela. Again, the crestfallen look. I moved to her side.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, allowing myself to get pregnant.” Angela cried. “I thought you would welcome the news.”

“It’s not that I don’t welcome it. I’m just surprised we didn’t talk about it beforehand. We’ve always shared important decisions like this. I didn’t even know you stopped taking the pill.”

Angela sat silent, tears forming.

I continued, “Of course I’m happy. I just wasn’t prepared for the news. See, I’m smiling now.” He put on a big grin. If not quite sincere, he did show a lot of teeth. “Does that make you feel better?”

Angela wasn’t totally convinced of I’s conviction of acceptance to becoming a father for the second time, but she laughed at the silliness of it all. I had begun to overcome her doubt.

“Have you told your parents yet?” he asked.

“No, besides the doctor and now you, no one else knows.”

“Then let’s get on the phone, spread the good news!” I’s enthusiasm began to thaw Angela’s pain of betrayal at I’s initial reaction.

“I’m happy, I’m really happy,” I explained. “It just took me a minute to get over the shock. Maybe we’ll have a boy! A son! A son!” I’s turn of mood came as a bit of

shock to Angela.

“You’re truly happy?” She still had her doubts.

“Yes, it’s the right time. I should never have doubted you. We are going to be parents again. And my parents, and I’m sure yours, will be delighted as ever to the prospect of another grandchild to spoil. Let’s the bells ring out! There’s a boy child comin’. He’s gonna be a son-of-a-gun.”

Angela laughed, “There’s no guarantee it’s going to be a boy. Don’t set yourself up for disappointment,” she warned.

“Oh, I know it, deep down in my heart. I’m going to be a Dad!”

“You already are a ‘dad’,” indicating Chrissy. “Or have you forgotten?”

“To Chrissy, I’m a ‘daddy’,” I explained, “and no matter how old she gets, I’ll be her ‘daddy’ and she’ll be my little girl. But a boy changes everything. To a boy, I’ll be ‘Dad’ and we’ll play baseball and football and soccer and basketball and fish and camp and hike and do ‘guy’ stuff!”

“You don’t do any of that now. Why all of a sudden all this enthusiasm towards the outdoor life?”

“Like you said, I’m going to have to get in shape to keep up with my little quarterback! Gotta get me some weights, a rowing machine. Heck, I’ll set up a whole gym in one of the garages. We don’t use the space for anything else. It will do the both of us good!”

Angela thought I was going a little too overboard in his new-found enthusiasm, but if it helped to temper the shock of the moment, then all was good.

* * *

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Five months later, Angela was visibly pregnant, and the biggest surprise of the past months was the discovery that she was going to have twins. I was even more ecstatic upon the discovery. “Two boys? Even better! We’ll be able to have our own team! Just imagine one behind the plate, another on the mound, and me swinging away, hitting those home runs!”

“Just because there are two of them, there’s still no guarantee that they’ll be boys. There’s just as much possibility that it’ll be two girls. How will your team shake out then?” Angela laughed.

“Boys. Girls. I doesn’t matter. It’s the team. It’s always been about the team.” I’s exercising regimen seemed to have released some sort of chemical and gotten him all worked up. He spent nearly every afternoon working out in the gym his father helped him build, and a decidedly enhanced physique made Angela look at him a little closer than she had in the past.

“My big strong man is happy to be a papa,” she cooed in baby talk. “Your ‘team’ will be here soon enough.” As if on cue, one of the babies kicked her and her reaction was a quick “Oh!”

“See, a football player if I ever saw one! Gonna kick from one end of the field through the goalposts on the other. You just wait and see!” I drifted off in his imagination.

Angela considered what it was going to be like with five instead of just the two of them and Chrissy. Would she be able to keep up? How was she going to take on the extra burden of two little babies?

“I’m going to have to spend some time in your gym myself,” she told I. “Not only am I going to have to drop

this baby weight, but I'm going to need extra stamina when the twins arrive."

"Is it safe?" I was concerned. "What does the doctor say about that?"

"There are a number of exercises that will be good for me and the babies. You won't see me out there playing tackle football, or throwing hoops, but some simple walking on the treadmill will go a long way to get me fit as well."

"Then let's do it together! We'll share the whole experience." I was true to his word, and worked out with Angela daily.

I's thirty-sixth birthday arrived without a lot of fanfare in the Mall household. Almost completely forgotten were the I-Day celebrations of old. I, a bit self-conscious about their origin, persuaded some of his acquaintances within the political machine to take a second look at the fifties-era holiday and in the twenty-some years since the last major public celebration, it had become merely a footnote in history, not even being printed on calendars anymore. I was fine with that outcome, in fact, few even really remembered those celebrations in the fifties, which began to wane in the mid-sixties, only to resurface slightly during Golden Fingers' heyday. But now with the lore associated with the holiday draped in historical cover cloths, the real celebration could now focus on the other birthday in the house: Chrissy's fourth.

A big party was planned, and a number of children were treated to clowns, animals to ride, amusement park rides, balloons and many colorful decorations.

"This is going to be a big celebration," I predicted,

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“because by this time next year, the twins will be here, and Chrissy may feel like a second-class citizen. We can’t let her think she’s not that sweet child that’s been the apple of my eye all these years.”

I ran with the children as if he was one of them. His new fitness quest had allowed him able to keep up with the children, and he knew he was ready for the adding of two more to the mix in the next year.

Chrissy ran up to him and gave him a big hug. “Daddy, this is the best party ever!” A better birthday present for him was not to be had. “*She may drive me crazy, sometimes, but she’ll always be my little girl*” he mused contentedly.

1990 - I GO TO EXTREMES

When the twins were born, I was delighted with the outcome. Not only did he have his son, Tyler Nathan Mall, but now another daughter, Meredith Susanna Mall. They probably wouldn't bond together as the sports team I had imagined, but he was happy nonetheless. When the twins arrived on March 10, I was so excited he rented an airplane to fly a banner over the city, announcing their birth. While the world wasn't exactly watching, I still had enough notoriety to pull off such a stunt.

"Sometimes I go to extremes," he admitted, when asked about the event on a local TV newscast. "But I can't help it. My family is now complete. Every significant event in my life has been a celebration, and I won't let this one pass without notice either."

The airplane stunt was not the only effort perpetrated by I at the birth of the twins. I had also taken out a full two-page spread, one for each of the twins, marking the event in *Rolling Stone* and even a few UK and European music magazines as well. One would think he was trying a comeback in the music press. "Oh, no. I'm out of the

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music business for good,” he insisted to another reporter. “This is just another big event in the life of I Mall. Once upon a time, I didn’t have to go to such extremes to get notice, notice followed me. But these days, my family and I live a quiet life, and for the most part, like to keep to ourselves. I’m just very excited, and felt that I needed to tell the world. Perhaps someday, my kids will be as famous as I once was; perhaps I still am,” he winked.

Angela took I’s renewed notoriety in stride. She had seen him undergo these sudden transformations from mega-star to simple family man many a time over the course of their marriage. I was a widely swinging pendulum that never sat still and explored many of the opportunities that he was able to imagine. “At least he’s not doing drugs,” she confided to her sister-in-law Emily. “That was his darkest moment, and it wasn’t even intentional. He was beside himself with grief, embarrassment and had reached the bottom of the pit. He just didn’t know what he was doing.” She was referring to the infamous “suicide incident” in which it was widely reported that I had taken his own life. “With my help, he pulled himself out of the doldrums and has been a good man ever since. Yes, he does go a bit overboard sometimes,” indicating the airplane and magazine ads, “but he means well. What’s wrong with spreading joy?”

Emily agreed, “I only wish Spike was as joyful as I. His stint in ‘the joint’ (as he calls it) during his teens is still eating at him, even though it produced a good outcome. He learned to play drums from that experience. And that led to him being pretty famous on his own, as well. I’m afraid that the public eye was not the spotlight he sought, though. His time at the juvenile hall was a great

embarrassment to him, and he lives under the constant fear of it being revealed, even though it was years ago.”

“Even I doesn’t know about it,” Angela admitted. “To this day, he just thought Spike was living at his grandmother’s house for two years. I’s a smart guy, but sometimes the obvious passes him by.” Angela and Emily both giggled.

“Spike took a long hiatus from music, as you know, but I’ll bet you didn’t know that he’s working on a solo album, did you?” Emily revealed.

“That is news!” declared Angela. “Drums and what?”

“Drums are the focus, but he’s exploring all kinds of rhythm instruments as part of the project. He’s calling it *Spike that Rim Shot*. I truly hope he comes up with a better name. That one is just awful!” The ladies enjoyed another round of laughter.

The laughter woke Tyler, and soon Meredith was joining in the ruckus. “They just have to do everything together, it seems,” complained Angela, lightly. “You would think they were joined at the hip. Even their poop schedules seem to be in sync. I helps out sometimes, but he draws the line at diaper duty. Can’t really handle the smell.”

“One thing I’ll say,” Angela continued. “He’s not into roughhousing with them just yet. Of course, they’re only six weeks old, but with Chrissy’s broken arm a couple of years ago, I don’t think he wants to takes any chances. I’ll bet that changes once they are old enough to start playing some sports. I was really excited to be able to do that with them someday. Chrissy’s been quite a helpful one, though. She loves playing the big sister role, and she doesn’t mind the messy diapers. She can’t quite fasten the pins, but she

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loves to rinse them out and watch the ‘poopie’ go down with the flush.”

Both of them enjoyed a good laugh at that one, while they together changed the twins’ diapers.

Six months later, I was restless and troubled. “The twins are crawling all over the place, and even making some attempts to stand up. Before long, they’re going to be walking, running, sprinting everywhere. I’ve got to baby-proof the whole house again, before it’s too late!”

I’s knack for exaggeration often motivated him to do good things. His heart was in the right place, even if a review of the situation did not call for such extreme action.

“First up, I’m going to built a six foot fence completely around the property. That way, they won’t get out into the road and get hit by a passing car.”

Angela noted wryly, “They’re not dogs, you know. They don’t just dash wherever they want. Even when they are old enough to run and play, and that’s going to be a couple of years at least, they are built in with some common sense. Unless, of course, they inherited the lack thereof from their father.”

“Very funny, ha, ha. I’m just saying you can’t be too careful. OK, maybe a six foot fence is a bit extreme, but we can go with a nice brick and stone wall. It’ll be decorative and functional at the same time.”

“And, who, pray tell, will see this project to completion?” Angela asked.

“I’ll do the job, you just watch!” I stated, firmly.

Three months later, as the Christmas holidays were

approaching, the half-completed fence was not providing any protection from the wild masses, nor protecting the near-toddlers from the ravages of rushing traffic. Angela complained, “You promised you’d see this one through, and I’m not seeing any progress. Should I call in the Dads again to save your bacon?”

I hung his head. “I guess I do need help. I’m lucky our dads like to do this kind of stuff. I have the enthusiasm for the job at the outset, but can’t seem to make my way through the finished product. Give them a call.”

A few days later, the “crew” was at it, shoveling a new trench for the cement base, building the pillars and setting the stones between. In a matter of three days, the fence project was completed. Henry added some of his own ideas to it, including electrical outlets so that a string of Christmas lights could be lit up during the holidays. Henry had also designed an area where a Christmas tree could be mounted at each end of the fence. It was simply a round chamber, sized to fit a tree trunk up to a reasonable size, and of course, electrical outlets to support the Christmas lights. Henry had long ago learned his lesson about electrical issues and made sure the entire setup was up to code, and hidden from view and tampering. He was proud of his achievement.

“This will last you for years, long after the youngsters are grown. And, it can be used for other decorations year-round,” Henry stated.

“Other decorations?” I inquired. “I don’t see anybody putting up anything else during the year, except for a flag on the holidays.”

“Oh, I’ve got a place for the flag as well,” Henry explained as he pointed out the location. “But I’m

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thinking you could observe the other holidays in much the same way as you decorate for Christmas. Put up colored lights at Easter, red, white and blue lights for the Fourth of July, orange and black lights for Halloween. Maybe even some decorative flags to indicate the season. You never know. It might catch on.”

I was a bit wary. “The neighbors would run us out of town on a rail. Even I hate to see it when someone still has their Christmas lights up in the middle of January.”

“Go ahead, try it and see. Right now, Christmas is the obvious choice, but when St. Patrick’s rolls around next year, put up some green lights for a couple of days. It will be festive. You can even invite the neighbors over for some corned beef and cabbage. That will win them over. Use that picnic area we built. The weather will be nice, and it’s designed to be used year round.”

“A picnic in March? That seems a little extreme. How about nice party indoors?”

“No believe me, a picnic in March would be perfect. You can’t always count on the weather, but I’d say there’s better than a 50/50 chance that it’ll be right. ‘March comes in like a lion, and goes out like a lamb.’ We’ll be sure to catch the lamb part. Hey, maybe a nice little lamb roast to go with that corned beef. Mmm. Sounds tasty!”

I had his doubts, but also knew his father’s extreme visions had something to offer each time he’s had them.

1991 - UNBELIEVABLE

“Unbelievable!” I complained. “Simply unbelievable!”

I was thumbing through the latest Rolling Stone magazine when he happened upon the following news blurb.

“Isaac Daly, former lead guitarist of the mega-famous Golden Fingers, has announced a series of special concert dates. While the original musicians are not reuniting, Daly will bring together a set of musicians that will create what he calls ‘The Golden Fingers Experience.’ Dates are set for this spring and early summer across various locations through the United States. Tickets are expected to be budget-priced, and will sell out quickly, he predicted.

“Unbelievable!” I stated, yet once again, reddening.

“What’s the problem?” Angela inquired. “I haven’t seen you so upset in a long time.”

“It’s that Isaac. He’s planning on going out on the road again using the Golden Fingers name, and presumably using my songs to boot. It’s bad enough that I have to read about it as a *fait accompli*, no less.”

“Can he do that?” Angela asked.

“Not really without my permission,” I considered. “Or

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at least I don't think so. But, then again, if he worked a deal with the record label, then I might have lost control altogether. Those guys don't have anybody's interests at heart but themselves. Technically, they own the rights. I get my royalties, and they are generous, but they negotiated away some of the ownership of my songs in the process. We were young; we didn't think it 100% through."

"Let's get Spike on the phone, and see what he has to say about it," Angela offered. "And we might as well touch bases with Ozzie as well. All of you should have a say in this endeavor."

Angela dialed up Spike and Emily answered. "Hi, Emily. I need to talk to my brother. Is he home?"

Emily's answer caused a frown to appear on Angela's face. "What?!" was her surprised reply. "Could you say that again?"

It's curiosity was aroused, and he picked up the extension to listen in.

"... going over to see Isaac about doing a few dates this spring. Something about an 'experience'." Emily's voice did not betray any sense of guile or revelation.

"I read about Isaac's plans in *Rolling Stone*, and he's a bit upset about it," Angela stated. "He's not sure that what Isaac is doing is even legal, under the contract they had with the record company. Do you know any more about it than we do?"

"Spike didn't give a lot of details, but he didn't seem to think it was a big deal. I heard him say things like 'Sounds like fun!' and 'Let's do it!' It really appeared he was looking forward to whatever Isaac had in mind."

I was getting even more visibly upset. "Et tu, Brute?" he

subvocalized, considering his own brother-in-law's betrayal. Finally, he spoke up, remaining calm, but with an edge to his voice.

"Don't you think Spike could have checked with me before committing to such a project?" he said.

Emily, a bit surprised to hear I's voice, stammered a bit before responding, recognizing I's tone.

"I, I, I... don't think he really had any thought about it affecting you in any way. All he indicated was that it might be fun."

Angela shot I a quick glance and mouthed the words, "Be nice, it's not her fault" to I, but not being a lip reader, he couldn't understand what she meant.

"What?" he nearly shouted into the phone.

Emily, surprised at this new outburst began to cry, and Angela firmly told I to get off the phone. She covered the receiver and said, "Hang up now. Look what you've caused!"

I slammed down the phone and left the room, causing Emily to cry even harder. Angela tried to calm her down. "Emily, please, it's all a misunderstanding. I was on edge, and didn't mean to take it out on you. If anything, he's mad at my brother."

Angela paused a moment as Emily responded. "Yes, he's out of the room now. He's convinced now that Spike and Isaac are plotting this tour of Golden Fingers material behind his back."

Angela paused again as Emily responded. "Well, that makes a bit of sense. Not sure if I will believe it given his current state of mind. Maybe we'll sit down when he calms down a bit and work through the details. I think a call to Isaac is in order."

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“I’m sorry that we upset you, Emily, it certainly wasn’t what I thought this call would turn into. Anyway, please forgive us and I’ll talk to you later, OK? Bye!”

Angela hung up. I, still fuming, reentered the room. Angela spoke out, “I, sit down. You’ve gone off the deep end for no good reason. I spoke to Emily a bit more, and got a better explanation of what the situation is. It’d be best if you just kept quiet while I explained.”

I took a seat and Angela resumed. “In the first place, Isaac is not going to be touring Golden Fingers material. He’s getting ready to release his first solo album, and a tour is being set up. He asked Spike to drum for him. He’s not trying to capitalize on the Golden Fingers name, or pretend that the band is Golden Fingers. In fact, the *Rolling Stone* article contains a misquote about the new show. What he actually told them was ‘It’s going to be like a Golden Fingers experience, but new all the same.’ You can see how they may have twisted his words. His plan is to bring some of the spectacle of a Golden Fingers show from the ‘70s into a ‘90s context. New music, new musicians. He’s hoping for some of the old fans. They are still following the band, even after all these years of inactivity.”

I had to admit that the misinterpretation was an easily, perhaps innocently, perhaps maliciously, misconstrued alteration of the facts., “The music press has always done that, reporting on rumors and innuendo, rather than finding out the true story behind the story,” I complained. “If they would only check their sources, today’s events would not have played out the way they did.”

A few days later, I touched bases with both Isaac and Spike and got to the bottom of the real story.

Isaac, having been clean and sober for fifteen years, was celebrating the fact with a new set of songs, co-written with his wife, Dawn. With the both of them sober for fifteen years, they decided on their first official collaboration. Dawn had a brief career as a folk singer and even had a minor regional hit “When the Wind Winds about the Breeze” back in 1973. Her career was shuttled by drug abuse and a failed marriage, leaving her a shell of a woman. She spent three years in rehab, coming out clean, and left behind her budding career to seek out a child she had given up for adoption in 1969, at the age of 14. Her pursuit brought her to California, nearly penniless, but eager to find gainful employment. Taking a job as a waitress, she encountered Isaac as he came to dine one evening. Hitting it off, he returned often, and in the course of their conversations, their sordid past lives were revealed. In support of each other, they decided to join a twelve-step group together, and romance continued to blossom.

Isaac joined with her in the quest to reunite with her abandoned child, and ten years into their relationship, they found success and rediscovered Hannah Jolene Erikson, the daughter she had given up, seventeen years earlier. The initial meeting of mother and child was not the story book ending she had hoped for. Hannah, despite being adopted by a fine family, was rebellious, and could not focus. She often ran away, took up with the wrong crowds, and herself had become pregnant. She was currently mulling over the possibility of an abortion when Dawn contacted her.

Dawn was able to convince her otherwise, and in a few months, Hannah gave birth to a son, Roland Harold

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Erikson. Born a bit premature, and saddled with the stain of his mother's addictions, he only weighed four pounds at birth. Despite heroic efforts, Roland survived only four months. Hannah, Dawn and especially Isaac, who had taken to young Roland as would a grandfather, were hard hit, and simultaneously reached a new low. Hannah, without the strength of experience, could not contain her addictions, and fell once again into the low society pits from which she had crawled. In two months, she also was dead. Dawn having only a brief reunification with her daughter, was beside herself, yet on the strength of support from the twelve-step group, and the love of Isaac, was able to avoid falling back into the same pit herself. In mid-1987 their long-term romance finally blossomed into a wedding. The chose to remain childless.

During the next four years, they composed nearly one hundred songs of hope and healing together, some recounting the despair they had experienced, but always pointing to a greater light ahead. Isaac's and Dawn's wish was to bring the best of these out as Isaac's solo album, and to tour the country, passing on some of that light to all who attended their concerts. Isaac had recruited some of the cream of the current crop of country, rock, folk and R&B musicians to come together as a sort of supergroup. All of them had agreed to donate their time, and fifty dates were scheduled. The beneficiary of the proceeds? I AM FEW Hunger.

"Unbelievable!" was I's stunned reaction to Isaac's gift to humanity. Without a second thought, I pulled out his checkbook and made the first donation, \$1,000,000. And on the second thought, gave his blessing to the entire

venture, including providing permission to perform any and all of Golden Fingers' many hits, without restriction. Unbelievable.

1992 - TEARS IN HEAVEN

The day began like any other. The sun came up, glorious as it lit up the earth from the night's slumbers, bringing the life-giving heat to all who fell in its path across the sky. Only a few clouds interrupted its passage, as it seemed to crawl across the sky. Everywhere on earth, there was peace, as it surveyed the tiny humans below, going about their business as if there were not a care in the world, and for many, there weren't. Occasionally, across the globe, one might find a raindrop, or two, or thousands, but giving it up for the earth's bounty, thankfully, as if they were tears in heaven, saying "I'm here to serve you." A wind might blow gently, or strongly, or with hurricane force. Or it might not move at all. Somewhere, in the high peaks, a snowflake would waft in that wind, making its way to a new, temporary home on earth. Sometimes its brothers and sisters would also fall, in rapid succession, until they would make a city, a region, a nation, populated by a blanket of fresh whiteness. In another part of the world, the wind would whip up sand from the ground, giving flight to many who had only known the darkness of

being buried deep in the earth, visiting sunlight for the first time ever.

The oceans would pick up that wind, and create waves, some gentle, some tortuously violent, crashing into yet another rock face, creating more sand that may some day turn up in the desert, or washed forever to the depths of the sea, perhaps never to experience the sun's ray again. Then, as suddenly as the wind came up, it would die down, providing an unexpected calm, belying the forceful violence that preceded it.

Sandy Daly awoke on that bright sunny morning as on any other. Sometimes challenged by the struggles of her previous life, sometimes without a care in the world, ready to face the day ahead with cheerfulness and thoughts of unexplored opportunities. Today was a dark day for her. It had been exactly fifty years since her father, Col. William Thompson, had been killed in a mission during World War II. Although she was just a young teen at the time, the experience had taken its toll on her, as well as her entire family. She turned to abusive habits, mostly alcohol and cigarettes, and raised their use to excessive. Gifted with naturally good looks, her alcohol-induced low morals made her very popular among the men of her generation, and she gained quite a reputation. A not-quite-unexpected pregnancy sent her out of state for a few years, and when she came back to her home town several years later, she was responsible, in a loose way, for the well-being of two children: her love child from her late-forties dalliance, Eric Thompson, and her son Isaac by Robert Daly, now her former husband.

When Sandy and Robert met, Sandy was the young unwed mother of Eric, and had not yet completely fallen

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on hard times. The future for the two of them seemed to be bright, and Sandy's wild days almost became a thing of the past. When, again not so unexpectedly, Sandy turned up pregnant, Robert was quick to marry her, and provide her first full family experience since her father's death. Although struggling financially with a new wife and her child, as well as the child on the way, Robert still attempted to provide for the new family as best he could. When Isaac was born, overwhelming expenses made them seek out public assistance to help cover the bills. Although it helped some, they were not enjoying the American dream of two cars in the garage, and a chicken in every pot. Young Isaac was brought up, lacking complete nourishment, and often was ill, and did not grow as quickly as other children his age.

On the rare occasion that Sandy took him to a doctor, the doctor would express concern about his development, and insist that Sandy and Robert provide a better environment for their child. Sandy, never being one to listen to criticism, responded by refusing to return to the doctor, even when Isaac was stricken by many of the childhood diseases that plagued children of the fifties and sixties. As Isaac's general health deteriorated, one might wonder if he was going to survive childhood at all.

Sandy's own recovery from her wild times was also affected, and tension between her and Robert increased. Shortly before Isaac's seventh birthday, Robert filed for divorce, and moved out of town. Sandy fell deeper into the pit.

Six months later, Sandy arrived back at her hometown with the two kids in tow, and tried to resume her former life, but drinking, smoking and some drug abuse followed

along with her. Enrolling the kids in school, Sandy briefly reconnected with Henry Mall, whom she had slightly known during her teens as “the chicken guy”, discovering that his son and Isaac were going to be classmates. Encouraging a friendship between the two, she managed to find a bright spot in her existence and began the slow road to recovery. Over the years, she had left the drugs behind, but continued to drink, often in secret, ending each day in a stupor, and greeting each morning as a new opportunity to open yet another bottle. Her public assistance money was barely enough to keep her and the kids off the streets. Some relief came when Eric, turning 16, decided to move in with his father, who now lived in Oklahoma. Despite the fact that his parents never married, he did manage to have developed a sort of relationship with him, and knew that it would be better all around if he just “disappeared.” Sandy was publicly adamant about him leaving, but secretly relieved that another mouth to feed was out of the home.

By the time Isaac turned 18, Sandy had been through a succession of boyfriends, who had helped to support Isaac, but also fought demons of their own. Some pulled in income from shady operations, either fencing stolen merchandise, stealing cars and operating a chop shop, or dealing drugs. Sandy could never get completely away from this lower-class environment, and Isaac even succumbed to some of these illegal activities as well. Isaac’s brief high-school romance with I’s cousin, Betty, did not last much beyond their graduation, and the two drifted apart. Eventually, Betty and her family moved to Nevada, and Isaac soon nearly forgot about her.

As Isaac’s involvement with Golden Fingers began to

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emerge, and as the income from their successes began to mount, Isaac was able to finally help his mother. He moved her into a new home, provided her a monthly stipend, and for the first time in many years, no longer needed the help of public assistance to live from day to day. A path to recovery was finally firmly established, and her excessive drinking began to taper off. When in attendance at I and Angela's wedding, she arrived sober, but could not help in taking to the liquid refreshment following the ceremony.

With Isaac's continued help, she finally was able to suppress the addiction of alcohol, and admitting she had a problem went a long way to keeping her sober. Now with fifteen years of sobriety behind her, she found herself once again facing the challenge as she mourned on the anniversary of her father's death. "*One drink to honor his memory won't hurt,*" she thought to herself. She climbed into the driver's seat and drove to the liquor store, picking up a bottle of scotch. Upon returning home, she poured out a shot, raised the glass in the air, and toasted aloud, to the empty room "Daddy, this one's for you, wherever you are!" She knocked it back, savoring the heat of the alcohol, and suddenly rushing with desire for another. She poured another shot, and gulped that one down as well. Drink after drink, she soon discovered that the bottle was empty, but that her need for the liquid was not abated. Climbing once again into her car, she set out on the road. Swerving around other vehicles, it was very clear that she was no longer in control, and when she swerved too widely, she ran off the road, striking a tree head on.

When paramedics arrived at the scene a few minutes later, it was clear that she had not survived, and was

pronounced dead at the hospital about an hour later.

The days following her death were filled with activity, Isaac and Dawn made arrangements for the funeral, Eric Thompson and Robert Daly flew in to give their last respects, and I, as a surrogate nephew, was asked to give the eulogy at the funeral.

“Sandy was a longtime friend of the family, and had experienced both the lowest lows and the highest highs that life had to offer. She was taken from us tragically this week, and though time may forget her to all but a close few, she will be held in our hearts forever from this day. I’m sure there are tears in heaven today at her memory and passing, and tears, like the gentle raindrops we see today, on earth to mark it as well. Go, Sandy, find your peace now, perhaps a better peace that you ever found in this life, and we will all rejoice together when we meet again.”

Sandy Thompson Daly, aged 64, was laid to rest alongside Dawn’s daughter and grandson, whom Sandy had befriended in their brief time together. Isaac, at the graveside with Dawn, shed another tear as they lowered her body into the ground. Holding onto Dawn for comfort, together they were able to battle their own personal demons, stretched to the breaking point by two successive years of tragedy. Their forbearance in the face of pain was an inspiration to all who knew them. They were going to be OK.

1993 - ORDINARY WORLD

I looked back on the past several years and noted that despite his former world-wide fame, he was becoming an ordinary citizen, living in an ordinary world. His day to day activities included meals with the family, playtime with his young children: Chrissy, his oldest daughter, now eight, and the twins, Tyler and Merry, now three. Chrissy was enjoying her time in school as a second grade student, but intensely disliked her teacher, Miss Tree. Miss Tree was adored by all of her other students, but Chrissy had had an “incident” with Miss Tree that colored her opinion of the popular teacher. Chrissy had brought a dot-to-dot book, given to her for her birthday, to class to play with during recess break. Miss Tree noticed her connecting the dots, and thought that maybe some of the other children might like to share as well. Miss Tree asked if she could “borrow” the book to make games from it for some of the other children. Chrissy hesitated, but reluctantly gave up the book to her teacher. Miss Tree set it aside and the day went on without the activity Chrissy had planned for herself. By the end of the week, it was apparent that Miss

Tree had forgotten about the activity and when Chrissy asked to have her book back, Miss Tree indicated that she had returned it, leaving it on her desk for Chrissy to pick up. The book was never returned to Chrissy, and her birthday gift was lost. Miss Tree was at fault, and Chrissy was not about to forgive her.

When it came to assignments and homework, Chrissy “conveniently” forgot to pick them up, and although she failed to use the classic “my dog ate my homework excuse” it was clear she was not doing it. Miss Tree contacted I and Angela by telephone. Angela picked up on the second ring.

“Mrs. Mall? This is Miss Tree, Chrissy’s teacher at the school. We have a problem.”

Angela’s face flushed, and her heartbeat began to rise, fearful for her daughter’s well-being. “What is it?” she asked in a panic.

“Oh, no,” Miss Tree responded, “there’s no problem with Chrissy herself, she’s fine. “ Angela was relieved, but still concerned.

“I’m glad to hear it, but why have you called?” Angela asked.

“Well,” Miss Tree continued, “Chrissy is not turning in her homework, and I’m afraid her grade report is not going to be favorable if that continues.”

Angela was perplexed, “I don’t understand, I work with her on her homework almost every night. We’ve gone through her math book almost from cover to cover. She’s very diligent.”

It was Miss Tree’s turned to be puzzled, “The fact is, she hasn’t turned in a homework assignment for three weeks. Do you ever see any of the worksheets I send home

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with her?"

"No," Angela admitted. "We only work out of the book. I'd say we haven't seen an assignment sheet for about three weeks. Hmm. That's curious."

"That would explain the lack of turned in assignments. I'd like to meet with you, Chrissy and your husband to try to get to the bottom of this." They worked out an appointment for the following day after school.

On hanging up, Angela called Chrissy into the room. "I just spoke with Miss Tree, and she says you're not turning in your homework. I know we work together on it, so what is happening to it?"

"I throw it away. I don't want to give it to her, because she's mean. I hate her!" Chrissy's eyes began to well up with tears.

"Mean? I've only heard good things about Miss Tree. What has she done?" Angela was a bit concerned.

"She steals my stuff, and doesn't give it back!" Chrissy was now in full tears mode.

"Steals your stuff?" Angela prompted, "What do you mean?"

"My dot-to-to book that I got for my birthday. She stole it and won't give it back. I miss it." Chrissy sniffed.

"I'm sure she didn't steal it," Angela suggested. "We will talk to her about it tomorrow. She wants to see us after school."

"I don't want to see her after school. I'm going to get in trouble." Chrissy began to cry again.

"You're not going to get into trouble," I tried to calm her down. "We will find out the real problem."

The next day, Angela and I met with Miss Tree after

school. Angel explained about the dot-to-dot book.

Miss Tree responded, "Yes, Chrissy loaned me her book, but I returned it to her. I left it on her desk about three weeks ago." Miss Tree paused. "Oh, no, I hadn't 'connected the dots'," she paused to giggle. "Chrissy's book and her homework are obviously tied together."

She turned to Chrissy, "Is that what this is all about? Is there a problem with your book?"

Chrissy replied, accusingly, "You stole it! My book. You stole!"

Miss Tree defended herself, "I didn't steal your book, Chrissy. I returned it on your desk after school that same day. You should have picked it up the next day."

"It wasn't there," Chrissy accused. "It wasn't there."

"Then I'm afraid that someone else may have picked it up," Miss Tree suggested. Maybe the school custodian knows something about it. She would have cleaned the room that night. How about I check with her, and we'll get to the bottom of this mystery."

Chrissy sniffed, and replied with a simple "K".

The next day, Miss Tree spoke with the custodian before class began. "Emma, do you recall, about three weeks ago, seeing a dot-to-dot book in the classroom?"

Emma responded, "Yes, ma'am, I found one on the floor. I picked it up and put it on the shelf over there," indicating the bookshelf against the wall. "I thought that maybe one of the students dropped it, so I put it in a safe place until it could be returned. I forgot about it and didn't let you know what had happened." Emma walked over to the shelf and picked it up, hidden in plain sight. "See, here it is!"

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Miss Tree was tottering between anger and relief, and opted to go the relief route. “Thank you, Emma, you’ve solved a big mystery, and maybe even saved a little girls’ academic career in the process.”

Seeing Emma’s puzzled expression, Miss Tree explained how Chrissy had been neglecting her homework, and how she was failing in the class. The return of the dot-to-dot book would certainly help to set her back on the correct path.

When Chrissy arrived, Miss Tree called her up to the desk. Chrissy, a bit wary, approached it with some trepidation. When Miss Tree revealed the lost dot-to-dot book, Chrissy’s eyes lit up. “You found it!” she exclaimed. The other students arriving looked up to see what the ruckus was, and Miss Tree asked Chrissy to calm down a bit, as she handed her the book. “Best to take that home today, so that it doesn’t get lost again,” she suggested.

“Miss Tree,” Chrissy exclaimed, “You’re the best teacher ever!”

Chrissy’s behavior in class returned to that of a model student and her grades began to improve. Because of the misunderstanding, Miss Tree only required her to make up half of the required work assigned during the past three weeks. Both I and Angela worked with Chrissy to complete her assignments, and I gave her little quizzes to make sure she understood the material.

I spoke with Chrissy about the incident and misunderstanding. “If something like this happens to you again, I hope you come to us to tell us,” he explained. “We were able to solve the problem in time, before it became a bigger issue. It’s never a good idea to throw away your

homework, and with the effort you put into it, you don't want to be wasting your time."

Chrissy, seemingly wise beyond her years, agreed.

I sat down with Angela after dinner that night. "We survived our first 'school crisis', though I don't think it's going to be our last," he said. "By the time the twins are in school, I can imagine all sorts of problems with them as well. At least, since they are a boy and a girl, they won't be able to pull the classic switcheroo and attend each other's classes," I mused, "but I can see them getting into some kind of trouble if they choose to gang up and create mischief together." I laughed quietly.

"Yes, of that I'm sure," Angela agreed. "But we've got a few years ahead before we have to worry about them. But come to think of it, now that they are in pre-school, how do we know they aren't already scheming?" Angela laughed out loud as well.

"Can you imagine them in their teens?" I wondered aloud. "They are going to be a real handful, then. And when they start dating, we're going to have to deal with twice as many issues as we do now. It's going to be some interesting times!"

"Oh, I just imagine what it will be like for them as they go to their prom," Angela said. "What'll that be, 2008? 2009? I just imagine that by then, maybe they won't even have proms. The world is really going to change. People will be living on the moon, we'll have flying cars. Maybe the kids will attend school on Mars, for all we know. A lot can happen in fifteen years, I would think."

"I'm going to try to not imagine them in outer space," I mused. "I really don't think things are going to advance

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that quickly. Look at what we've got today, our TV is going to be a central part of our way to communicate with people all over. The cable TV system is going to bring us all closer together, you just wait and see."

I and Angela lived in an ordinary world, but their dreams for an extraordinary future were as big as ever.

1994 - MR. JONES

Adrian Alan “Spike” Jones, Sr. It was a mouthful, and Spike preferred his simple, masculine nickname over the full moniker. Spike and Emily had been married for nearly eleven years, and their ten year old son, Adrian Jr., was following his father’s early penchant for troublemaking, despite the efforts of his parents to quell the innate violence that appeared to be part of his genetic inheritance. Despite the fact that he was only in fifth grade, he was called into the principal’s office on nearly a weekly basis.

“Mr. Jones,” Principal Harlan Desmond would always begin, “what is it this time?”

With his many visits, Adrian was used to the questioning, and it barely registered that it was a punishment to be sent to the principal’s office.

“Mr. Jones, are you listening to me?” Principal Desmond continued.

“Yeah, I’m here. “ Adrian answered the question with a nonsensical answer, it was obvious that he wasn’t listening.

“Mr. Jones,” began the Principal a third time. “Would

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you mind telling me why you've been sent to me this time."

Adrian responded, "It's that punk kid in my class. I can't stand him."

"And which student would that be?" the Principal urged.

"I don't know his name. He's that punk kid in my class. That's all I know about him."

"So what is your problem with this 'punk kid'?"

"He's a punk, that's what."

"And just what does that mean?"

"He doesn't respect my space."

"And what is your space?"

"He sits behind me and kicks my chair. That's my space."

"And this is a problem because...?"

"It's my space. I don't like my chair being kicked!"

"So what did you do to defend 'your space'?"

"I smacked him. That's what I did."

"You struck a fellow student? You know that's against the rules, don't you?"

"He didn't respect my space!"

It was clear that a reasoned discourse was not going to work with young Mr. Jones.

"Mr. Jones," the Principal continued, "this is completely unacceptable behavior, and there will be consequences."

"What are consequences?" Adrian asked.

"Consequences are the resulting punishment for your continued bad behavior. I am going to have to meet with your parents to discuss this. For now, you need to go back to class, and you must be on your best behavior. I'll ask Ms. Wilson to seat you away from your punk kid nemesis

for the remainder of the class. No more trouble today, you hear?"

"Yeah, OK."

Adrian returned to class, and upon returning, the kids in the class snickered. Adrian glared at them, but was directed to a new seat by Ms. Wilson before trouble could start.

The next day, Spike and Emily were called into the office to have a discussion with Principal Desmond.

"Your son is becoming a troublemaker, and is sent to my office weekly," he began. "We are limited in what punishment we can inflict, other than talking with the parents. In my days as a student, if we got out of line, then the paddle was the answer. And as an answer it was pretty effective." He paused and stared wistfully out the window, then resumed. "But that's no longer an option in this day and age. We must use other means. I'm afraid those other means are suspension, or if the bad behavior continues, complete expulsion from the school. Our hands are tied in this situation. Adrian's behavior is at least annoying and at the worst, dangerous to the well-being of the other students."

Spike and Emily were in a state of shock. They knew Adrian was rambunctious, and sometimes played roughly with his friends, but they had no idea that he was fighting other kids at school, if that's what the principal was inferring. Emily expressed their concerns, "How long has this been going on? Why haven't we been told before now?"

"Adrian has been in my office three times in the last month, and last month twice. His classroom behavior is

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becoming disruptive, and the fact that he hasn't been punished is beginning to influence some of the other students whose behavior isn't exactly model either."

Emily held her hand up to her mouth in shock. Spike continued, "What can we do?"

"We've tried reasoning with him, trying to draw upon his better nature, but it appears that he has none," the Principal suggested.

Spike took offense, "You're out of line there, sir. Our son is not a criminal. I think there is something else at play here."

"I'm not implying that he's born to be bad," the Principal tried a bit of levity to defuse the heat in the room. "But there is something outside of the school environment that is causing him to act up. Perhaps you can work with the school psychologist to try to get to the bottom of it. May I make a referral for you?"

Spike agreed that that course of action had merit, and an appointment was scheduled for the following week.

"If Adrian is sent here once more before your visit with the psychologist, then I have no other choice that to suspend him until then. Please talk with him and explain the severity of these consequences."

The drive home was held in relative silence as the parents considered their options.

Spike broke the silence, "Have we gone too easy on Adrian?" he asked Emily. "Are we unfit parents?"

"I don't think we're unfit," Emily offered, "but maybe we have been lax in the punishment department. As an only child, I'm afraid he gets away with a lot more than he should."

“Timeouts apparently weren’t enough for him when he was younger. And the last thing I want to do is spank him. He’s too old for that anyway, it can’t possibly do any good.”

“I’m absolutely without any ideas, either,” Emily said. “It’s going to be a long few days before the psychologist visit if he chooses to act up in between.”

Adrian managed to keep his calm on the day of his parent’s visit with the principal, and Ms. Wilson decided that the new classroom location might just become a permanent assignment. When class was dismissed at the end of the day, Adrian walked alone towards home until Carol, another student caught up with him.

“Why do you have to be so mean, Adrian?” she asked.

With an uncharacteristic melancholy, Adrian shrugged and simply said “Don’t know.”

“Mr. Desmond is gonna get you in a lot of trouble if you don’t shape up,” she continued. “He kicked Sam out of school. You don’t want that to happen to you, huh?”

“Getting kicked out of school wouldn’t be the worst thing,” Adrian considered. “I’m bored in school. It’s too easy and we never do anything interestin’. I want to play on computers like the kids at the high school do. Why don’t we have computers?”

“Computers are too hard,” Carol complained. “I tried one once, and all I could make it do is go beep.”

“Computers aren’t that hard,” Adrian suggested. “I played with one at the store and it was easy. We even had one at home when I was five, and I could play games and everything. My parents won’t let me play with the one at home now, because it’s where my mom does the bills. But

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I bet if I had one, I could make it do all sorts of cool things.”

“I gotta turn here to go home,” Carol said, indicating the next corner. “Maybe your parents will buy you your own computer, huh?”

“I don’t think so,” Adrian complained. “I think instead I’m going to be grounded after they had their talk with Desmond today. Hmm. Maybe I’ll be so far grounded that I’ll be able to skip school next week. I’d like that!”

Adrian walked in the front door to meet his parents, waiting at the table for him. “Sit down, Adrian Alan Jones, Jr.” Uh, oh, full name was trouble.

“What?” was his simple reaction as he took the proffered seat.

“You know we visited with Principal Desmond today,” Spike began.

“Yeah, I know. He told me he was going to call you.”

“You’ve been getting in a lot of trouble at school lately,” Emily continued the conversation. “Why?”

“I’m bored. School’s boring,” Adrian continued, reiterating portions of his conversation with classmate Carol. His final conclusive statement was “I want a computer.”

“You have your game system, and you hardly play that,” Spike complained. “What could you possibly do with a computer?”

“I heard one of the kids in my class talking about how they had the internet at their house. He said there was lots of cool things that he found to do. He said there was a spiderweb thing that he goes on.”

“The World Wide Web” Spike confirmed. “Yeah, I’ve

heard about it. But it's just something for college kids. You can't tell me that a fifth grader can get anything out of something like that."

"That kid is on all the time and finds games to play and everything. The games I have are boring. I want the internet games."

"We'll think about it, but you have to behave."

At the meeting with the school psychologist the following week, Spike and Emily raised their concerns about Adrian's lack of interest in typical school material. The psychologist pulled Adrian's file and looked at recent testing results.

"It appears that we've underestimated young Mr. Jones," as she pored over the scores. "It seems he has a very high aptitude for applied math and languages, Our typical curriculum at his grade level emphasizes very basic skills, but it seems he's actually capable of a level exceeding those taught, perhaps by several grade levels. It's no wonder he acts up in class, it's an outlet for him, even as a negative one. But if we channel his energy and intellect into something more productive, perhaps computers, his behavior problems just might go away."

Spike and Angela bought Adrian his first Macintosh computer the very next day.

1995 - ANTS MARCHING

“Ants!” screamed Merry, “there are ants marching on my bed!”

I ran into his youngest daughter’s room to check out the situation.

“Look at this!” he scolded Merry, “There’s a sucker in your bed. What have I told you about eating candy in bed!” Merry flinched as I’s temper was rising, and he caught himself before he completely blew up.

“But daddy,” Merry explained, “it wasn’t me. I didn’t eat any candy.”

“And you think the candy just got there all by itself?”

“Tyler did it. He wants me to get in trouble. Tyler’s mean to me.”

“And why would Tyler want you to get into trouble?”

“Tyler’s mad at me because I told on him. He was eating candy before dinner and mommy said not to. Mommy got real mad at him.”

“Well, you were right to tell your mother. Tyler needs to follow the rules, and if he put the candy on your bed, then he is the one who is going to get into trouble.”

“But don’t tell Tyler what I said. He’s going to be mean to me again.”

“Don’t worry, Tyler will not know it’s you. But there is trouble waiting for him.” I left the room and went to Tyler’s room.

Upon hearing Merry’s scream, Tyler knew that his father was going to pay him a visit. In order to prevent the impending punishment, Tyler closed the door to his room, and sat down with his back to the door.

I reached for the handle, and sensing resistance on the other side, pounded his fist against the door. “Tyler! You open up right now!” He pounded again.

Tyler feigned absence. “Nobody in here!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle a bit at Tyler’s attempt at safety, but kept his warning tone. “You’d better come out right now, Mr., or there will be trouble.”

Tyler meekly opened the door, and I held out the ant covered sucker for Tyler to see. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked. “Your sister’s bed is covered with ants as a result of your prank.”

“I’m sorry daddy. I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t mean to. That’s about the lamest excuse that I’ve ever heard. Well, now you are going to help us clean up the mess. Come with me.” He grabbed Tyler’s hand and dragged him, protesting, to Merry’s room.

“See what a mess you’ve caused?” indicating the marching ants. “It’s going to take some time to get rid of this mess. Now help me take this bedding off, so we can get it cleaned up.”

I grabbed a corner and pulled the bedding off in one pull, careful to fold the ants inside the bundle so as to not allow them to escape.

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“We’re going to have to get this outside and shake them off before we try to clean the sheets.

They went outside and shook the sheet, freeing the ants from their sweet prison, and then quickly returned inside to stuff the bedding into the laundry basket. He returned his attention to Tyler.

“Now let’s go into your sister’s room and clean up the rest of the ants. I’m sure they didn’t just start there. The candy attracted them but there’s sure to be a few stragglers left behind.”

When they returned to the room, I traced a line of ants back to the window sill, where they disappeared into a crack below the sill. “Here’s where they are coming in,” he claimed. “If we don’t take care of this now, they are going to turn up in other parts of the house. See what trouble your mischief has caused?”

Tyler hung his head in shame. “Daddy, I’m sorry.” He started again. “Don’t be mad.” He turned up eyes of innocence that cracked I’s icy stare. I relented and brushed his hand over Tyler’s head.

“Ah, I can’t stay mad at you. But no more of these shenanigans, I tell you. Now help me clean up these ants.”

I and Tyler worked together to clean up the ants. “Normally, if this were outside, I’d use some ant spray and that would be it,” I instructed Tyler. “But since it’s in your sister’s room, I don’t like the idea of poison all over.”

I continued, “First, we’ll patch the hole under the window where they came in.” He used some spackle to fill in the hole, then took a putty knife and smoothed it over. He let Tyler touch the wet spackle, and play with a little bead. Tyler began to take some up to his mouth, and I

quickly stopped him.

"I don't think that will hurt you," he said, "but I wouldn't recommend eating it. It's not going to taste very good."

Despite his warning, Tyler continued the spackle's journey and put it into his mouth. "It looks like gum!" Tyler said, but the look on his face soon belied that fact. "Ooh, ick," as he spit it out. "That's yucky!" He continued to spit out the foul substance.

"See, I told you. You really ought to listen to your old man," I warned.

After cleaning up the minor mess that Tyler's experimentation had caused, I moved on to cleaning up the remaining ants that still climbed on the wall. "Here's something safe that will stop the ants marching for the time being." He sprayed a little blue glass cleaner and the ants stopped dead in their tracks. He handed it over to Tyler, who looked curiously at the blue liquid, wondering whether or not to taste it as well. I stared him down and told him, "Remember what I said about the spackle. This will be ten times worse. And, it will hurt you as well."

Tyler turned the bottle on the remaining ants and gave it a spray. "This is more fun," he said. "I can watch them stop when they try to drink the blue stuff." He sprayed again for good measure.

"I think that's enough for now," I indicated. "Now we have to clean up the mess."

They grabbed some towels and started wiping away the spray and the ants. A few stragglers still survived, and Tyler took up the spray bottle one last time, making sure they were gone for good.

"Good job, buddy," I said. "You killed 'em real good!"

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Once the inside mess was taken care of, the two decided to deal with the ants marching on the outside wall as well.

“This one’s going to take a bit more ammunition,” I said. “We’re going to have to go for the real stuff this time.” He held out the can of ant spray and took out a line of them climbing the wall. He continued all the way down to the ground, and tracked them back to a small hill they had opened in the yard.

“I’ll spray inside here, and that should be the end of that. Now whatever you do,” he said, as he turned to Tyler. “Don’t touch anything out here. This stuff will make you real sick.”

Tyler, watching the ants struggling and expiring, had no choice but to agree.

Inside the house, despite their efforts, the job was not complete. Although Merry’s room was ant free, the problem had been transferred to the laundry, where some ants still wrapped up inside the bedding had escaped and were climbing the walls around the washer and dryer.

“This is going to take the full ammo approach as well,” he aid to himself, and he grabbed the ant spray and gave every inch of ant-covered trails a good soaking. Before long, fumes were beginning to rise, and I began to feel a little sick. He quickly opened the door to vent out the room. A rush of air from the outside only serve to blow the ant spray fumes back into the house, where the mist began pervading all of the living area.

“Abandon ship!” I cried, as he perceived the danger to his family. “Everybody outside. It’s going to blow!”

Angela rushed in to see what the problem was, and chided I. “You’re exaggerating a bit, I think. It’s going to

smell for a bit, but I hardly think it's that dangerous. I'll open a window, and it will blow out. In the meantime, I think you'd better take some time to wipe up the mess you're made in this room. And while you're at it, how about stuffing those sheets and blanket into the washer. They are going to need a long hot bath before I'm about to put them back on Merry's bed." Pouring in a cup of soap, I started the wash cycle.

Once everything got cleaned up, I breathed a sigh of relief. His family was safe from harm, safe from the advance of the marching ants. And the war against the ants seemed to be over.

The next day, yet another trail of marching ants was crawling along the kitchen counter, oblivious to the events and battles of the day before. I was at the end of his rope, and did not want to keep spraying ant spray everywhere the ants would materialize. He finally gave in, grabbed the yellow pages and looked up exterminators. The ad read "Ants marching. We'll take care of them, under the table or wherever you find them. Dream easy tonight. Call Matthews' Exterminators for the solution to your problem. Don't let another ant spoil your day. Wasps, mosquitos, termites, spiders and all sort of creepy crawly pests are our speciality. Call today!"

I wasted no time calling them. By mid-afternoon, the exterminators had arrived and the ants were history. What began as a simple prank had turned into a major fiasco, with expenses running over fifty dollars, and the whole house having to be evacuated while extermination was in progress. I made sure that Tyler did not forget the lesson he had learned this day. "Don't put candy in your sister's

Only Golden Fingers Could Play So Heavy

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bed. Understand?"

1996 - STANDING OUTSIDE A BROKEN PHONE BOOTH WITH MONEY IN MY HAND

A passerby noted the man standing at the booth, obviously in distress and asked his problem.

"I'm standing outside a broken phone booth with money in my hand," Clark opined. "there are people in dire peril and I have nowhere to change!"

"You need change?" the passerby asked. "I think I can help you out." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful. "Here you go," he said as he held out his hand. "I'm always ready to help out a fellow in need."

Clark looked down at the man's hand in disbelief. Not only did he not need change, he was in rather a hurry and did not have time to stand here debating the need for coinage. Despite the stranger's helpfulness, Clark had to turn him down.

"Sorry, pal," he began. "You seem to have misunderstood. I've got plenty of change. The problem is the phone booth itself. It's broken. I can't get the door open without ripping it off from its hinges. I'm afraid the local police would have a problem with that."

"Then your problem is solved!" the man declared triumphantly.

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“You can use my cell phone. I have plenty of spare minutes. Here you go.” He proffered the device.

Clark looked down at the man’s hand and shook his head. “Again you misunderstand. I am not in need of a phone. I just need to use the phone booth.” He paused uncomfortably. “It’s a bit hard to explain.”

The man looked curiously at Clark, then offered another bit of help. “There’s another booth around the corner.”

With a flash and whoosh of air, Clark seemed to disappear in front of the man’s eyes. “That was odd,” he noted silently as he walked away, shaking his head.

Angela looked over the manuscript I had provided to her. “This is what you’ve been working on? This is your ‘Great American Novel’?”

“Yeah! What do you think?” I was eager to hear the answer.

“Frankly, it’s crap. I don’t think I’ve ever read anything so bad.”

I was crushed. “But I’ve thought this story out to the end. Anyway, it’s just a first draft. They’re always a bit rough.”

“Sandpaper is rough. This is atrocious. Stick to writing music. You’re good at that, and not so good at writing a novel. Stick with what you know.”

“I must respectfully disagree,” I took on a haughty attitude. “This is my baby. This is what I was born to do. You just wait, the story will emerge, and I predict it will be a bestseller!”

“O.K., have your fun. But I don’t think your dad is going to be able to get you out of this one. He can complete your projects, but this one is beyond redemption.”

“My dad is not an Author. I am,” I insisted.

“Right, right. An Author. You just go ahead. When it hits the bestseller list, I’ll read it.”

I ignored her jibe and continued writing.

Clark discovered the working phone booth around the corner, just as the stranger had indicated. The door was operational, and the street itself was fairly deserted.

“This will do,” he stated to no one in particular. “This will do nicely.”

Clark removed his hat, and placed it carefully on the shelf just below the telephone. He removed his glasses, and placed them in his pocket. He picked up the phone book, thumbed to the “R” listings, and ran his finger down the page until he encountered “Raven.”

“Here it is, ‘Raven, John L. - 2877 Santiago Blvd. #3’”, Clark took out a notepad and wrote down the address. He picked up his hat, replaced his glasses and stepped outside the booth. Looking up and down the street, the lack of activity on the street was now a problem. Seeking to hail a taxi, Clark returned once again to the busier street at which he began his quest.

“Taxi” he hailed, as he spotted the yellow vehicle down the street. “Taxi!” The vehicle slowed, as Clark stepped into the back seat. He glanced at his notepad, “2877 Santiago Blvd.” he told the driver. And there’s an extra twenty in it for you if you can get me there in under ten minutes.”

“You got it!” the driver indicated, as he stepped on the gas.

Eight minutes later, the driver pulled to the curb in front of the Santiago address.

I stopped typing and read over his previous scene. “It’s perfect! The suspense is building nicely!”

Clark paid the fare, and added the promised twenty and stepped out of the car. He surveyed the building in front of him, and caught his breath. “This is going to be dangerous, I fear,” he sub-vocalized. “But there’s no other choice but to go out and do it!”

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He approached the door warily, grabbed the handle, entered and spoke to the person inside. "Dr. Raven, I presume?"

The woman looked up and indicated the sign on the wall, "Yes, this is Dr. Raven's office. Do you have an appointment?"

Clark looked to the right and to the left, as if afraid that someone might overhear their conversation. "No, I do not," he simply said.

"Well, let's look at the book." She scanned and turned the page. "We've got nothing open today, but it looks like a 9 AM slot is available tomorrow. Would you care to return in the morning?"

Clark's newfound bravado poured out of him, as syrup from a jar, slowly returning to the anxiety of earlier in the day. "There's nothing available right now?" he asked. "Can you check again, please?"

"No, I'm sorry sir, tomorrow is the earliest we can fit you in."

Clark sighed. "That will have to do. Put me down for 9 AM."

The receptionist looked down to pencil him in. "Your name, sir?" There was no reply. Looking up, again she said "Sir?"

But Clark was nowhere to be found.

"That seems as good a place to end this chapter," I said aloud to no one in particular. "The character is developing nicely, the situation remains mysterious. I think the Pulitzer Prize is practically in my pocket!"

I pushed back the chair as he stretched his arms about his head. "It's time for some inspiration!"

I stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a piece of hard candy and popped it into his mouth. Biting down, he felt a piece of his tooth chip off. "Ow!" he cried out. "My tooth!"

Angela heard his cry for help and ran into the room. "What's the problem?"

"I think I broke my tooth when I bit on this piece of candy," he reached into his mouth and pulled out the candy, and a bit of the tooth. "I'm going to have to go to

the dentist,” he said. “Can you make me an appointment, please?”

Angela got on the phone. I could hear her speaking to the dentist’s office “Tomorrow at 9 AM? Nothing earlier? OK, we’ll take it. See you in the morning!”

“Tomorrow?” I complained, “My tooth is hurting now!”

“I’m afraid that’s the best we can do. Dr. Santiago is all booked for today. If something opens up today, Ms. Clark will give us a call. Why don’t you get back to your ‘writing’. It may take your mind of the pain. Plus, you can take a couple of aspirin as well.”

I returned to his desk after downing the aspirin, and tried to concentrate on the manuscript.

Clark fidgeted as he awaited his 9 AM appointment. A visit to Dr. Raven was always nerve-racking for him. It’s not that he was afraid, but the thought of the initial pain belied the fact that even the hope of relief could not compensate.

“The doctor will see you now.” Clark was led into the examination room.

“Please remove your shirt, and Dr. Raven will be right in.”

Clark was nervous, but awaited the doctor’s arrival. He looked at the wall. The doctor’s degrees were displayed there, and the charts and diagrams were a pleasant distraction from the anxiety he was feeling.

Dr. Raven knocked and entered the room. “Please lie down, and we’ll get started.” He began pressing upon his spine, gently kneading the vertebrae, until a distinct “pop” was heard. “There! Does that feel better now?”

Clark sat up, raised his arms above his head, and declared, “No pain! You’re a miracle worker, Doc!”

Clark jumped up off the table, shook the doctor’s hand and said

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“Thank you!”

“Just check in with the receptionist on your way out, and you’re good to go.”

Clark paid his bill, left the office and felt ready to face the world once again.

Angela looked over I’s work the next morning and shook her head. “This is about the least interesting piece of crap I’ve read, possible ever. I don’t think you’re going to find a second career as an Author, despite your efforts. I’m sorry,” she repeated, “it’s just horrible.”

“My tooth pain is throwing me off my game,” I claimed. “Once we’ve been to the dentist, I’m sure I can make some revisions.”

The two of them got into the car and headed to the dentist’s office. Pulling into the lot, they noted a broken phone booth on the corner.

“Looks like someone hit it with their car,” Angela noted. “I’m glad we don’t have to make any calls this morning. That’s going to be out of commission for some time, I fear.”

“You’re trying to distract me from visiting the dentist,” I accused. “You don’t have to do that. I don’t fear the dentist. I’m a big boy.”

He boldly stepped out of the car. “I’ll walk right up to that door, turn the handle, and enter without a care in the world!”

He reached the door, grabbed and turned the handle and got ready to enter. The doorknob failed to turn. It was locked. He looked at his watch, and it read 8:55 AM. The office was still closed. He would have to wait out the five minutes.

1997 - I BELIEVE I CAN FLY

“It’s been six months,” Angela chided, “and you’ve yet to sit down and finish that so-called super-hero novel of yours.”

“Super-hero novel?” I raised his eyebrow quizzically. “I never tried to write a super-hero novel.”

“And just what do you call the novel with ‘Clark’, a phone booth, and the ability to fly?”

“Fly? There was nothing about flying in my novel. Where do you get a silly idea like that?” I seemed a bit confused about Angela’s line of questioning.

“Oh, come on. Are you totally dense, or something? You don’t remember writing about Superman?”

“I never wrote anything about Superman, that’s for sure. I had a character named Clark, that’s for certain, but there the similarity ends. You seem to think I have him saying something like ‘I believe I can fly’ and then just take off? That’s just ridiculous. It’s not believable. I’ve never bought into Superman as a figure to be celebrated or emulated. An alien from outer space comes to Earth and saves the human race. Totally ridiculous.”

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“Still, Clark. Phone booth. Hat. Glasses. That screams Superman,” Angela insisted.

“It really never crossed my mind. ‘Clark’ is Clark Wilson, and he suffers from chronic back pain. When a sudden pang comes upon him, he does everything he can to find the nearest chiropractor to relive the pain.”

“And you find that compelling literature? Sounds pretty pedestrian and drab to me,” Angela complained. “And how long was this novel to be?”

“I was planning on about 300 pages for the first volume. The sequel would probably be about the same, maybe 350.”

“A sequel? On what material? Visits to the dentist?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I was inspired to write the sequel based on my experiences with the broken tooth. There’s a great story there!”

“Oh I’m sure there is,” Angela replied with sarcasm. “A real page turner.”

“Yes, I really think so. I’m glad we’re on the same page.” I was oblivious.

“So, when is it coming out?” Angela decided to play along.

“I’ve set it aside for now. I’ll probably work on it again in the Fall.”

“As I suspected. You never finish anything,” Angela accused.

I became defensive. “I finish everything... in my own time. It takes a while, but I have all the time in the world!”

“All the time in the world? You could be hit by a bus tomorrow! What good will time do for you then?”

“There’s no bus, no accident, no illness that will strike me down. I’ve seen it!”

“Seen what?”

“I have seen my future. And it is bright!”

“Your future? And just how is that?”

“A dream. I dreamed of me at an old age, and you were there beside me. Celebrating.”

“And you believe in this dream.”

“I do. I think it runs in the family. My mother had dreams, and they came true as well.”

“So what was your dream?”

“We were together, celebrating my birthday. The 113th! Yes, I was a teenager once again!”

“113? And how well do you think you’ll be at 113, should you even make it to that?”

“Fit as a fiddle, I’m sure. You and I were dancing and everything. And I know the future will be bright, because of the special sign.”

“Special sign?”

“My cake had 113 candles. That lit the place up!”

“So tell me more about this dream. I suppose your parents were there?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, they’d be over 130 years old. No one lives to be that age!”

“I dare say that no one lives to be 113 either. At least, very, very few. Why would you be among them?”

“I saw it in the dream!”

“All right. Go ahead and believe it. You may as well believe you can fly, as well.”

“Once again, it’s you being ridiculous. You don’t have faith in my predictive dreams? What if I told you I dreamed we won a million dollars in the lottery?”

“You dreamed that?”

“Well, no. And since we haven’t, the fact that I didn’t

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dream it proves my point!”

“I really don’t think it works that way.”

“Don’t get all scientific on me. You just wait and see. If I don’t reach 113, it’ll be over my dead body!”

“Now that’s a statement I can believe in.”

Discourse like the one earlier in the week troubled Angela. She was sure that I was losing it. That all of his mental faculties weren’t present. That he wasn’t firing on all cylinders, to use a common expression. She confided her concerns to Emily. “I is not all there sometimes. I would blame it on all those drugs in the sixties and seventies, but I was there. He did not partake. There’s no other excuse but a descent into mental illness.”

Emily disagreed, “Mental illness? I really don’t think so. I is exuberant and childlike, sometimes, but that’s just the way he is. You’ve known him for more than thirty years. You should have recognized that by now.”

“That’s true, I suppose,” Angela admitted. “But sometimes he is just so over the top, I can’t figure him out.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to engage your own imagination. Maybe you should stop being so serious and concerned, when there’s clearly nothing wrong, and seek out your inner child as well. What do you do for fun?”

“I like to sit and watch the TV, read my books, spend time in the garden. I find it relaxing.”

“I find it boring, if you ask me. You need to get out, find adventure. Do something together. I is probably feeling tied down to a homebody existence and wants to go out and experience life, and I think you would benefit from it as well.”

“We went on that Mediterranean cruise.” Angela offered.

“And that was what, ten years ago? You’ve barely stepped foot out of the house, much less taken any major trips, since.”

“We go out. To the mall, out to eat.”

“Slow my heart, girl. Let me off this crazy ride!” Emily patted her forehead as if wiping away sweat.

“So, what’s your idea of a good time?”

“Why not go out and have an outdoor adventure? Hiking, horseback riding, surfing. Your kids are getting old enough to enjoy some of those activities, and if they’re too much for them, you can always leave them with us and go off and do some things, just the two of you. Be a kid again!”

“A kid again? I never did those things when I was a kid in the first place. I’m not sure if I even remember how to ride a bike, much less if I can ride on a horse. It sounds too dangerous.”

“Danger is only in your mind. Oh, sure, there are activities that are truly dangerous. Jumping from a plane without a parachute hoping to land in a pile of hay comes to mind. Juggling a dozen knives set on fire. That I would not recommend. But you want to know what the real danger is? Not living life to the fullest! You’re in danger of wasting away, never having accomplished anything. Tell me, when you look back at 70, 80, 90, what will you have to look back on?”

“I claim that I’ll be there at 110. In a dream.”

“So then, what will you look back on at 110? A life filled with TV shows, books and the garden? You’ve got to live a little. No, I take that back. You’ve got to live a lot!”

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“So, what, you think I need to take a class?”

“A class isn’t go to do it for you. You need to grab life by the tail, and hold on!”

“You seem to have everything planned out for me, don’t you? I don’t get a say in this?”

“With your track record, I should think not.”

“OK, show me something. What should I do to add excitement to my life?”

“Give me a day or two, and I’ll come up with something.”

Emily was true to her word, and visited Angela once again a couple of days later. “I’ve got the perfect thing. It’s exciting, a little bit dangerous, and it will get the adrenaline rushing through you. You won’t be the same afterwards!” She was clearly excited about the idea. “You won’t be satisfied to just sit around and read anymore!”

Angela was intrigued, if not a bit wary. “What is it? What have you got cooked up?”

“I’m not telling. You’re just going to have to trust me on this. Get into some comfortable clothes, and we’ll be on our way.”

Angela decided to take the bait. “*After all,*” she thought, “*What if I’s right, and I’m healthy enough to see 100 and beyond? Might as well live life the fullest.*”

She changed her clothes, and together Angela and Emily went out to the car. “Where are we going?” Angela asked again.

“You’ll see,” Emily winked conspiratorially.

They drove about an hour before turning into a private airfield. “We’re taking a flight? To where?”

“You’ll see,” was all the response she could get. “Trust

me.”

“The two of them entered the small plane, and the pilot greeted them. “Welcome aboard, ladies. We’ll be off the ground in no time, but first, let’s get your ‘chutes on. Don’t want to jump out without them,” he chuckled.

“‘Chutes as in parachutes?” Angela’s eyes grew wide. “You’re going to try to get me to jump out of a plane? I think not!”

“It’s fine, I’ve done it seven times now. Spike and I have made it a hobby, and we love it. You will too.”

“Spike has never told me he jumps out of planes. I’m his sister, don’t you think I should know something about that?”

“He didn’t want you to worry. You know how you get sometimes. Now get the parachute on, and let’s take off!”

The pilot/instructor showed Angela how to put on the parachute, and also explained how she would not be going down alone. They would be going on a tandem jump. A professional will accompany her at all times.

Wary as always, Angela reluctantly agreed to the experience. Boarded, the plane took off and settled into a 10,000 foot altitude. Angela was secured to the professional, and after a quick count of three, was airborne. The exhilaration set in immediately.

“I believe I can fly!” she screamed with delight as every part of her body tingled with the excitement of this new adventure.

1998 - ONE WEEK

Sunday

I and Angela awoke at 4 AM and couldn't fall back to sleep.

"Sunday is the one day each week that I can sleep in," I complained. "Why can't I have just this one?"

Angela disagreed. "You can sleep any day of the week, silly, there's nothing different about Sunday than any other day."

"Yeah, I know, this life of leisure can make one a bit lazy, I suppose. But come to think of it, Sunday is a bit different. Any other day of the week we've got to get up to either take the kids to school or to some Saturday morning event. Sunday, to me, is sleep day"

"You know," began Angela, "we could always go to church. We haven't done that for a long time."

"Church? I'm afraid the walls would fall down once we entered the building. At the very least, the minister would probably pass out on the floor as soon as he saw our faces."

"You know, we used to go regularly. Now we don't even

attempt to make a token visit on Christmas or Easter.”

“And what good is it to start going now? You think my soul needs saving? Remember, I’ve seen it, I’ll be around until I’m 113. What’s going to church going to do for me?”

“How do you know it’s not because we go to church that you’ll reach that ripe old age?”

“Tell you what. Give me one week and if anything bad happens then we’ll start going to church next Sunday. One week.”

Monday

At 4 AM, I woke covered in sweat, heart beating rapidly and mind racing. Angela, disturbed from her slumber asked, “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I think I have. It was just a dream. No, a nightmare. My grandfather was haunting me, telling me I’ve got to change my ways or spend an eternity in Hell to atone. I barely knew my grandfather, he died while I was still young. Why would I dream about him?”

“Could be that sign you were seeking about going to church. Why else? Was there anything there to indicate that’s what he was suggesting?”

“Dreams don’t work that way. They are never explicit. They’re wrapped up in mystery, and full of symbology. I’m sure it was just a dream. Nothing more. You got me all worked up yesterday and this is what manifested. It’s nothing. Go back to sleep, it’s still dark. We’ve got three good hours of sleep ahead of us.”

I lay there for another hour before he could fall back to sleep, pondering the dream. Did it really mean he should go to church? Was his grandfather’s dire warning going to come true? Was his life of leisure going to get him in the

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end?

“It was just a dream,” he told himself. “Nothing but a silly memory that worked its way into my slumbers.”

But if he could disregard this one, could he continue to believe his 113 prediction?

Tuesday

I woke at 4 AM on Tuesday, as well, but there was no dream, no sweats, no rapid heart beat. Just a feeling of calm and solace. This began to worry him. “*What now?*” he thought suspiciously. “*Is this some sort of mind trick?*”

Setting it aside, he fell back asleep quickly, and woke at his normal time of 7 AM. He felt refreshed, as if the interruption of sleep at 4 AM hadn’t even happened. “*Did I dream that as well?*” he wondered. But the feeling had been so vivid, he knew it had to be reality.

As was his usual custom, he visited each of his children’s rooms and woke them to get ready for school. Each one greeted him with a smile and a hug, and I felt a warm sensation flow through him. “*This isn’t how it usually goes,*” he thought. “*There’s usually some level of complaint. At least one of them feigns sickness. What is going on?*”

As the day progressed, events unfolded as without effort, every step he took felt like he was walking on thin cushions, not enough to feel clumsy, but just enough to take away the cares of the day. The taste of food was a little sharper and pleasant, the drinks crisper and more refreshing. Even water tasted better than he had ever experienced.

When he finally retired at his usual bedtime, the complete sense of calm once again enveloped him, and his last thought as he drifted off to sleep was “*Is this Heaven?*”

Wednesday

I woke on Wednesday at 7 AM, fully rested and ready to face the day ahead. He was not quite ready to get out of bed, just yet, as he vividly recalled yet another dream during the night. His grandfather appeared again, kindly addressing him this time, as opposed to the fire and brimstone speech of his dream two nights before. “Yesterday was my gift to you,” he heard him say. “This is the kind of peace you can expect, if you only believe.”

His grandfather’s words were mysterious, nearly incomprehensible. “Believe? Believe what?”

“Believe...” and grandfather faded away.

As I arose from bed, he stubbed his toe on the bedpost, and the kids were being rambunctious and not willing to cooperate about going to school. In other words, pretty much a normal awakening. “*Was yesterday just another dream?*” he wondered. “*It seemed so vivid, so but unreal at the same time.*”

The rest of the day had him feeling uneasy again, wondering what was around the corner at every step. Was danger lurking? Was injury imminent? He couldn’t place a source for his anxiety. Nothing was really going horribly wrong. It was in general, just a normal day, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was different. He felt as if his head was in a cloud. Interactions with others did not have the same feel, and he wasted no time finding his bed, ready to shake off the day and try again tomorrow.

Thursday

I woke at 4 AM, once again in a sweat, and with a pounding headache. He got up to take an aspirin, and found the bottle empty. The room temperature was like a refrigerator, and the sweat chilled him to the bone. Angela lay asleep, undisturbed, and he couldn’t bear the thought

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to try and wake her up to ask what she might be experiencing.

He slipped on his robe and slippers and went downstairs. Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out a carton of milk, so that he might sip the comfort of a warm glass. He poured into a glass, only to discover that the milk was curdled, plopping into the glass, and splashing over onto the countertop. The smell was putrid, and he quickly poured it down the drain, flicking on the garbage disposal to rid himself of the foul liquid. The switch failed to engage the disposal, so he only was able to flush it down with water from the tap. *"At least that's working,"* he thought, *"I'll have to call the repairman later this morning"*

He looked over at the phone and noticed it was off the hook. Picking it up, he listened to hear only silence. *"I must have forgotten to hang up after the last call."* But he couldn't recall a call coming in, or making a call. *"Maybe someone else did it. I'll have to get after the kids for not taking care of things properly."* He hung up, waited a few moments and picked up again, but the line was dead. *"Great. I'll have to use the neighbor's phone to call the disposal repairman and the phone repairman."* As he stepped out to leave the room, he slipped on some of the spilled milk, and hit his head on the counter on the way down. He fell, unconscious, to the floor.

Friday

I awoke the next morning, once again at 4 AM, in bed with no idea how he got there. Angela lay beside him, as if she hadn't moved. He touched his head when it had impacted the countertop, but felt no injury, not even a slight bump. He got up, looked into the mirror and could

see no evidence of his unfortunate fall. He'd lost a complete day. Had he been in the hospital? Was he suffering from amnesia induced by the fall? He once again went downstairs into the kitchen and checked the refrigerator. The carton of milk was still there. He gingerly open the top and took a sniff. Perfectly fine. He poured a glass, and it came out smoothly. Placing the glass in the microwave oven, he heated it to a perfect 120 degrees, warm enough to comfort, and not too hot to burn his mouth. He decided to add a dash of chocolate to it, and popped in a couple of small marshmallows as well. It went down with satisfaction and relaxation.

I returned to the bedroom. Angela hadn't stirred and he was fine with that. He had not wished to disturb her in his night cravings for comfort food. As he lay down and his head hit the pillow, he fell asleep in a matter of seconds.

Saturday

4 AM arrived, and the alarm went off. I quickly silenced it to not disturb Angela, and it appeared as if he had succeeded, as she did not stir. *"It must be my curse to wake at 4 AM, but I'm not tired, so maybe I'll just accept it and watch a bit of TV. Maybe that will help me fall asleep and wake at a more normal hour."*

I headed downstairs once again, and sat down in his easy chair. He picked up the remote and wondered what might even be on TV at this ungodly hour. As the image begin to emerge on the screen, it revealed itself as his grandfather. "I'm not dreaming this," he mumbled to himself. "But I don't understand what's happening. Maybe I've seen this show before, and the man I'm seeing was appearing in my dreams, and I just assumed it was my grandfather."

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The image addressed him directly, and I was taken by surprise. "It's been one week, and you've seen what life can offer, both good and bad. Choose wisely, my son. Choose wisely."

Sunday

I looked over at the alarm clock and it read 7 AM. Turning over, he saw Angela laying there, looking at him. "I'm glad we were able to fall back asleep, I needed those few hours."

"What's today?" he asked her.

"Still Sunday, just like it was three hours ago when we woke up. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," as a calm of peace once again overcame him. "Let's get ready for church."

1999 - YOU GET WHAT YOU GIVE

I checked his watch. Time had frozen and he shook his wrist as if that would make the digital device begin ticking again.

“There’s nothing wrong with your watch,” Angela said. “Time is moving on just like normal. You get what you give, and when you give your time, time will return to you.”

“But it’s so boring, standing here waiting for the people to arrive. I know once they get here, then the time will move again. It’s just this interminable waiting. I’m anxious to get on with the project.”

As if responding to his complaint, the doors opened and crowds waiting outside began to file in.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” was the call as the hungry folks began to take their place at the long tables.

“Everyone take a seat and we will serve you. In the meantime, take this opportunity to visit with your neighbor. They could be an angel in disguise.”

Every one of the volunteers took their station, some ready to serve at the tables, some, like I and Angela,

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serving food to the servers to distribute at the tables. Every one of the thirty volunteers had a job and everyone was eager to do it.

“OK people, let’s go!” shouted the main organizer. “This is it!”

I’s job was to ladle soup, while Angela tossed the salad bowl and scooped it up into individual bowls.

Four servers at a time approached the soup station and I hustled to keep up. Soup splashed on the table and Angela warned “Slow down, there’s plenty of time and everyone will be served.”

Angela carefully placed a salad into each bowl, ensuring that each one had a piece of tomato to add color and flavor.

By the time everyone had been served, two hours had passed. I looked at his watch and noted that it had in fact been working and was amazed that the time had passed so quickly.

“What did I tell you?” said Angela. “You gave your time, and it came back to you.”

“Wouldn’t you think we’d just lost two hours of our lives? We barely remember it passing by.”

“The time is lost only if it’s wasted. You can’t say that we’ve wasted any here. Look how many have been helped today with everyone pitching in.”

“Well, now do we have time to eat?”

They ate their fill as they sat among the remaining assembled guests.

The table conversation covered many subjects, but the inevitable happened, and one of the guests began to ask questions of I about his experience as a big rock star.

“What was it like to be so famous, once upon a time?”

Remembering his days of intense fame, he responded, “Well, it’s not like I’m not still famous. I try to keep a lower profile, but there’s still a lot of recognition when I’m out in public.”

“It’s been more than twenty years since you last toured. I remember seeing the ‘Playin’ Heavy’ tour in 1977 at the Memorial Auditorium, and what a wild time it was!” His eyes glazed slightly as he silently reminisced. “After you stopped altogether, music wasn’t the same. We ended up with junk like Simply Fortescue and Plastic Chase, and so many other groups that, thankfully, have been mostly forgotten.”

They sat silently for a time, continuing to reflect on the decline of music in the ‘90s.

“I actually liked the music of Simply Fortescue,” offered I, “although Plastic Chase was really just out there chasing trends and not really developing their own unique style. While the style of Simply Fortescue did not appeal to the masses, I found them a refreshing change from the dance rhythms that perpetuated in the late ’70s and throughout the ‘80s. Their exploration of atonal dissonance on their *Playing the Role of Your Butler* release was both controversial and inspirational. It was also very reminiscent of the music of Reginald Von Happenstein. I’m sure they found some influence in him as well.”

“Um, thanks for dinner,” was the only response as the guest rose to leave. He didn’t expect the casual conversation to turn into a lecture on musical styles of the ‘90s, and figured a quick exit was the only way to divorce himself from a topic that he found personally distasteful.

* * *

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A few days later, a news item ran on the TV:

A few of the hardcore fans of the '70s supergroup Golden Fingers have banded together to suggest, if not demand, that the group get back together. Calling themselves 'The December 3rd Coalition,' after the now-forgotten observance of I-Day, they've created the web site 'A Most Amazing Man' and have started an online petition to reunite the group. Many are saying that now is the time for what could be an historic return to the heavy days of the 1970s. More on this story as it develops.

I logged into his computer and brought up the AltaVista search engine, looking for the “A Most Amazing Man” web site. The petition had already gathered over 100,000 signatures, and the site boasted that they expected to get over a million by year’s end.

I was not ready to step into the spotlight again, and the rest of the band had their own lives and interests to see to. As he continued to peruse the site, he noted that the primary author was someone named Roger Linder. Further AltaVista searches revealed very little about him, but the site offered an email address, so I decided to send him a message:

Roger,

While I am honored and a little surprised to see such a renewed and fervent interest in reviving the seventies popularity of my former band, I must admit that this is no longer a passion of mine, and I don’t wish to influence any further speculation as to the success of your campaign.

* * *

I do believe, however, that I have a unique story to be told, and if you're interested, perhaps we can work on some sort of collaboration in the future.

--

I Mall, Golden Fingers founder
IMall@OnlyGoldenFingers.com

He hit "Send" and was surprised when a responding email came back within a few minutes.

Mr. Mall,

How excited I was to receive a message from you! I briefly considered it to be a hoax, but am certain that your message was the real thing.

It is I who is honored to be able to rally Golden Fingers fans around the world in support of of a reunion, but it appears that my zeal may go unrewarded at the present time.

I am, however, very interested in a possible collaboration on some biographical material. Fans, and I definitely include myself in perhaps the number one position, have been clamoring to get some insight into your life, especially in the period after your "disappearance" if I might be so bold as to call it that. In the years from 1978 to 1983 there are virtually no references to your whereabouts, your hobbies, passions, whatever it was that kept you busy until your all too brief

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reappearance in 1984.

Feel free to continue this conversation, and if I may be so bold to suggest, I'd like to get a chance to meet and work with you in person. I'd like to document this process on the "A Most Amazing Man" web site, and I'm sure that fans the world over will flock to the site to read your continuing story.

--

The number one Golden Fingers fan better known as
Roger Linder
roger@rocmabra.com

Second thoughts began to surface, as he considered the possibilities of some deranged fan, possibly dangerous, getting too close and endangering the well being of his own person, or that of Angela or the children, whom he had kept from the limelight for many years. He brought her into the conversation.

"I'm not sure what I've just gotten myself into," he told her. "Read this." She showed her the email.

Her eyes widened at the mention of a personal meeting. Their life over the past twenty years had been one of mostly solitude, and inviting the frenzy of former fans into their home was a sobering thought. "You know, 'fan' is short for 'fanatic' and I'm not just a little bit concerned in what this could turn into. What do you know about this 'Roger Linder' fellow?"

* * *

“I tried to search for information on him, but there isn’t much to be found. I suspect that he really is just a fan, perhaps a little over the top, but that his intentions are fully honorable. The web site that he runs has actually been around for a few years, and he doesn’t appear to be hiding any sinister purpose in it. He even has open forums for other fans to discuss their devotion to the band, despite that there is little chance that it will once again be a going concern.”

I collected his thoughts for a few seconds, then declared “I’m going to go for it. Maybe this is the chance for collaboration that I was looking for back in 1986. After all, ‘you get what you give,’ isn’t that a philosophy that you’ve espoused in recent times? If I give my fans what they want to hear, maybe I’ll get a little closure to the Golden Fingers saga. It will be a fine way to end the millennium.”

I turned once again to his computer, and composed another email:

Roger,

I’ve given the matter some thought, and in consultation with my wife Angela, we’ve decided to arrange for a meeting, and fill you in on these “missing years” that you’re so curious about. I’m not certain that our simple lives will be of great interest, but perhaps there is more to discover that even I suspect.

We will welcome you to the “Mall Hall” in a few days. Please get back to me with your telephone number, and

we'll come to a mutually-agreed date and time to begin our adventure.

--

I Mall, Golden Fingers Founder and future
Biographical Collaborator

IMall@OnlyGoldenFingers.com

With only a slight hesitation, he hit "Send" once again.

1978 - TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

“1978 began several years of exploration for us,” I told Roger. “Our whirlwind romance and subsequent marriage left our own heads reeling, and the success of the World Reform campaign drove us to seek out a much quieter existence. It was Too Much, Too Little, Too Late: too much to do, too little time to do it, and we decided to drop out of sight before it was too late.”

After the success of the World Reform movement, I and Angela tried to settle into a newlywed pattern. They enjoyed nice quiet dinners at home and took in an occasional movie. The problem was that I was too recognizable, and fans would constantly interrupt a tender moment asking for autographs or, perhaps thinking they were the Next Big Thing, provide a cassette of their musical output, hoping that I’s influence in the industry might finally catapult them into the superstardom they thought they most richly deserved. Every once in a great while, a real talent would come along, someone like

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Reginald Von Happenstein. Reginald had built up a loyal local fan base and recorded a solo demo that he was shopping around. He happened upon I and Angela at a restaurant and introduced himself, making sure to be courteous and not interrupt a tender moment. Despite his efforts, the initial meeting did not go well.

“Happenstance?”

“No, sir, it’s Happenstein. Von Happenstein, to be exact.”

“I know what you said, and I know what I meant. I meant, did you just come here by happenstance, or have you been stalking me?”

Sir! No, sir! I was eating my dinner when you came in, and I waited until an appropriate time before I interrupted your night out.

It’s demeanor softened and he sensed the genuine concern for privacy from the slightly younger man.

“So, what can I do for you? You must know that I no longer sign autographs. I will, though, allow a picture.”

“That’s very gracious of you, sir, but what I’d really like is for you is to take this recording of some of my music and listen to it at your leisure. And if you’re so inclined, perhaps give me your opinion.”

“And why do you think that I, a member of the greatest group ever known and a now retired musician, would have any interest in doing that? Do you know how many requests I get in just one week for this very same thing? Hundreds, I tell you. Tapes come in from all over the world, and there’s not enough time in the day to even consider a fraction of them. What makes yours any different?”

“I suppose that there isn’t any particular reason why

you would consider mine over any other. I was just hoping you might consider it.”

“So, how would you characterize your music? More disco? What makes it interesting?”

“To tell you the truth, I do have quite a local following here in town. My music is a bit eclectic, and can’t really be pinned down into a particular genre. But folks tell me they like it.”

“Well,” I paused in thought. “You’re persistent, and seem to be sincere, so I’ll take a listen. No guarantees, and there’s a good chance our paths won’t even cross again.”

Reginald thanked I, and went on his way.

Angela noted, “You seemed a little harsh with him, I. Remember, the fans made you who you are, and without them, you may have been nobody. It could even be possible that Reginald here might really have something to offer, so give him more than just a passing chance. Maybe there is something unique there.”

I slipped the cassette into his jacket pocket, and promptly forgot about it.

Several months later, Angela and I were walking downtown, when I spotted a poster advertising a concert by Reginald Von Happenstein at a local club. Intrigued, he noted the date and time, and decided that he might just check out this potential new talent. He also recalled that he had never even given the promised listen to the cassette that Reginald had presented him. Upon returning home, he sought it out, finding it still in the pocket of his jacket. He put it into the tape player.

The sounds that came out were mesmerizing, mystical, and magical. I had rarely experienced anything like this,

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including his own material. It evoked deep happiness, followed by deep sorrow, utter joy, complete terror. Never had music brought such vivid emotions. It was too much, and he had to stop the player to bring him back to earth for just a bit. He sat in silence, contemplating the sounds he had just heard, wondering how it was even humanly possible to create such a work. He turned the tape back on, but too little time had passed. He couldn't handle the intensity of what he was hearing. He waited a full hour before resuming. Then, steeling himself, listened to the remainder through the final, critical moments. Stunned, openly weeping, he realized that his delay may have jeopardized any possibility of working with this extraordinary talent. Was it too late?

When the date of Reginald's concert came, I was there, seated next to the stage, to hear the live renditions of songs that, through repeated listening, had already burned themselves into his mind. The same raw emotions welled up in him as upon the first listen, and at the break, he approached Reginald.

"Sir, if I may so bold as to address you that way, your music has touched me as no other in recent memory. I'm not sure what I can do for you, because it's already perfect in every way."

Reginald was stunned at I's reaction. He knew that his offerings were unique, and though the local fans had expressed interest, no one had even approached the level of interest that I had expressed.

"How can you play this music without completely breaking down yourself?" I asked. "It takes me every effort I can make just to get through the recording in a single session. Where will you take it next?"

“I play it here for just a percentage of the door. There’s very little available for me to do anything at all with it besides bringing it to the local devotees. They are few, but fervent fans. But I can barely imagine taking it to a larger audience. It touches some, but I don’t know if it has wide appeal.”

“I will make it my mission to get this out there,” I offered. “I still have a number of contacts in the industry, and this deserves exposure. Let me see what I can do.”

I began visiting his former producers, label executives, even his friend and former manager Rod Manger. To his utter dismay, little interest was found among the collective group, and I could not convince anyone that this talent was one to be explored.

“There’s too much dissonance in the music and too little melody,” Rod remarked. “I just don’t hear any potential in it. It’s never too late to find some other protege, because I don’t think Reginald Von Happenstein is happensteining.” He chuckled a little at the even littler joke.

I was persistent in his search for support, but none was coming from any avenue. Doggedly, he pursued all leads and was about to give up when he visited a small label called Eclectic Fry Records. Max Fry, the label’s owner and chief producer, dealt exclusively in records that defied the mainstream, and Reginald’s music had a similar affect on Max as it had had on I.

“Sales on my label are small, but the taste of the music buyers is impeccable,” Max stated. “While Reginald will likely never be a superstar, I think I can guarantee a significant return from the fiercely loyal aficionados. The

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key is a wide distribution to the markets where his type of music will really be appreciated. That's our expertise here at Eclectic Fry, and it would boost sales even more with your endorsement. That could potentially increase the audience by association to your own set of fans."

I weighed the options. On one hand, he believed in Reginald, and wanted to see him succeed. On the other, he did not want to get dragged back into the music business again. He was retired, and living comfortably enough. It was a dilemma, but his support and respect for Reginald led him to lend his full support and name to the project. Max worked up the contract, and I presented it to the Reginald that evening.

Reginald was overwhelmed at the prospect. "I can't believe that our chance meeting at that restaurant would have resulted in something this big in my life. I believed in myself, even when few others did. But you did, too, and you have proven yourself once again as a valuable friend, too much for me to even contemplate. Anything I do for you in return would prove to be too little, and now it's too late to get this contract back to Max Fry this evening, but first thing tomorrow, this new adventure begins!"

Reginald's demo tape was rough, by commercial recording standards, but it laid the groundwork for setting up his first professional recording session at Eclectic Fry Records. Max had outfitted the studio with as many of the instruments that he could identify in the recording. There were three synthesizers, an electric guitar, two twelve strings guitars, one electric and one acoustic, a hammond organ, complete with Leslie speakers, a full drum kit and enough percussion instruments to keep an entire

elementary classroom enchanted during their music lessons. But the coup d'état was the arrival of I's original bass guitar, supplied by I himself.

"That instrument has more stories than you would care to hear," remarked I to Reginald. "And some of them are better off unheard." He silently reflected for a few moments. "But it's yours to play and use as you see fit."

Reginald lifted up the revered instrument and placed the strap behind his neck. The history that the instrument carried seemed to give it more weight than its size would betray, yet it was only an illusion. When he picked the first few notes, the golden sound was released, and notes could be nearly seen floating in the air before them. I recognized the strains for "Ethereal Rafting Upon the Solar Sphere," one of his favorites from Reginald's demo, and he urged Max to begin recording right away. There was magic happening right before them, and everything had to be captured. By the time the first bass track for the six minute piece had been captured in full, Reginald, I and Max all were all drenched in sweat, an involuntary reaction to the energy being released by just that single instrument.

Building upon that initial take, a drum track was added. The complex rhythms were like no other, combining efforts that Starr, Moon, Watts and even Jones could only have hoped to discover in their careers. When the guitars were plugged in, and the effects adjusted, the energy and complexity of the piece only increased exponentially. Reginald finished the final solo and collapsed to his knees, spent from the exertion. Max and I sat in silence, mouths agape, as they tried to comprehend the experience they had just witnessed.

Gaining back a portion of their senses, I rushed into the

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recording booth and assisted Reginald back to his feet. Dazed, Reginald accepted the guidance to a chair, and sipped upon a glass of water brought in by Max.

“Are you OK? Can you continue?” asked Max.

Reginald took a bigger gulp, and savored the refreshment. “I’ll be fine. I’m not sure what came over me. When I recorded the demos, and even in my live performances, this has never happened, but I don’t think that I’ve ever created such a performance as this before, either. There is truly magic in these walls, because I don’t think it all came from me.”

“We need to take a break, because I don’t think you can continue today. I know I can’t,” Max indicated. “Let’s take it up again tomorrow.”

The next day, everyone was refreshed and they continued with the interrupted sessions from the day before. Reginald added the synths and some percussion, and although the final product was exquisite, the experience of the previous day was not duplicated.

“I’m not sure whether to be disappointed or relieved,” I quipped. “I supposed relief in getting through the session is the most welcome. I’m not sure I could bear the constant affront of raw emotions for too long a time.”

The sessions continued throughout the week, and while none of them hit the intensity of that initial day, there were moments throughout that recalled the feelings each had experienced. In some cases, the individual tracks were laid down to no apparent physical effect, but it was the overall combination of tracks after being mixed that proved that the whole was so much better than the individual parts. In some cases, Max’s own direction

added a new element that did not appear in the original demos. Such was the case with the session for “Plaintive Meanderings.”

Max suggested that I and Reginald perform together, rather than record separate tracks, and went further to explain that I’s presence on the recording would add an additional note of legitimacy to the entire project. Reginald and I agreed.

Reginald sat down at one of the synths, and started developing an atmospheric layer. I joined in with the bass, playing in the upper register of the instrument. Max adjusted the filters, until the bass itself was barely recognizable and Reginald’s synth lines seemed to come out of every corner of the room. They could not be directly located, no matter what vantage point was taken. It was a totally immersive experience, and the two musicians began feeding off of each other. I’s own fingers played over the fretboard without effort, in a manner he had never before done, and Reginald began inserting colors, that although only visible in the mind, were so realistic that one would swear afterwards they they had made an actual visual appearance. When Max began feeding the earlier part of the session directly into the live mix, it created a unique whole that brought both musicians to tears. By the time it was all over, twenty-seven minutes and thirty-four seconds of “meanderings” had been recorded. The track became the whole of side two of Reginald’s first studio release.

Despite I’s support, mentoring and direct involvement in the whole process, the resulting record “Reflections on the Meaning of Space and Time” did not sell well, and failed to make the charts. But I knew that given time, it

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would be discovered someday, and that the world would know that the musician Reginald Von Happenstein was a force that could not be ignored. Reginald continued for years with his small cult following, but did not find the mainstream success that his talent certainly deserved.

1979 - BAD GIRLS

Marilynn Spencer and Marie Jordon had called themselves the “M” girls in the Golden Fingers fan club, which they themselves had organized in 1974. They had met at a Golden Fingers concert in 1973 and became fast friends during the band’s heyday. They also had been befriended by Angela and I, even to the extent that they were invited to be bridesmaids at the wedding. Within the fan club, they answered correspondence, spoke with fans on the telephone and together published a fan newsletter, which they called *True Gold*. Despite the band’s breakup, they continued to follow the solo careers of the four members, and even delved into reporting side interests and activities. While never a great money-making effort, newsletter subscriptions and fan club dues were enough to keep the correspondence flowing and pay postage and long-distance charges.

Outside the circle of “true fans” their past activities had been considered by many to be bordering on “groupie” behavior. Whenever the band had been in town, they were invited backstage, and even partied with the band on more

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than one occasion. Their reputation began to be seen as “bad girls” and despite efforts to dissuade that opinion, the label stuck. While enamored with each of the individual members of Golden Fingers, they had been particularly attracted to I. Though really no more than a teenage crush, the music press did little to portray the relationships as they really were, and constantly described them in the most salacious terms.

By 1975, I and the band had distanced themselves from the “M” girls and their efforts, but non-plussed, the girls continued to keep up correspondence with fans, and their reporting and story ideas never really wavered from the positive portrayals of the band, and exhibited true devotion to the band’s ideals.

Because of their continued devotion, I and Angela reestablished the relationship in 1976, and found the two to be as genuine as they appeared. Angela’s initial hesitation and concern moved easily into trust and friendship. The three friends would get together for shopping excursions and other girl’s-day-out activities, and Angela would be their confidante and advisor whenever a question came up that they couldn’t answer.

But by late 1978, in an effort to regain the long-sought privacy that had evaded I and Angela for the past couple of years, the relationship began to move more into the background, and fewer and fewer face-to-face encounters happened. Without Angela’s mutual friendship, Marie and Marilyn’s relationship also began to erode, especially after Marie began dating Jordan Spencer, another fan that had been active in the Golden Fingers scene. Though they shared the same last name, Jordan was not related to Marilyn, and the similarity of the combined names to

their own was initially a point for great amusement.

But as Jordan and Marie's relationship began to blossom, Marilynn felt excluded, and she secretly plotted to interfere and if possible, destroy the couple's happiness. It began seemingly innocent enough, with Marilynn flirting with Jordan, even suggesting that they hang out on some evenings when Marie was otherwise engaged in other activities.

Their infrequent meetings, however, began to establish a basis for increasing the relationship, and before long, the two Spencers were the couple and Marie was on the outs. As word got out about the new couple, Marie began spreading rumors that Marilynn and Jordan were in fact cousins, and that their continued dalliance was incestuous and demeaning.

The final straw was Marie's revelation and public accusation in the pages of *True Gold*, which escalated to the point of a split publication, and a new newsletter, *Golden Tales*, being established under Marilynn's sole editorship. The now public exchange of accusations split the fans, and reestablished the "bad girls" moniker that the two had earlier unjustly earned.

By the middle of 1979, the exchange had become so ugly that Angela felt she had to step in. Not only was the reputation of the two former friends sullied, but the gossip and hearsay was now being directed at members of the band, and imagined relationships that may or may not have occurred was even putting a strain on Angela and I's own marriage.

"We have to do something about this feud between the 'M' girls," she mentioned to I, as she perused the latest copy of *True Gold*. "Not only is it splitting the fan base, but

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the rumors are now starting that I was the spoiler in the affair that you and Marie supposedly had in 1975. She was only 16, then! What did happen?"

"You know there was nothing going on between Marie and me, or Marilyn either for that matter. Sure, they liked to flirt, and maybe liked to brag to their other friends about their time with the band, but believe me, nothing happened."

"But public perception can become the truth in matters like this. What if this whole thing backfires, and we are dragged into it against our better judgement? We need to take charge of this, and get the truth back on the right track."

I consulted with Rod Manger, asking for him to seek out some legal advice. If there were accusations of a sexual relationship with an underage girl, that could only mean trouble, and I was very intent on distancing himself from any such accusations.

"You've always had my back, Rod, and I have got to find a way out of this mess that we are finding ourselves in."

Rod began to look a little uncomfortable, sweat forming on his brow, and his face reddening.

"What is it, Rod? What is going on?"

Rod looked to the floor, as if to find support there, and after a few moments of reflection, looked up to meet I's gaze. "Remember that night in 1975 when the girls surprised us on the road in Omaha? We got snowed in, and we had to spend an extra day."

"Yeah, I remember," I remembered.

"Well, Marie and I sort of hooked up that night. It

began innocently enough, but soon enough the liquor started flowing, and before we knew it, we were sharing a bed at the hotel. A one night stand, but a night that has haunted me ever since. You see, she got pregnant, and I didn't find about it until we returned from the tour a couple months later."

"Pregnant? We saw her often during those times, and I don't remember anything about that!"

"When she confronted me, I knew that there was no easy way out. There could be no public revelation, or I would be facing jail time. She didn't tell her parents, but began to suspect after getting sick, and started to put on some weight. After a visit to the free clinic, the truth was revealed."

Rod once again returned his eyes to the floor, as if trying to read from there what to say next. I's own eyes remained fixed upon him, waiting for more of the truth to be revealed. Rod moved to the window, looking out, gathering his next thoughts and facing the revelation he was about to admit.

"We terminated the pregnancy, and never told anyone."

I stood there, unable to comprehend this new revelation. First, a statutory rape, then an abortion. It was too much for him to take on at the moment, and he left Rod standing there in silence.

When upon relating the newly uncovered facts to Angela, she indicated "We can't just sit on this. If it ever comes out that we knew about it, or even if anyone suspects we knew about it, and thinks we tried to cover it up, it could go very badly."

"Rod has been one of my closest friends, and he made

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a mistake, a very bad mistake. He needs to come clean himself, and we need to be there to support him. And Marie has also suffered silently all these years. She needs to find closure, and the recent events cannot be helping the matter at all.”

Marie and Marilyn's continued elevation of words and accusations caused the mainstream music press to take up the story on a national and even international level. Headlines such as “Bad Girls even Badder” and “I was I's Love Child” only spurred additional rumors that were ever increasing about additional liaisons within the band. Just as public discussion quelled the rumors of the 17-year-old love child just on the basis of their relative ages (I would have only been nine years old when she was born), one woman even purported that her three year old adopted infant was the love child of I, the result of his supposed illicit affair with Marie. While that was also easily debunked, it did cause wonderment among fans about any possible truth behind any of these stories. The truth must be in there somewhere, and had to be exposed.

Angela and I couldn't even leave their home without being accosted by reporters, photographers and outraged fans who felt that they had been betrayed by their idol. Daily, outside the gates of their private residence, the crowds would gather, some accusing, some continuing to worship and revere and offering support, some there just out of curiosity at the continued spectacle.

It came to a head when one deranged fan outmaneuvered the security constraints that had been in place, and found his way into the private residence. Police were called, and the situation quickly defused, but the encounter had rattled I to the extent that he felt that the

truth of the matter really did need to be revealed. He contacted Rod, and insisted that he come clean, if only to clear his conscience, but also to counter all of the negative publicity that was now occurring.

Local TV, newspapers and radio were contacted for an impromptu press conference, and when the parties we gathered, I stepped forward to address the waiting crowd.

“While we are sickened by the amount of misinformation being distributed by rumor mongers and even to be found in the legitimate press, we feel that it is only appropriate to address these issues in this very public manner. I would like to bring to the microphone my personal friend and former manager, Rod Manger, to address you.”

Rod approached the microphones, but tried to avoid directly looking at the cameras. He read his previously prepared admission: “In 1975, during a brief affair with one of our fans, I was responsible for causing her pregnancy, and actively sought out and supported the termination of that pregnancy at eight weeks. Because she was a minor at the time, I did not come forward, for fear of the legal consequences, but am now making full admission of my guilt in the initial act, and in failing to reveal it in the subsequent years. I publicly apologize for my actions, and will immediately turn myself over to the authorities to face any charges.”

Rod turned away from the mikes and cameras as the inevitable questions began to surface. “Who was it?” “Were there others?” “Who knew?” “Why now?”

Rod simply left the area and waited for law enforcement to come to arrest him.

* * *

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Rod's trial was set, but because the victim had been a minor, Marie's name was not publicly revealed. Despite the arrest, it did nothing to quell the continued rumors about I and Marie. If anything, Rod's affair only strengthened the opinion that there were more revelations to come, that the unknown stories were even more insidious and demeaning to female members of the fan base. Significant drug use, binge drinking, prostitution and forced sexual activities with female and male fans, even reports of involvement with organized crime were all ideas that were bandied about. The seemingly pale reality of Isaac's minor drug use was elevated into a serious addiction, and rumors of his period of absence with the band was due to a drug rehabilitation program. Everything was getting out of hand.

Angela and I were at wit's end, and Angela accused I of not doing enough to distance himself from the situation. Feeling helpless and without any direction to turn, she had to make a change, to get away from the bad publicity, the daily hounding, the ever-present questioning. Her decision to separate and move back in with her parents came as a shock to I, who felt that they could weather this situation, and thought he saw an end in sight. But she was steadfast in her determination, packed a few belongings and arranged for a private exit to not add any more fuel for the fire. When she arrived at the Jones' home, she found a level of calm that had been absent for several weeks, and her mother and father took her in.

"Are the stories true? Her mother, Annette, asked. "Was I really involved in all of that? Is he still involved?"

"Mother, you know that isn't true. I is, and has always been faithful to me, and he is not involved in any way with

any of the activities that they are saying. Spike, Ozzie and Isaac are also far removed from any of the rumors, though they certainly are under the same suspicion and speculation. It just seems that one cannot be in the public eye and not have dirt dished onto them, despite their innocence.”

Buddy chimed in, “I’ve know I since he was a little child, and despite his reputation as a bad boy during the Golden Fingers days, I personally know that he was never involved in any of those activities. In fact, there were a number of times when his father and I were together with him at the very time that he is accused of such heinous acts. Maybe it would help if we came forward in his defense.”

“I wouldn’t want to drag you into this. You don’t know the kind of scrutiny and negative publicity you would have to endure. That’s why I had to get out from under it, for a bit of respite. I desperately love I, and already am missing him. Coming here was a quick reaction, but I don’t think it’s going to solve any problems in the long run, and a separation is going to only fuel speculation that something bad really is afoot.”

Angela paused, and wiped a tear from her eye. “I have to be strong, and I have to be at I’s side. Thinking that coming here would ease the situation was a mistake, and I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

“Dear, you know it’s no trouble,” Annette consoled, “and you and I are always welcome, no matter what the situation. Do what you think is best. You have our full support.”

Angela hugged her parents, and returning to her own home, hugged I and apologized for her rash actions. “We

are in this together, and whether it gets worse or better, we will continue to be in it together.”

1980 - (JUST LIKE) STARTING OVER

Rod's trial had begun, and it appeared to be an open and shut case. Since he had made a full confession, it basically became a matter of formally proving the charges, and then awaiting whatever sentence was to be carried out.

Through the elevating war of words between Marie and Marilynn, Jordan Spencer remained relatively obscure. While he was still with Marilynn, her continued behavior and public demeanor had put a real strain on their relationship. And, just under the surface, he realized that he still had feelings for Marie as well, and was torn by the situation between the former friends. When he visited Marie, the old feelings came to the surface, and he admitted them to her.

"I hate to see what's become of you and Marilynn. What should have been a solid friendship between the three of us got out of hand and it feels like we can never return to a normal state of things as they were."

Marie agreed, "Now that Rod Manger's trial is under way, I hope that the publicity and anger can be redirected. I really am sorry for what has happened, I miss my

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friendship with Marilyn, and regret what this has caused. Golden Fingers' name as a band and as a collection of individuals has been sullied. Fans have lost faith in the band, and *True Gold* and *Golden Tales* have both just degenerated into gossip magazines, with very little truth to either. Subscriptions have fallen off to less than ten percent of what they used to be, and financially, there's little chance they will continue beyond another issue, if even that."

Marie hesitated and collected her thoughts. "I haven't been exactly straight with Marilyn or you, or anyone else for that matter. The teenage fan that Rod was involved with was me. I wasn't in control, I'd been drinking, and we ended up together in Omaha. I got pregnant, and kept it hidden from everyone until I revealed it to Rod. Together, we made the decision to end it, and he helped out financially. I've always regretted it, and don't know what I would have done if I had decided to keep the baby. The abortion was anonymous, and as far as I know, only Rod was ever aware of it."

Jordan whitened with shock, then reddened with rage. He did this to you? He raped you, and left you on your own?"

"No, it wasn't like that. Yes, I wasn't in full control, but I remember everything, and don't regret the affair. It was a mistake, and perhaps we should have taken better precautions. It really was just a one night stand. There was never any desire to continue."

"But he was an adult, and you were just an innocent teenager! He must pay for what he did!"

"He is paying; he's on trial. Justice will be served."

"But there's no amount of justice that will erase the

hurt you've suffered. The pain you've endured."

"No one knows my pain but myself. I've accepted my part of the blame, and Rod has apparently accepted his. There's nothing further to be done."

"It's unacceptable, I tell you! Sure, he'll get his fair trial, and maybe a slap on the wrist. If any time is served, it will be short, and then he'll be back on the street to take advantage of yet another young girl. It's always the same with those types, there's never any rehabilitation."

"Rod is a good guy, don't paint him as a criminal. He's remorseful, and has publicly stated so. He's protected my identity, and I appreciate that."

Jordan's rage was only fueled higher by Marie's seeming submission. "I will see to it that it never happens again," he stated defiantly as he stormed away.

As the sentencing phase of Rod's trial was proceeding, Jordan was in the gallery, waiting for the inevitable moment of a lenient sentence. When the judge pronounced "Five years, with time served." Jordan knew that he would be out in less than two. Rarely did they keep a prisoner for the full term. He stood and shouted "No!" and pulled the gun that he had secretly brought into the courtroom, and fired a single shot, piercing Rod's head and striking a bailiff as well. Another officer of the court advanced on Jordan, but he turned the gun on himself and fell dead before he could be restrained. The trial was over, but the headlines were only beginning.

"*Murder/Suicide in Teenage Rape Case*" the headlines read, and detailed the full story. Local news began looking into the background of the gunman, and it inevitably led back

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to Marilyn and Marie. Marilyn was inconsolable and could think of no reason why Jordan would perform such a rash action. Marie was also questioned, and under the stress of the situation, admitted her own involvement in the weird triangle that had developed. There was no sense in hiding the truth, knowing that the truth would reveal itself eventually. While the headlines grabbed the day, it did serve to ease the tension as Marie and Marilyn decided to talk things through, and began to patch up their relationship. They joined together to create one final, apologetic issue of *True Gold*, and mailed it to the full, former subscription base. In it, they exonerated all of Golden Fingers, and apologized for the division that their very public quarrel had engendered.

Angela and I were deeply affected by Rod's death, but also secretly relieved that the whole sordid affair was coming to an end. "We need to get out of the spotlight, and try to rebuild the quiet life that we had before this all came to pass," Angela advised.

"I was thinking the same thing," indicated I. "But how do public figures such as we've become ever escape? Witness Protection Program?"

"I don't think it works that way" offered Angela. "The Government is not going to help us disappear."

"But we can disappear, if we want to. We can just go incognito and relocate for a while. Let's put this place on the market, and see what we can do."

They contacted an agent, and before long, their home for the past few years was up for sale.

"I think we can just let the market take its course, and we can find ourselves elsewhere. I've always wanted to

spend some time in Australia. I think we can disappear there for a while. It will be just like starting over.”

Simon Elderjohn, a British expatriate, had been the European publicity manager for *Golden Fingers* and now lived in Sydney. When I contacted him and explained the current situation, Simon indicated that he, like many others, had been following it in the press, and wasn't surprised that they wanted to keep a lower profile. He suggested a temporary name change, purchase of a small property and arranged for private transportation in relocating. The Malls decided that the smaller suburb of Rockdale was not only appropriate, but close enough to the larger city to be convenient. They chose the pseudonyms of Arthur and Hilda Potsworth, and registered for official documents under that name. They acquired a flat as a temporary space while they sought out property to build a new home.

Angela had never been out of the United States, so a Southern Hemisphere adventure was an overwhelming delight. While their new home was being built, they traveled to many exotic locales within the island continent. While the climate was similar to their native California, the opposite seasons and odd juxtaposition of traditional American holidays was a common source of confusion.

The initial shock of the Winter season beginning when summer was expected took its toll on the couple. As snow covered the ground in some areas from the middle of May and extended into September, they longed for time spent at the seaside. They were beside themselves on how to behave. Traditional cold-weather activities, typically tied into the November-December holiday season, had no

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place in the May-June calendar. They missed the traditional Memorial Day barbecues and though they knew to expect it, when the 4th of July came and went without any hint of celebration or fireworks, the idea began to sink in that things were going to be very different here. Of course, as holidays unique to America, they had no place in Australian culture. Still, they missed the traditional summer celebrations. Although Labour Day was celebrated in October, none of the familiar trappings of family barbecues and swim parties to close out the summer season were present. It was nice, at least for them, to see that the Spring season was coming in, and the weather improving.

The next confusing event occurred for Halloween. The celebration of Halloween in Australia was not particularly widespread, both because it was considered an American tradition, and the traditional Autumn trappings were non-existent. Nowhere to be found were jack o' lanterns, scarecrows and other devices that reflected the ancient Celtic origins of the celebration. Not exactly knowing what to expect, they bought candy for Trick or Treaters, but as the evening wore on, none were to be found. I, who had always enjoyed Halloween as a child, and was continuing to appreciate it as an adult, was particularly disappointed.

Dressed in his now-traditional Hobo costume, he complained "These Australians do not know how to have fun. Were we back in California, we would have been invited to no fewer than twenty celebrations. Of course, we would have turned them all down, but it was always nice to be considered. Here, zilch!"

Angela offered, "It looks like there is something coming

up in Adelaide in a week, a Christmas Pageant. We can fly there in a few hours, or maybe drive there in about three days. Could be interesting.”

“Road trip!” I enthused.

Angela and I packed up their rented Datsun 280ZX. I had always wanted a sports car, and admired the Datsun’s sporty accoutrements, and despite the limited passenger space, it was plenty for just the two of them. Time wasn’t an issue for them, but the pageant was scheduled to take place on Saturday, November 8, so little time could be wasted. Setting out on the road on Tuesday the 4th, their first day’s destination was Canberra, slightly off the direct route, but only a three hour drive. I couldn’t help but break out in song, “Lord I was born a Ramblin’ Man. Rolling down Highway 31.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be “Highway 41?” Angela asked.

“Look at the sign,” as they passed the highway sign indicating Federal Highway 31. “When in Australia, as they say.”

“They never say that, I don’t think,” was Angela’s only reply.

They were passing Lake George, and I seemed deep in thought. He pondered the days on the road. “We never came through this way when we were on tour, but I’ll bet this would have been a great place for an outdoor show. The season is great and it would have been close enough for some pretty good crowds to gather. I’ll bet Dylan even gave it some thought. He once again began to sing: ‘I think it can be very easily done. We’ll just put some bleachers out in the sun. And have it on Highway 31.’” He chuckled and indicated, “I can probably joke about

this all day.”

Angela only replied, “I wish you wouldn’t. Besides, we left Highway 31 behind some time ago.”

They arrived in Canberra in mid-afternoon and sought out a hotel to stay for the night. They found an older building that seemed to offer some elegant splendor and checked in for the night. “Arthur and Hilda Potsworth,” I indicated, offering their credentials. “Just one night. We’re taking a leisurely drive to Adelaide for the Pageant.”

The desk clerk eyed I with a hint of suspicion. “Arthur Potsworth, hmm?”

“Yes, that’s right,” indicating his ID papers, “and Hilda,” indicating Angela.

“OK, sir, if you wish. Your room is on the 14th floor, number 1459. The bellhop will assist you with your bags.”

“There’s no need, we only have the one. Thank you.”

As they left for the elevator, I could hear the desk clerk humming “Music Will Be My Life.”

After settling in, they decided to seek out dinner, and descended the elevator to the lobby. When the door opened, they noticed that a large crowd had gathered.

“There he is!” “Golden Fingers *are* heavy, man!” “Sing a song!” were only a few of the shouts coming from the throng of fans that had gathered.

I looked over to the hotel desk and gave the clerk the evil eye, but conceded to the crowd and spent the next two hours signing autographs and having his picture taken.

“Ok, folks, thanks, but we’ve really got to get going. We’re very hungry, and it’s getting late.” The sun was

beginning to set, and even in the capital city, some places were shut down early during the mid-week. Hotel security assisted in getting them outside without a lot of interruption, though a few fans tried to break through the minimal security constraints, the Malls were more or less able to enjoy some private moments.

“Looks like we will have to start over once again. I guess there just isn’t much anywhere that we can hide, at least not if people are going to recognize us,” I observed.

“Maybe we can change our appearance,” Angela mentioned. “Shorter hair, different color. Maybe you can grow a beard. What about glasses?”

“I can barely grow a beard in a month, and am certainly not going to get one in a day. I can get my hair cut, though.” I still wore the long hairstyle that he sported during Golden Fingers and his solo career.

Grabbing a quick sandwich, the only fare that seemed to be available at this late hour, they made their way back to the hotel and slipped into bed for the night.

Arising early, they sought out the bell captain and indicated the need for a haircut and Angela’s hair to be colored. The hotel had a salon, and they were ushered in through the private entrance.

Minutes later, I was a transformed man, barely recognizable as the rock star he had been. Angela’s transformation took longer, but her new look was also a stunning change from before.

Donning a more conservative suit and tie, he tested the recognition factor by taking a quick stroll in the surrounding the hotel grounds. Few even looked up to him, as he tended to blend into the crowds along with

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others in the Government District, looking like another businessman or government official.

“This could work,” he told Angela as he returned to the salon. “No one even gave me a second look. It *will* be just like starting over.”

They hit the road again, this time heading south, taking the scenic route to Melbourne. Before long, the city gave way to open road, kilometers (they had to go native, since the signs were all in metric) without even seeing another vehicle. It reminded them of the rural areas in their native California. By the time they reached Lind National Park, nearly four hours had passed, but it seemed like little time at all, as they enjoyed the simple but beautiful splendor that the Australian countryside had to offer.

After taking a quick tour on the Euchre Valley Nature Drive, they continued another half hour west of the park to the small town of Orbost and stayed in the Commonwealth Hotel. Despite their attempts to be incognito, and unknown to them, they were recognized. However, unlike the situation in Canberra, their attempts at privacy were honored, and the only evidence remaining of their stay was a sign that still may be there reading “I Mall slept here.”

Thursday morning had them on the road again towards Melbourne, and the trip was just 4 hours. Looking ahead, they realized they still had nearly a full day’s drive to get to Adelaide, if they wanted to see the Pageant, the main purpose of their trip. Bypassing the big city, they chose to continue on, and settled into The Ansonia in Ballarat.

After their stay in Ballarat, they hit the final day of the

road trip West and arrived in Adelaide late Friday afternoon. Preparations for the next day's event were well under way, and it was difficult finding lodging. They ended up in the basement apartment of a small hotel, not quite the accommodations they had experienced in Canberra, and lacking the quaint charm of the hotels in Orbost and Ballarat, but choices were limited. A light rain was falling and the local news expressed concern how it might affect the Pageant.

Saturday morning the rains cleared up, and the crowds gathered to see the Christmas Pageant, with Angela and I, as the "Potsworths", successfully remaining unrecognized. They had succeeded in starting over.

1981 - ARTHUR'S THEME

Angela and I were really beginning to settle into their new lives as “Arthur and Hilda Potsworth,” and were finally getting acclimated to the Australian culture. The small community of Rockdale had become their home, and their quest for anonymity seemed to have succeeded beyond their expectations. There had been a number of slips and close calls into revealing their actual identities, and together they decided to fully immerse themselves into the new environment as best as possible. To that end, they began to refer to themselves by their pseudonyms.

One might say that Arthur's theme was depicting that of a suave, distinguished and sophisticated gentleman, quite a contrary appearance to the I Mall rock god image. Arthur even had tinted his hair on the sides to present himself as someone approaching middle age as opposed to this true age of 27. Hilda had also taken to wearing heavy makeup to help in her disguise as well. She had attempted to color her hair blonde, but discovered that red appeared more natural. She adopted a different clothing style, more in line with the contemporary Australian culture, which,

while similar to American tastes, still had some distinct differences.

Their new home in Rockdale was nearing completion. While not ostentatious, it did not abandon comfort and convenience, but also exhibited its own sophisticated air. With just the two of them, the size was not excessive, but spacious at 300 square meters on a lot with plenty of room for landscaping and other benefits of their lifestyle. However, knowing that their time spent there was likely to be limited (they did miss their native California), they chose to keep things intentionally simple. They figured that someone would come along in the future to purchase it, and would appreciate that it was a fine estate in its own right.

“I believe that you should always strive to do the best that you can do, no matter what the circumstances,” Arthur would be known to say. “We will be here for a while, at least until things settle down back home, so we may as well be comfortable in the meantime.”

Hilda suggested a musical theme for many of the furnishing and decorations, and it became Arthur’s as well. One room was set aside specifically as the music room, and it was to be outfitted with several large speakers, a generous stereo system, and a large screen projection television, one of the largest available in its class at nearly one and a half meters.

“Why do you want a TV in the music room?” Hilda asked when Arthur first brought up the possibility.

“I think TV will continue to be a very important part of music, and by hooking it up to a nice sound system, we can truly enjoy it for our leisure time. We certainly will have plenty of it. Look what happening back in the US,

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and even what's happening closer in New Zealand. Music is really moving toward a more visual medium. Sure, we had a significant presence of live performances, but this new medium of short videos will be a big thing, I expect."

As moving day arrived, Arthur and Hilda stood outside the entrance to their new home. Unlocking the door, they were shocked to see how empty it all appeared. "I thought the movers would have been here by now. The plan was that everything would be in place when we arrived," Arthur complained.

As they stepped across the threshold, it was apparent that something was wrong. It wasn't as if their possessions hadn't arrived, but that they were missing. Only a few scraps of evidence suggested that something had been brought in, but that it had also been brought out.

"We've been robbed!" Hilda shrieked.

As Hilda ran frantically from room to room, Arthur maintained a calm demeanor. Finally, he could hold it in no longer, and restrained Hilda on her third pass through the room trying to find the missing items.

"Don't keep looking for something that's not going to be found," he advised. "The movers did come, and were instructed to remove it all again while some last minute improvements are being made."

"You didn't consult me on this?" she accused.

"No, because I wanted it to be a surprise," Arthur added in defense. "The stuff from the old flat is junk, bought without much thought to theme or appropriateness to these new surroundings. I'm treating you to a shopping spree!"

"Ooh, yay," Hilda offered without much enthusiasm. "I fully expected that we would be able to step right in and

settle in, and you're saying we need to go out and buy it now? Just what happened to our old stuff?"

"I had it brought back to the old place. While we are waiting to get everything in place here, we still need someplace to live. I know, I should have kept you informed. I guess I was just too excited to offer this additional adventure, and assumed you would be as happy as I imagined. I was wrong."

Hilda was hesitant to give in to Arthur, but she finally gave in and their shopping adventure was set to begin.

"Which room do we want to outfit first?" Arthur asked. "If I had my choice, I think we should start with the Music room. I've already laid out the specifics, so it's just a matter of just getting what we need. A huge stereo, the TV, big speakers. All with entertainment in mind. We might even think of it as our own personal theater!"

Arthur was obviously very excited about the prospect, so Hilda acquiesced and they started shopping for the desired components. By the time they had completed their shopping, a large truck was filled and on its way to the new home. It also included theater style seating, and even a popcorn machine, added for authenticity. Hilda drew the line when it came to adding a full snack bar with hot dog cookers and soda vending. "You can just go to the kitchen if you want anything like that."

"Speaking of the kitchen, let's do that next!" Arthur's enthusiasm failed to wane, even under Hilda's withering glare. "New range, oven, microwave, refrigerator, table, chairs, dishwasher, dishes, cups, food. We need it all!"

So they went to the appliance store and bought everything they needed, the best quality that they could

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find.

“No food, just yet, until the appliances are delivered and set up,” Hilda advised. “Otherwise everything is going to spoil.”

“Ok, then. The bedroom!”

So off they went to buy a bed frame, headboard, mattress and box spring, two dressers, a stand up wardrobe, area rugs and curtains for the windows. They even found a nice chandelier to add some elegance.

“We need a fireplace for those cold evenings.” So a portable unit was added.

“And how about a sound system to sleep by?”

It was purchased.

“And a bed for the dog.”

“We don’t have a dog!”

“Then a dog!”

“No dog.”

“Why not? I always wanted one when I was a kid, but never had one. My dad never got over the fact that he’d lost his best friend Greta, and we never had another.”

“No dog.”

“A cat?”

“Maybe a cat. But not in the bedroom.”

“OK, not in the bedroom. But maybe?”

“Maybe.”

A similar frenzy followed the furnishing of each room, and the process took nearly two weeks to complete. Before long, several dozen delivery trucks had come and gone, and the parade was continuous: furniture for the living room: sofas, end tables, coffee tables, lamps, draperies, carpeting, artwork, pottery, coffee table books. Then

followed the bathroom, little bureaux for storage, towels, and various other sundries. Tools for yard maintenance. Bookcases, books, record cases, records. Everything to make a living space a space for really living. The house was now finally ready to move into.

The refrigerator was packed, the pantry full, even an auxiliary pantry was well-stocked.

“Why do we need all this food?” Hilda asked. “There’s only two of us, and there’s enough here to feed an army.”

“Well, how about a party? Maybe a theme of excess? Roman Orgy, perhaps?”

“And what about our intent to keep a low profile? I don’t think so.”

Arthur looked down, despondently. “Just a little one?”

“Consider this,” Hilda replied. “We have kept to ourselves these past few months, and have done little to bring attention to us and our situation. We’ve not nurtured any relationships, and don’t have any close friends. Who are we going to invite? The store clerks and salesmen from the places we’ve shopped? The delivery drivers? Face it, I”, Angela accidentally slipped out of her new identity, “I mean, Arthur. It’s not going to happen.”

Arthur looked around quickly to see if anyone had caught her faux pas, and the reality of the situation is that there was no one about to catch it or care about it, reinforcing Hilda’s point.

“We need to get some friends, then,” Arthur declared. “It would be even more suspicious if we didn’t have any.”

Finding a balance in anonymity and trying to maintain a social life, meeting new people, making friends and getting invited to their homes, was not an easy prospect.

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On one hand, they had never been a particularly social couple, due to the desire for privacy following the extremely public former existence. On the other hand, they also missed that interaction.

“We may have to admit that our experiment in privacy and anonymity is not all we expected it to be,” Arthur admitted. “While it has allowed us to move about freely, there is still the need to keep others at a distance, lest they become too close and, putting the pieces of the familiarity puzzle together, discover our true identities. It may be time that we stepped back into who we really are, and destroy the charade.”

Hilda was hesitant. “But I’m enjoying the time we spend together, and don’t want to destroy that. Can’t there be a middle ground somewhere?”

“There is no middle ground, that’s the price of fame. We’ve lost our right to be ourselves and maintain any semblance of privacy. We have to pick one or the other.”

Hilda conceded, “Then keeping up the facade of these fake identities cannot be the choice. There is too much pressure to protect ourselves, and until we return to who we really are, there will be no true peace, no matter how hard we try. Look at us, and what we’ve become: living out our lives, always hiding who we are, trying to buy happiness, but never achieving it. It’s time to end it.”

“But how do we do that?”

“Why not go on that new program, *Sunday*, that is just starting up?” Hilda suggested. “They cover emerging topics, and it would likely be a coup for them to uncover our ‘conspiracy’.”

Arthur agreed and made a call to Simon Elderjohn, who was the only one who shared their secret. “Simon, it’s

Arthur Potsworth.” He paused. “Oh screw it,” he said exasperatingly. “It’s I Mall. We’ve decided to end our secret identities and come out publicly as new Australian residents I and Angela Mall. Can you help us get on *Sunday* to make our official announcement?”

Simon considered I’s proposal and countered “Are you sure you really want to do this? Everything you’ve worked for for the last year and a half would be wasted. You’d be mobbed and have to start being a public figure again.”

“Yes, we have discussed it extensively, and believe that the time is right for us to make this move. We plan to stay where we are for a while, but eventually, will go back to California. Besides, we don’t consider it a waste. We’ve had some wonderful times, we’ve seen a lot of the country, we have a great new home. But we miss the social interaction. Basically, we are tired of being destined to be loners.”

I and Angela Mall had their guest spot on *Sunday*, and the whole story came out. But contrary to their expectations of either accusations of betrayal, or being mobbed by adoring fans, the story raised no sense of sensation, and was only briefly reported in the local press. Golden Fingers mania had apparently subsided, at least in Australia, probably relegated to the back pages of the current slate of music magazine and the Malls were able to begin building their lives of a formerly very public, but now semi-private residents of their newly adopted country.

Their first public outing was celebrating the Christmas season at the seashore, such a unique experience for the native Californians. To see fully lit trees set up on the

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beach, and temperatures climbing into the low 30s, the thought of a white Christmas was inconceivable. Instead, they were regaled with activities such as the big Yacht Race, throngs of crowds at the local beaches, camping and all of the traditional summertime activities one would expect, despite what the calendar says. While it took some getting used to, they managed to enjoy the season, and began meeting folks and building a new social life. Gone was the stigma of isolation, of having to protect their true identities. They finally had the opportunity to be themselves. Back at their home, they threw their first Christmas party, inviting some of their new friends. The fully-stocked pantry was opened, and the excess food was finally getting some use. They hired a cook and his staff to make this a most memorable occasion. Out came elegant cakes, and haute cuisine of a caliber that had not been seen in the area for some time. However, missing their own remembered experience of Christmas, they decided to “Americanize” it. They rented a snow making machine and filled the yard with a fresh layer of powder, bringing alive the White Christmas of their memories.

“Don’t you just miss this?” Angela inquired. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“We lived In California. We didn’t have white Christmases there either.”

“Well not at home, silly, but those days growing up when our families went up into the mountains, played in the real snow, made our Christmas angels. I miss those times.” She paused to reflect. “I’m still a California girl at heart. I miss home, I miss my parents, I miss my brother. Maybe a visit back home?”

“I miss it, too,” I admitted. “Life here has been

wonderful, but I think we've always known it would be temporary. Perhaps it is time to return home, and really begin the life we envisioned there."

In their private reverie, they failed to notice that their efforts to have a white Christmas were failing miserable. The 35 degree temperatures were causing the newly manufactured snow to melt incredibly fast, and instead of being a field of fresh powder, it turned to slush, and then to mud.

"Yep, it's not the same. Let's go home."

1982 - KIDS IN AMERICA

Angela and I's triumphant return to America was anything but. There was no fanfare, not even a mention in the national music news magazines. Golden Fingers fever had waned, and the days of crowds, autograph seekers and stalkers had been left behind. Two years of seeming anonymity had done the trick, and although relieved, I was also a little bit disappointed.

"It's like there never was a Golden Fingers, or that I never was famous at all," he mused. "What hath we wrought? We're just another couple of kids in America."

"But isn't this what you've been after for the past few years?" Angela countered. "We can finally begin to live the life we dreamed. We are set financially, and we can go just about anywhere we want, without even gaining a hint of recognition."

"Nonetheless, it hurts a little. Fans are so fickle."

The first order of business was where to live. They had sold their former home, and the home in Australia, and were, in effect, homeless. Despite the fact that everything

they owned and had purchased in Australia was brand new, it was too much trouble to bring it around to the other side of the world, so they returned what they could, and sold the remainder at a substantial loss.

"It's only money," I mused. "We went though a lot of it, but there's more where that came from."

"How much more?" Angela asked.

"Plenty," and I left it at that.

Turning his thoughts to establishing a new home back in America, I offered the suggestion: "Let's do a tour of the country, and maybe decide on where we want to settle down. There's nothing else pressing to do, and we are free to be anywhere we want."

"Road trip!" Angela fired back, only slightly mocking I's enthusiasm for the short Australian tour of the Southeast Coast. Never having traveled much as a child, she was actually was looking forward to it.

"More than just a road trip," I said. "It will be the adventure of a lifetime!"

January

January's chill was still a shock after the reversal of seasons in the land down under.

"First order of business is to warm up. Let's join the snow birds in Arizona and see what that is all about," I suggested.

"It's just a bunch of old folks, I suppose. We're still practically kids, so what will we have in common with any of them?"

"It's not like we will be hanging out together," I countered. "It's just that a lot of folks spend their winters down there."

"So how will we get around? Where are we staying

along the way?”

“I’ve got it all figured out. We’ll get an RV. It will be a real road trip. We’ll drive on the road, live on the road, eat on the road.”

“I’m not going to spend all my time in a bus!” Angela cried.

“We’ll tow a vehicle as well, for the shorter trips. We’ll spend some time in lots of different places. If we plan it out well enough, we can see the whole country, and use the whole year to do it. If our life was a book, this could be its longest chapter.”

“We’ll need a map. We’ll need lots of maps.”

“We’ll get a map.”

Arizona

Despite the fact that Arizona was a bordering state to California, from the north state the drive was nearly two days, unless one wanted to spend the entire day behind the wheel. Setting out on a cool January morning, I noted “We don’t need to break any speed records on this trip. There’s no destination other than home, and no timetable except December 31.”

With their new RV and a new car in tow, they enjoyed the leisurely pace down the Great Central Valley, stopping in many of the small towns along the way that, while life was in the way, they never really had a chance to visit. Town after town offered up its touristy friendliness and unique aspects, until finally, the road gave way to seemingly endless deserts and lack of population.

As they crossed into the Imperial Valley of California, passing the Salton Sea, they finally came to the extreme southern end of the state. As they looked around in all directions, seeing nothing but desert, I declared, “This

could be center of the world, for all we know. After all, why not?"

"I would think the center would be full of lava."

"Point taken."

Turning east, their direction was set: Arizona.

Entering through Yuma, they stopped at an old former prison, The Yuma Territorial Prison. I remarked "Good thing we haven't done anything bad, yet. We could have ended up here." The place was in shambles, and hadn't housed a prisoner in years. "However, as we have ended up here, we might as well explore a bit."

They toured the prison grounds, and learned more about the fascinating history of the town. Altogether they spent a couple of days.

"It's time to hit the road," I stated, feeling restless already. "Next stop: Phoenix!"

However, only a couple of hours down the road, they noted the turnoff for the Painted Rocks State Park. "This could be interesting," indicated I, as he took the turn. They marveled at the ancient inscriptions, and fell to temptation to add their own, a simple inscription of a bass guitar with "1982" beneath it.

After spending a couple of hours, they returned to the Interstate and continued on the road to Phoenix.

"Let's park the RV and do a couple days of exploring here." I ticked off a mark on the side of the RV. "We'll keep track of the states right here."

Their first stop was the Desert Botanical Garden, where they enjoyed the immense variety of diversity to be found in the desert landscape. They followed that with a tour of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve, taking a few short hikes

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to fill out the day.

The next day, they were off to the mountain area outside of the city, taking in splendid views and enjoying the crisp, yet comfortable Arizonan weather. A trip to the Capitol building rounded out their stay.

Finally, as they left the Phoenix area, they drove the few miles north to Flagstaff, and again, abandoning their RV, drove the remainder of the way to the Grand Canyon. Renting some camping equipment, they took some mules down to the bottom of the canyon and spent a couple of very chilly nights in the great outdoors.

“Maybe we won’t do too many more nights like that.”

“Maybe not.”

Their week in Arizona was coming to a close, and they continued to head east towards New Mexico, taking a short stop in the Petrified Forest National Park to explore some of that ancient beauty.

New Mexico

They almost failed to notice while crossing the line into New Mexico, since the sole “Welcome to New Mexico” sign had fallen down. They stopped, propped it up, and took a picture of each other by the decrepit sign. A friendly traveler also stopped and took a picture of the two of them together.

They continued until the turnoff for El Malpais National Monument, temporarily ditching the RV in nearby Grants. Another day of hiking, picture taking and general relaxation kept the couple busy.

Tired, but happy, then spent the night in Grants. “This has been nice, maybe we should retire here.”

“You’re already retired.”

In the morning, they continued on the way to

Albuquerque. Again, parking the RV, they took a tour of the city, finding many enjoyable attractions, including the zoo and aquarium and various parks. However, it was a day trip out of town to Las Vegas that held the most potential excitement.

They boarded a train, which had a direct connection to Las Vegas. Filling his pocket with quarters, I indicated to Angela, "I'm feeling lucky, and I think that we will come away big winners."

The three hour ride through the desert was enchantingly pleasant. Seeking out the details among the barrenness proved to be an enjoyable pastime, and helped the time to pass quickly.

Upon arriving in Las Vegas, I was confused. "Where are the big hotels and casinos?" There was no building higher than a couple of floors, and nary a slot machine was to be seen. "Did we step into a time machine, and arrive before Vegas became what it was?" The town appeared to be no more than a typical western town, right out of the movies. Despite appearances, townsfolk appeared in modern dress, but still, no marquees, no bright lights, and the main drag did not resemble the Strip of his memory.

Out of curiosity, they stopped in a visitor information center and inquired about the changes they'd seen.

The bemused information officer informed them that they were not in the famous Las Vegas, Nevada, but Las Vegas, New Mexico. The town has its own charms, but if they were expecting the big city, they were more likely to encounter disappointment. Since their trip was one of discovery, this mistake turned out to be a great discovery after all.

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Returning the next day to Albuquerque, they continued the exploration of the larger city, and ended up spending a week, including a day trip to visit the state capital in Santa Fe.

Texas

Hooking up the car to the RV, they returned to the road and headed east on I-40, destination Amarillo, Texas. After a half-day's drive through the desert, and encountering a sudden thunderstorm, they were a bit concerned with flash floods, but their fears were groundless on this particular day.

Arriving in Amarillo in early afternoon, they were relieved to see evidence of civilization after their drive through the desert. They enjoyed tours of local museums and various sites celebrating the cowboys and their lore in the old west.

After exploring the area for a couple of days, they headed south to Lubbock. Turning onto highway 289, they drove for miles before discovering that they were in fact going in circles, a loop around the city. Returning to the Interstate, they continued south to Midland, and once again headed west to connect with I-20. They pulled the RV into Balmorhea State Park. They particularly enjoyed the large pool and the relaxed atmosphere, even though the weather was a bit too cold for actual swimming. Despite that, the scenery and potential was something they thought might warrant a return trip some day.

After a couple of days, they once again hit the road, heading to San Antonio. Stopping briefly for a meal in Fort Stockton, and welcoming a break in the desert monotony with a short stop in Ozona, they decided to leave the Interstate and head up to San Angelo. Finding

that the area had a lot to offer, they spent a few days at the state park, and enjoyed some recreation at the nearby lake. Once again vowing to return to fully partake of the outdoors activities that were limited because of the calendar, they once again headed south toward San Antonio.

Arriving in the city, they consulted their map before making the same mistake of looping the city on I-410. They first visited Mission San Juan Capistrano because Angela wanted to see the swallows. Discovering too late that the famous swallows were not only not there, but it was the wrong Mission San Juan Capistrano, they nonetheless enjoyed touring the ancient architecture. They suspected that the place name confusion was something they would continue to experience throughout their trip.

They also discovered that there were several other missions in the area, and thoroughly explored each of the others.

Heading up to the state capital of Austin, they enjoyed viewing the government buildings and toured the Capitol grounds. After a couple of days in the capital, they once again hit the road, heading towards Houston.

Houston was a refreshing change of pace from the small towns along the highway and the vast stretches of desert between them. Parking the RV outside of the city, they took to the road in the car instead. Also, they decided to take a few days residence in a local hotel, rather than return daily to the RV. As they visited Pasadena, they knew not to look for the Rose Parade, but were momentarily confused upon encountering Yellowstone Park. The lack of geysers and other geologic features was a dead giveaway.

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A day trip to Galveston was enjoyable, but the winter weather on the Gulf made them vow once again to return during a more appropriate time.

Finally, they headed north to Dallas and Fort Worth to begin wrapping up their whirlwind tour of Texas. "There's so much more to be seen, it just can't be done in a couple of weeks," I noted. "But I think we've gotten a good taste of what Texas has to offer."

Driving around the Dallas-Forth Worth area, they discovered that it was a much larger area than they expected, and a lot of cultural activities were available to see. They visited the site of Kennedy's assassination, and I speculated on the various conspiracy theories that had been advanced in the years since. "It's never going to rest," he noted. "They will still be debating this for many years to come."

As the month came to an end, they began making their way to Oklahoma.

February

Oklahoma

Entering Oklahoma in early February, they headed north towards Oklahoma City. Seeing a highway sign for Buffalo/Springfield, I wondered aloud "I wonder if Neil's in town."

They noted that the nights were chilly, but that the daytime temperatures were generally mild. Although a few clouds floated overhead, there was no threat of any impending precipitation. They discovered a Botanical Gardens and toured that, enjoying a taste of the local flora. They visited the State Capitol and several museums.

Following a couple of days in the capital, they moved East and spent a couple of days exploring the Lake Eufala

area before heading North to Tulsa.

While in Tulsa, they encountered the legendary Route 66. “Maybe we should follow this. Could be fun.”

“If we wanted to follow it, we should have started back in California. We’re right in the middle. Besides, it’s not heading the way we need to be going.”

Arkansas

After a couple of days exploring Tulsa, they moved into northern Arkansas, and discovered the beauty of the Ozarks and Eureka Springs. They were particularly moved by the Christ of the Ozarks statue, and enjoyed the old town atmosphere of Eureka Springs itself. “This is another place I’d like to return to in the future,” Angela indicated.

They continued south to the capital of Little Rock, enjoying the Capitol grounds and visiting the Hot Springs area for a relaxing time. I was tempted to dip a toe into the water, but upon discovering that it was a hundred and forty seven degrees, thought better of it. Instead, they found a local site that used the water, but at a more comfortable temperature, and they enjoyed a relaxing spa vacation. After a few days, they continued to Texarkana, straddling the two state lines. “I guess we returned to Texas earlier than we had expected.”

They headed south to Louisiana.

Louisiana

Their first stop was in Shreveport. They spent some time exploring the Red River area and then continued to the lower part of the state, stopping overnight in Lake Charles. They visited museums and art galleries, before embarking to Baton Rouge, the state’s capital. They enjoyed the relatively mild temperatures and they took

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part in some more indoor and some outdoor activities.

Arriving a week before Mardi Gras in New Orleans, they were sure to establish themselves before the crowds started to come in. There was no sufficient space for the RV in the city proper, so they housed it outside of town, and checked into a local hotel. As they toured the pre-Mardi Gras city, the crowds were noticeably growing larger, and they were glad they got into town when they did. By the time the celebration was in full swing, they were fully immersed in the local culture, and even found themselves participating in one of the parades.

The scene on Bourbon Street hit a little too close to home reminding them of the days of frenzy during Golden Fingers touring days, and they decided to return to a less public profile before perhaps being recognized and mobbed.

With Mardi Gras over, the city began to calm down, and they enjoyed a more leisurely pace, visiting the Bayou area and generally enjoying the comfortable weather.

Mississippi

A sudden storm greeted their arrival in Mississippi as they headed to Jackson. They visited the Capitol building, currently under renovation, and vowed to return once the renovation was complete. A botanical garden at the edge of town aroused their interest, and they stopped at a local drive-in for lunch.

Heading north to Tupelo, they noted along the way signs pointing to Philadelphia, Louisville, West Point, Macon, and Houston. "We could knock off practically the whole country right here in Mississippi!"

"Doesn't count."

They visited the birthplace of Elvis Presley in Tupelo.

Even though it had been nearly five years since his death, a steady stream of curious visitors were making their pilgrimages, before, presumably, heading on to Memphis. Angela and I, however, headed east.

March

Alabama

Continuing into Birmingham, they visited the Botanical Gardens, the Birmingham Museum of Art and enjoyed viewing and learning about the history of the famous Vulcan Statue.

They continued on to Montgomery, the state capital, and visited the various government complexes there. While in town, they also took in art museums and the Montgomery Zoo.

Continuing to head south, they stopped for a couple of days in Mobile. “Stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again.”

“We’ll get to Memphis. Be patient.”

After exploring Mobile they headed east to explore Florida.

Florida

The drive across the north state led them to Panama City, and once again found them confused at not finding the canal, despite searching for a full day. Tallahassee was next, visiting the Capitol, and a side trip to Natural Bridge Battlefield State Park. Finally, they arrived at Jacksonville and their first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean. They decided to spend a couple of days at Jacksonville Beach before exploring the southern part of the state.

Departing for Miami, they once again parked their RV and climbed into the car for an exploration of the Florida Keys.

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Moving to the gulf side of the state, they spent time in Tampa before returning to the central state and visiting Orlando for a few days with trips to Disney World and Epcot.

Georgia

Departing for Georgia from Orlando, their first stop in the Peach State was the Stephen C. Foster State Park. They enjoyed the gateway to the Okefenokee Swamp, and the refuge from the urban locations so recently visited. The night sky was magnificent, and they could see the Milky Way in all its glory.

They returned to the coast and made their way to Savannah, and marveled at the particularly rugged coast that Georgia had to offer.

Finally, they went inland to visit the State Capitol at Augusta.

South Carolina

Crossing into South Carolina, they continued to Columbia, visiting the South Carolina State House. Eager to see the ocean again, they ventured to Myrtle Beach. While the temperature remained cool, and on a couple of days it rained, they enjoyed time on the beach. The water itself was too cold for swimming, but with the right clothing, it could be comfortable. They enjoyed watching a sunrise over the ocean, in stark contrast to the ocean sunsets that they had always experienced. "Even though we toured on the Atlantic coast, I never got up early enough to see the sun come up," I noted.

Continuing to the state capital of Columbia, they enjoyed many of the cultural and historical sites the city had to offer. A simple night out had them enjoying *Deathtrap* at the movies, and the comedy nearly brought

them to tears.

North Carolina

Another half-day's drive and they found themselves in Raleigh, North Carolina. They enjoyed the site of its many Oak Trees and the classic construction of its State Capitol building. The Arboretum was particularly pleasurable.

They continued westward to Charlotte, enjoying the metropolitan feel of North Carolina's largest city. They were surprised to hear that Charlotte enjoyed a status as a significant financial center, second only the New York City. They enjoyed the zoo, aquarium and even took in a show at one of the area theaters.

Westward, they spend their final night in March in Asheville.

April

Tennessee

The April Fools' day drive across the Great Smoky Mountains was, at times, challenging for the RV, but the scenery was beautiful and worth the slightly nerve-racking route. They took in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and enjoyed a couple of days there exploring its endless wonder.

Continuing on to Knoxville, they once again enjoyed open and relatively straight driving conditions. They were disappointed to learn that they were too early to enjoy the World's Fair, which was to open in May, but the sight of the new construction and the massive Sunsphere was still a sight to behold.

The drive to Nashville was only slightly marred by a spring storm, but they enjoyed seeing this hub of Country music. "My dad would love this place," I remarked.

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The State Capitol seemed to take a back seat to everything else the city had to offer.

“No trip would be complete without visiting Graceland,” I remarked as they were en route to Memphis. “The King would be proud to see how he is honored today.”

Kentucky

Choosing to not cover ground they had so recently trod, they headed north on a minor highway to enter Kentucky.

“Enough of the big city, for now,” I stated. “We’ll stop here in this town of Princeton.” I was surprised to see that the city had no bars, and that in fact, no alcohol sales were permitted at all. “That’s odd,” he remarked.

After a delightful couple of days in Princeton, they continued on to Louisville. “We seem to be always arriving early,” I noted. “The Kentucky Derby is still three weeks away, so I guess we won’t be going to that. Would have been nice, though.” Despite the fact the the Derby itself wouldn’t be run until early May, preparations were already underway for the Festival.

“Can’t we just stay here a few days and enjoy that?” Angela inquired.

“I don’t see why not,” I answered. “We’ve been on the road for so long, and it only seems right that we take a break and thoroughly enjoy ourselves.”

Leaving the RV at a local park, they continued to see the sights of the city by car, and enjoyed the Louisville Slugger museum. They also took a day trip to Lexington, and toured the Capitol grounds.

Missouri

After enjoying the first few days of the Festival, they packed up again and headed to St. Louis, briefly passing

through lower Illinois. "We'll be back!" as they failed to stop.

There were greeted by the Gateway Arch as they entered the city. "Let's go to the top!"

"We certainly aren't going to drive up it!"

"No, we'll park. There's an elevator."

The view from the top of the arch was amazing. "I'm glad we stopped here, I can't believe what we're seeing!"

After the tour, they discussed the remainder of the week, "We can now go back to Illinois, or explore Missouri some."

"Let's explore!"

The continued westward until they got to the capital city, Jefferson City and spent a couple of days. Then down south to Springfield and a visit to the Nathan Boone Homestead. Turning north, they reached the other end of the state, stopping over in Kansas City.

"Can we make it to Illinois in one day?"

"I don't see why not, it's only a four hour drive."

They did not. They decided to stop over in Florida along the way. Florida, Missouri, the site of Mark Twain's birth.

Illinois

The drive to Springfield, Illinois was pleasant, but confusing. "Weren't we just here a few days ago?"

"That was Springfield, Missouri."

"Oh." They visited the State Capitol building, marveling at how it dwarfed the other buildings in the area.

They continued north to Peoria, staying overnight in an industrial area outside of town. "Nothing to write home about."

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“I’m sure it has something else to offer.”

They didn’t discover it.

Continuing on to Bloomington, they passed through and continued to Champaign. “How about some bubbly?”

“That would be Champagne.”

Despite the fact there would be no bubbly, they spent their last night of April just outside of town.

May

Indiana

May Day greeted them with bright sunshine and a trip to Indianapolis, where they visited the State Capitol as well.

“We’ll have an opportunity to visit the northern state later, I suppose, so let’s head south, and see what’s down there.”

Confusion set in once again as they passed through Bloomington. “No imagination?” I remarked. “Certainly there must be plenty of names to go around without having to duplicate so many.”

Southern Indiana was a pleasant surprise for them, as they discovered the sparse population and vast farmland. The small towns were quaint, and offered their own unique charm. They passed through Bedford, Mitchell and visited Paoli and Orleans, wondering if it was New or Old.

With the distraction at the rural nature of the area, I failed to notice that he was moving along the rural highway at a significant number beyond the local speed limit, and the inevitable flashing lights of an Indiana State Trooper forced him to pull over.

“License and registration.”

I pulled out his wallet and passed it on to the officer. The photograph was pre-haircut, and clearly showed the former rock god's famous locks. The name was also a dead giveaway.

"Thank you, sir," said the officer. "I'm a big fan. Your autograph, please?"

I signed the ticket, reluctantly.

Returning to Bedford for their overnight stay, they encountered US 50. "Hey, I bet we could take this all the way home," I noted.

"There's a lot more to see the other way," Angela directed.

US 50 East, was their new direction.

Ohio

They entered into Ohio, meandering along the scenic Ohio River, and finally into Cincinnati. "Sin City! Weren't we already here too?"

"No, that was Las Vegas, and not even the right one."

"Well, then. On to the capital!"

They headed to Columbus. While there, they of course visited the Capitol grounds, but also were taken in by the beauty of the Columbus Park of Roses.

"We'll be back to Ohio before long, I suppose."

Rejoining their beloved US 50 at Athens ("Where's the Coliseum? Or at least R.E.M.?"), they crossed into West Virginia.

West Virginia

"What's that smell?" I asked. "Oh, it's only the B&O." He enjoyed and laughed at his little joke.

Angela didn't.

They headed south, the winding road making the couple slightly carsick, and arrived in the capital of

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Charleston at mid-day. An overnight stay put them back on the road, through even more mountainous terrain, heading east to their next destination: Virginia.

Virginia

The transition from West Virginia to Virginia was barely noticeable, but for the “Welcome to Virginia” sign that greeted them. The terrain remained rugged and mountainous, but eventually gave way to a more rural, farming environment. After several hours of rough travel, they decided to stop in Waynesboro, a small town along the way. Enjoying the small town feel, but also enjoying some conveniences, they decided to stop over for the night. They visited some nearby Civil War landmarks and the nearby Shenandoah National Park.

Continuing the next day, they stopped over in Richmond and toured the Capitol.

Washington D.C.

Departing early the next morning, they headed north to the Nation’s Capital, Washington, D.C.

Rather than try to stay in the Capital itself, they continued on to Cherry Hill, Maryland to leave their RV and proceed back into the city via automobile.

While in Washington they toured the Capitol Building itself, the Smithsonian and its many museums and walked the distance from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and back. At just under three miles, and with so many attractions to see along the way, the effort seemed minimal. They were a little surprised to see active baseball games being played along the National Mall. “That would never go over well at home,” I stated.

A small side trip from the Washington Monument had them at the White House. Not wanting to disturb the

occupants (and partly because of a disagreement with their politics) they made no attempt at getting in.

“The road has been fun, but I’m ready for some pampering. How about we just check into a hotel, and take some time out?” Angela asked.

“Better yet, how about we do the ultimate pampering, and take a cruise?”

“And what cruise lines sail the Potomac?,” Angela inquired.

“Well, there are some, but not exactly what I had in mind. I’m thinking of something a bit more spectacular: Alaska!”

June

Maryland

After a return trip to Cherry Hill to pack a week’s worth of luggage for the cruise, they discovered the particular lack of formal clothing and accessories.

“I guess we didn’t plan for this eventuality, so we’re going to have to do some shopping.”

They found nearly everything they needed in Baltimore. I considered renting a tuxedo, but gave in and purchased one instead. “I will probably have another opportunity to wear it before long.”

Angela had difficulty finding the right shoes to match her outfit, and they decided to venture to Annapolis to see if they would have better luck. To her delight, she found exactly what they were looking for, and as long as they were there, they toured the State Capitol.

Alaska

Returning to D.C., they booked their flight to Seattle, the departure point for the Alaskan Cruise. “Washington to Washington. It’s like we never left.” The airport shuttle

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took them straight to the port to board their ship.

On board, they were greeted by the pure luxury they had been missing for the past several months. Their spacious cabin afforded them a chance to stretch out beyond the confines of their RV, and venturing beyond, they had the entire ship to explore. The meals were sumptuous, and I was particularly intrigued by the on board gambling. "It's Vegas all over again!" he cried. "We can even see a show!"

Several ports were on the itinerary, including the capital, Juneau, as well as some smaller inland passage tours for Ketchikan and Skagway. The trip into the fjords was particularly magnificent, but a little cold.

"I'm glad we had some heavy coats along with us. Stepping from late spring temperatures back into freezing cold is an adjustment I couldn't make without some help."

Their table mates at meals were oblivious to their identities, having come from an older generation, and had never been caught up in the frenzy of the Golden Fingers days.

"What do you do?" was the inevitable question.

I evaded a direct answer, "I'm between jobs right now. We're touring the US for a year. Just a couple of kids in America."

"You youngsters don't know responsibility, frittering away your time while everyone else is working," one of their companions complained.

"Oh, no sir, it's not anything like that. It's just we built up a bit of a nest egg and are enjoying some time while we're still young. We look forward to raising a family someday and settling down. This will be an adventure that we'll tell to our kids and grandkids. Maybe even repeat it

when they are older.”

The conversation gradually drifted to more non-confrontational issues, and the remainder of the week allowed the couple to fully relax.

Returning to Seattle and the end of their cruise, they boarded the flight back to D.C. “Washington to Washington. It’s like we never left.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

Another shuttle took them back to their RV in Cherry Hill, and strapping in, they were ready to hit the road again. This time their destination was Dover, Delaware, the state capitol.

Delaware

It was a short two hour drive, and when they arrived, they took to obligatory tour of the Capitol. “Didn’t George Carlin offer an all-expenses paid trip here just last year?”

“I think that was meant as a joke.”

“Well, we’re here anyway.”

They set out to explore the state, and were surprised when they were back by the late afternoon. “I guess we could have spent more time at the coast.”

“We were there two hours. Besides, it was a bit cold. We even took that side trip down to Ocean City, Maryland.”

“Yeah, I was curious to see the end of US 50. We could have turned onto it and traveled all the way back home.”

“We’re not ready for that, yet.”

After taking time out for a bite to eat, they headed up to Wilmington, and found a couple of state parks that, sadly, were day use only, and closed early in the evening. However, they decided to park their RV and visit them on the following day. They thoroughly enjoyed Brandywine

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Creek park, with its lush beauty and serene atmosphere. It left them wanting to spend another night, but it wasn't an option. "I guess it's on to New Jersey, then."

New Jersey

"How do you get off this thing?" I declared, after they had been on the Turnpike for an hour. "There's nothing but cars and it's costing me a fortune paying all those tolls."

"It's not that bad," Angela advised. "Look, right there up ahead is an exit that will get us over to the coast. See that sign for Asbury Park? Maybe we can visit with Bruce while we're there." Bruce had opened for Golden Fingers back in 1976, and that exposure was often credited with his subsequent success.

"He's probably out on tour. This is the peak of the summer concert season."

Their side trip allowed them the relief of another early arrival, and a pleasant afternoon at the beach.

The following day, they ventured an even shorter distance to Trenton, visiting the Capitol and then on to Elizabeth, where they enjoyed a meal at a intimate, local Italian family restaurant. Ditching the RV once again, they began planning their time to be spent in New York City.

New York

They began their first day in the Big Apple with a visit to Battery Park. They took the ferry to Liberty Island, and enjoyed the visit to that national monument.

After returning they headed up Broadway, passing Wall Street. "I guess I should see how my investments are doing."

"Let's not."

I couldn't help but sing "Blaming it all on the nights on Broadway!"

"It's daytime," was Angela only response.

But the lights suddenly came on when they discovered they were driving the wrong way on the one way Broadway.

"Oops."

"Maybe we should park and just walk it instead."

They continued walking up Broadway until they reached Union Square.

"What now?"

"I guess you just go around."

Rejoining Broadway on the other side, they continued until they encountered Herald Square.

"Give my regards to Broadway, remember me to Herald Square," I sang out, loudly enough for some passersby to hear. With some, a hint of recognition, but they moved on before it was too late.

As they arrived in Times Square, Broadway gave way to oblivion. "I guess that's it."

"No, it's just pedestrian walkways right here." They continued on towards Central Park. Entering the park, they began to explore the many paths it had to offer.

Upon arriving at the 86th street station, they decided that there had been enough walking and took the subway back to Battery Park.

"Well, we've seen it all!"

"Hardly."

They spent another week, but chose the subway and cabs for their primary transportation. Even after a week, they had hardly scratched the surface as to everything they would have liked to do. "I guess this will have to be a

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destination on its own the next time. But we have a schedule to keep, or we'll never get home."

"I'll be back," I stated. Passing nearby, Arnold shrugged off the recognition he thought he felt, but remembered the words.

Returning to Elizabeth to retrieve their abandoned RV, they moved on with their venture into Connecticut.

"Hey, here we are on Manhattan again. I said I'd be back, and here I am."

"Just drive."

They continued on, and when passing through New Rochelle, I asked "Do you think we should stop in and see Rob and Laura?"

"They don't exist."

July

Connecticut

They continued along the coastline of Long Island Sound after entering Connecticut and continued until they reached New Haven. Turning north, they stopped short of the capital city when I spotted Dinosaur State Park.

"Dinosaurs in Connecticut?" he asked. "I have a hard time believing that."

They stopped to take a look, but all they found were tracks. "I guess they were just passing through, like us."

They put up for the night after the long exhausting three hour drive in Hartford. "Might as well see the Capitol while we're here," I quipped, the next morning, as if they hadn't seen it everywhere else. Then suddenly realizing they failed to see the Capitol while in New York City, he exclaimed, "We have to go back, we didn't see the Capitol in New York City!"

“New York is not the capital of New York.”

“Oh, right.”

Checking the map, I noted “We can be in Boston well before the sun goes down.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Angela pointed out, as she pointed out the small state to the east. “We haven’t yet been to Rhode Island.”

Rhode Island

As they crossed over into Rhode Island, I couldn’t help but notice how quickly they got to the other side.

Despite his misgivings, they found Providence to be a delightful city, and found the Rhode Island State House to be an impressive structure, and quite beautifully lit at night.

Intrigued by the fact that Rhode Island was not actually an island, I desired to see an island in Rhode Island, so they planned a trip to Prudence Island, an actual island which had no apparent way of getting there. As it turned out, a ferry ran from Bristol to Prudence Island, so they took it. Discovering that the population of the island was fewer than 100, they surmised that those that did live there were trying to get away from the surprising heavily populated area of the capital.

They also discovered that there were several islands that could be visited in the Bay, and one island, Conanicut, had the town of Jamestown, which could be driven to by car.

“I guess there’s more to Rhode Island than I originally thought,” I stated.

After exploring Jamestown, they stayed the night in Portsmouth before heading out the next day to Boston.

Massachusetts

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“These drives are so short, one might think we’d be better off walking.”

“It’s over sixty miles. How good are your shoes?”

They chose to drive.

Arriving in Boston early, they secured a location for the RV, and drove into the downtown area. They discovered the start of the Freedom Trail and walked its length to Old Ironsides, where they enjoyed a tour and ended the day visiting the State House, and relaxing at the end of a long day at a local pub.

“Cheers!” as they raised a glass and the Independence Day fireworks shot off overhead.

“This state is a bit larger than the ones we’ve just been through,” I remarked, “and everything is not just here in Boston. Let’s stretch our metaphorical legs and do some more exploring.”

Heading west, their first stop was Springfield. “Haven’t we been here before? Is nobody original anymore?”

But I was silent when he discovered that this was the first Springfield. “I guess the rest just copied this one.”

They explored Skinner State Park, but found much of it to be in disarray, and suspected the place was not long for this world. “D’oh” was I’s only articulation.

They had better luck at Mount Sugarloaf, though they had to continue without the RV to be able to maneuver the winding road to the summit. But the spectacular view of the Connecticut River and the surrounding valley made the effort worthwhile.

Returning to Springfield for another night, then ventured out the next morning to head towards Worcester. “Sure would like some sauce,” I unnecessarily articulated.

Electing to take the road less traveled, they headed north on US 202, around the Quabbin Reservoir and left US 202 in Templeton. Deciding that was far enough for one day (they were getting used to these short trips) they parked their RV and checked into a small hotel, and enjoyed the small town atmosphere.

The next day they were in Worcester in less than an hour. "This is the way to explore," I stated.

"But we never even get a chance to unpack," Angela complained.

"What's to unpack? Everything we need is already in the RV."

"That's true."

Arriving in Worcester, I noted the location of the Stone's recent surprise concert there. "We used to do that with Golden Fingers," I stated. "We would drop in, unannounced, at some small venue, and blow the roof off the place. They didn't always appreciate it. Especially the night we really did blow it off. Of course, the tornado could have had something to do with that."

Finally, their tour of Massachusetts ended up in Manchester, once again on the coast, another quaint, small town. They spent two days.

New Hampshire

As they entered New Hampshire, I noted a sign that read "Portsmouth - 18 miles."

"That's on the Maine border. That hardly seems worth it to count as an adventure."

"Let's make it worth it."

They took a look at the map, and noted a group of islands a few miles off the coast. "I wonder what's out there?"

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“The map says they are the Isles of Shoals. Maybe we can get a charter to check them out.”

They discovered that there was a ferry service to Star Island and booked a trip. Once docked, they disembarked and began to explore the island. They found it only took a short time to hike completely across the island, and they even ventured onto the breakwater to hike over to Cedar Island and Smuttynose Island. However, they didn’t find much of interest on the two remote islands. Returning to the Star Island, they took another ride over to Appledore Island. Despite its larger size, there was even less development, and all they discovered was a marine laboratory.

“I guess the heyday of these islands is long passed,” I mused.

Returning to the coast town of Portsmouth, they headed down the New Hampshire coast. They found that Hampton Beach offered RV camping, and decided to pull in and settle in for a few days off the road.

Maine

“Did you know we already have been in Maine?” I asked.

“I don’t recall ever being here before. When was that?”

“You don’t remember? We walked there last week.”

It was Angela’s time to be confused. “Walked?”

“Yes, three of the islands are actually part of Maine. Only Star was part of New Hampshire.

“Imagine that.”

The short drive from Hampton Beach to Portland, Maine was pleasant, but otherwise uneventful.

“I’m hungry,” I stated. “Let’s see if we can find someplace to eat.”

As they drove through the city, they noticed several restaurants on every block. "Is that all these folks do?"

"There are too many to choose from!"

"How about pizza?" The street they were on featured three pizza restaurants. "Pick one."

They did, and it was delicious.

"We might as well hole up here for a few days."

"In the pizza shack?"

"No, just in this town. We can get some variety of food, more that we typically carry with us."

"I'd like some of the famous Maine lobster."

"I'm sure we'll be able to find it."

As they walked the streets of Portland, they discovered a farmer's market, said to be one of the oldest in the area. "We may as well stock up on some fresh stuff, our wares are beginning to wane."

As they continued to explore Portland, they also discovered an active set of island communities out in Casco Bay, with regular ferry service out to many of them. And this time they could take their car with them. "Let's explore!"

They first visited Peaks Island, and found that much of it could be visited by car. They enjoyed the long meandering seashore road that presented magnificent views of the bay and some of the other islands.

They had to return to the mainland to catch a different ferry to get to some of the other islands, but discovered that the ferry to Little Diamond continued on to several other islands, so it became an island hopping experience for them, including Great Diamond, Long Island, Chebeague Island and finally Cliff Island. While the day's exploration took several hours, much of it waiting for the

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next ferry, the return trip, in which they chose not to drive off the ferry, took much less time. Yet, it was getting dark as they returned to shore.

Finding that the late hour did not diminish the dining experience, Angela found her lobster meal.

Packing up the following morning, they headed north to Augusta, the capital. As they arrived, it began to rain.

“This seems a pretty small town for a state capital,” I remarked.

After visiting the Capitol grounds, and a short tour of the Blaine House, they headed further north.

Stopping briefly in Bangor to gas up, they continued on the Interstate until it ended at Houlton.

“The edge of the US!”

“Actually, not,” Angela noted. “Look at the map, there’s still some easternmost land to explore.”

“Let’s explore!”

They drove down the coast to Quoddy Head State Park, and found a space for the RV. They began their exploration at the West Quoddy Head Light, and climbed to the top for its spectacular view of the area. Despite the clouds, they still could see miles out into the Bay of Fundy, and could view the land mass of the Nova Scotia peninsula. As I leaned over the rail of the lighthouse, he yelled out “I’m the king of the world!”

“No, you’re not.”

Heading north, they continued on US 1, following it along the Canadian border to the northernmost town in New England, Madawaska, until it ended at Fort Kent. Despite the end of the official highway, they continued on the road, which eventually gave out. When they got to the end, they discovered there was no way to turn around.

Putting the RV in reverse, they drove backwards for about a mile before they were finally able to turn around and begin their trip back into civilization. After an exhausting day of driving and discovery, they laid over in Fort Kent.

The next morning, they headed south on Highway 11, and rejoining the Interstate, found their way back into New Hampshire.

August

New Hampshire, revisited

After a long day of driving, they decided to hole up in a state park near the capital of Concord, and arrived at Bear Brook State Park, only about a half hour's drive from the city. They decided to relax for a couple of days before continuing on their explorations.

Their stop at the State House provided them another historical tidbit: The nation's oldest state house in which the legislature still occupies its original chambers.

Afterwards, they headed north, crossing into Vermont after passing through the little town of Littleton.

Vermont

Continuing north, they ventured as far as the Canadian border, ending up in Derby Line. They found a place to park the RV, and walked the town, crossing, without realizing into the Canadian side of Rock Island. When they noticed a few signs in French, they realized their mistake and hurried back to the U.S. *Pas de problème*. "I guess we just made this an international trip," I stated.

The drive to Montpelier was relatively short, compared to the day's previous marathon drive, and they visited the State House. They were rather surprised to see that such a small city would be a state capital. Despite its size, however, they discovered that the city had a charm all its

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own.

The following day, they continued upstate to St. Albans, and after some experimentation, found they could cross Lake Champlain a little to the north, making their way back into New York.

New York, New York

“I said I’d be back,” I said as he was back.

“Yes, you are.”

“New York, New York, the city that never sleeps!”

“We’re nowhere near the city. We’re in Champlain.”

“Bubbly, my dear?”

They headed south on the Interstate through the Adirondacks, and headed toward the state capital.

“Finally, we get to see New York’s capital. I was confused.”

“You’re always confused.”

The narrow roads of the city of Albany weren’t quite right for the RV, so they parked it outside of town and drove into town in the car. The state capitol building was quite a bit different than any of the others they had visited. There was no traditional dome, and the whole thing looked more like a palace. After spending a night in a hotel in the city overlooking the Capitol, they retrieved their RV and continued to Syracuse. Deferring to another night in a city, they traveled on to Liverpool. “Maybe we’ll see a Beatle.”

“Maybe not.”

Having seen no Beatles during the overnight hours, they left the next morning to go to Niagara Falls. Finding that there was accommodation for the RV, they drove directly to Goat Island, parked and spent several hours enjoying the falls. “I wonder where they sell the barrels?”

“They don’t.”

After spending the night in the area, they followed the Lake Erie shoreline, entering into Pennsylvania after a drive of a couple of hours.

Pennsylvania

Their first stop was in Asbury Park in Erie, where they bought a postcard to send back home. “Greetings from Asbury Park” was all they wrote.

They continued south until they hit Interstate 80. “Hey, we can take this all the way back home.”

“Let’s not.”

Turning east instead, they traveled until the road turned north to explore some of the mountainous area north of the highway. They found a wealth of camping opportunities, and finally chose to stake out a place for a couple of days in Sinnemahoning State Park. Continuing north, they encountered US 6 and headed east. Though the winding road was sometimes a challenge for the RV and car combination, they traveled for half a day and came to Scranton in the early afternoon. They arrived in time to take a short tour of the Scranton Iron Furnaces. Heading south the next day, they arrived in Philadelphia, and spent a couple of days visiting the many landmarks of historical significance that the City of Brotherly Love had to offer. Finally, turning east, they ventured to Harrisburg, visiting the Capitol, and wondering if the nighttime glow was a little bit radioactive.

Finally, they concluded their loop drive around Pennsylvania with a trek to Pittsburgh, where they explored the city, seemingly crossing a bridge every few blocks.

“Sure are a lot of ‘em,” I noted.

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“Sure are.”

September

Oiho

After their night's stay in Pittsburgh, they headed west and crossed over in Ohio.

“Oh, Hi, again”

“Oh. We've been here before.”

“Yes, but going the other way.”

They stopped over in Akron for a bite to eat, then continued on to Cleveland for the overnight stay. Following along the shoreline drive of Lake Erie, they decided it was too much for the RV, and returned to the Interstate, continuing to Toledo.

“Holy Toledo, we just passed through Oregon.”

“Doesn't count.”

Michigan

They entered Michigan shortly before noon, and continued north around the lake until they arrived in Detroit. Looking for a good Italian meal, they stopped in the Roma Cafe, thoroughly enjoying their repast. They explored the city and surrounding area, then found a hotel to stay for the night.

Continuing the next day through Flint and Saginaw they made their way to Wilderness State Park, at the northernmost part of the state, just in time to celebrate the Labor Day holiday. The distance and serenity from all things industrial was an attraction, and they decided to extend their stay for a full week. During that time, they spent cool afternoons at the lakeshore, and even ventured a few times out on the lake itself by boat.

Rested, they returned south to go to Lansing and visited the Capitol and surrounding area. Following their

overnight stay in Lansing, they headed east to Grand Rapids.

“If we turn here, we can go to Wyoming.”

“Let’s not.”

They continued towards Ludington, and arranged to take the S.S. Badger ferry across Lake Michigan to Wisconsin. Arriving too late for the last ferry, they stayed overnight in nearby Ludington State Park.

In the morning, they drove onto the ferry, and parked the RV and car in its spacious parking area.

“This is just like Alaska without the glaciers.”

“Not really.”

The lack of slot machines was a jarring revelation for I. “When do we get to Vegas?”

“Not for a while. Keep your quarters.”

But they did enjoy the four hour cruise.

“I would have been nervous if it had been a three hour cruise.”

“Set your watch, it’s a new time zone.”

“So it was a three hour cruise, after all.”

Wisconsin

Upon arriving in Manitowoc, they had to wait for about an hour before they were able to fully disembark. They briefly explored the city, and discovered the site where Sputnik 4 crashed in 1962. They continued on north and spent the night in Green Bay. They decided to visit a few local bars to explore the music scene, and were particularly impressed by one small combo, focussing on the percussionist. “He can really bang the drum,” I remarked.

After the show, he went up to the young man and confided in him his identity, but asked him to be discrete.

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“I’m really impressed with your skills, and would like to consider working with you in the future. Please let me know how to contact you, and I’ll get back to you next year after we return to California.”

The following day, they continued east to Wausau, hoping to camp at Rib Mountain State Park, only to discover that it was only open during the day. Despite their initial disappointment, they discovered a great many things of interest. Heading north afterwards, they camped overnight at Council Grounds State Park instead.

Following their night in the woods, they noted that evening chills were beginning to set in. “Summer’s almost over.”

They drove the next day to Madison, and toured the capitol and spent the night.

Iowa

Heading out early the next day, they arrived in Dubuque, Iowa, crossing back over the Mississippi, which they had last seen in St. Louis. They continued on to Cedar Rapids, where they spent the night. The short two hour drive to the capital, Des Moines, found them checking in at Walnut Woods State Park. Back in town, they toured the Capitol, then returning to the state park, decided to do some canoeing on the Racoon River. They enjoyed a few days in the park while autumn set in.

October

Minnesota

Heading north, they stopped in Bloomington to see the former home of the Twins and Vikings. “My dad considered the Twins his home team, since his family in North Dakota like to root for them in the 60’s. The place sure has run down since then. They should probably just

tear the whole thing down, and build something else in its place.”

They attended a Twins game in the new Metrodome, but the team was having a bad season, and the game was lost.

The next day, they went to St. Paul, and visited the Capitol, spending another night. In the morning, they made their way to Duluth and explored the region surrounding the tip of Lake Superior.

On the way to Bemidji, they passed through Grand Rapids. “Weren’t we,” I began.

Angela cut him off, mid-sentence with a simple “No.”

In Bemidji, they stopped to visit the Paul Bunyan and Babe statues, and heard about the fictional character’s exploits. After a two hour drive they spent the night in International Falls.

“Brr.”

Still, they wanted the experience of the northernmost point in the continuous states, and drove the long drive on the next day to Penasse. Looking at the map, I wondered aloud “Why can’t we take this road right across the lake? It could shave off an hour.”

“That’s the border. There’s no road.”

They followed the highway, briefly entering Canada and parking the RV at the Young’s Bay Resort. A boat ride took them to Penasse.

“OK, we’ve been there. It’s cold. Let’s go back.”

Setting out the next morning, they once again passed into Canada en route to Grand Forks, North Dakota.

Looking at the map, I exclaimed, “No way are we taking that route.”

“That’s the Red River, not a road.”

North Dakota

They crossed the winding Red River at Drayton and stopped in the tiny town for a bite to eat before continuing to Grand Forks, where they spent the night. Continuing on the next day, they visited the International Peace Gardens on the Canadian border. They found a place to stay in Dunseith.

“We keep coming back to Canada,” I noted.

“Eh?”

The next day they arrived at the state capital, Bismarck, at midday and toured the Capitol building, unique and modern compared to many other state houses.

Following the overnight stay in Bismarck, they headed to the west, to the small town of Dickinson, the longtime home of his father’s family. While most of the family had moved to California, I’s uncle, Ed Mall, still lived on the family farm with his wife, Mary, and their teenage granddaughters, Samantha and Sarah. Dropping in, unannounced, was quite a surprise for the family, and at first they didn’t recognize the couple, who had changed so much since they last saw them. Once identified, however, they were welcomed into the family’s home.

“I’ve never been to the old homestead,” I told his uncle, “though my dad often spoke about it.”

Ed sighed, “Life is slower out here than you’ve had all your life, but it’s been a good one. But things are changing. The crops just aren’t doing as well as they used to, and raising livestock has become so commercialized that we can’t really turn a great profit anymore. We scrape by, but it’s been difficult.”

I sympathized with his uncle. “How can I help?”

“We’re not looking for a handout, I,” he paused in

thought. "But it wouldn't hurt either. I'm afraid that we might lose the farm in a few years if things don't change."

"I'm not in a position to help while we're on the road, but do you think you can hold out until next year, at least? I may be able to come up with something."

"That would be wonderful!" Ed's demeanor brightened considerably. "But enough depressing talk, why don't you come out and see some of the old things we still have around."

Ed took them out to the barn, where a number of ancient farm implements were stored. "You dad and I used to drive these out in the fields long before we were able to drive legally. We had a lot of fun, back then."

"Do they still work?"

"I've kept one of them in working order, for old times sake. Care to take a spin?"

I enjoyed his ride around the farm.

After a few days exploring the region, and appreciating the slow pace of the rural life, it was time for them to say their goodbyes, and continue on their journey. They headed south again to Pierre, South Dakota.

South Dakota

Pierre offered another unique persecutive in small town capitals, but the visit to the Capitol building revealed beautiful interiors, reminiscent of the classical structures in some of the other states. They also visited the southern tip of Lake Oahe, having seen the Missouri River at Bismarck, they were amazed to discover the size of the resulting lake dammed near Pierre.

After their stay in Pierre, they continued westward to Rapid City and enjoyed viewing the Mt. Rushmore Memorial and ventured further northwest to Lead and

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Deadwood, the legendary old west towns.

After exploring the region for a couple of days, they returned east, stopping briefly in Wall to see the famous Wall Drug Store, then continuing into the Badlands, staying in the National Park.

After a couple of days of additional exploration, the return to the eastbound interstate and visited the Corn Palace in Mitchell, and ended up at the Eastern part of the state in Sioux Falls.

Their overnight stay left them refreshed and ready to hit the road for the next destination state: Nebraska.

Nebraska

The highway south took them briefly back into Iowa at Sioux City, but they didn't stop and headed instead on US 75 South.

Coming into Omaha, I got excited "Maybe we'll see Marlin Perkins"

"Maybe we'll not."

Instead, in honor of the former Blackstone Hotel, I and Angela ordered Reuben sandwiches and butter brickle ice cream for lunch.

After lunch, they visited Boy's Town before returning to Omaha for a night's stay.

The short drive to Lincoln incorporated the obligatory trip to the Capitol building, yet another unique structure.

Continuing along Interstate 80, they headed for Grand Island.

"I was expecting a more tropical clime." Disappointed, I decided to continue to North Platte instead. But first they visited Tornado Hill, which was created in the previous year from tornado debris.

In North Platte they visit Buffalo Bill's Ranch and the

Golden Spike Tower and Visitor Center. The long day over, they spent the night.

November

Kansas

Sleeping late the next day, they hit the road later than usual, and heading south decided to stop in small Oakley, Kansas.

“It’s still several hours to Topeka, so I think we’ll stay here.” They found an RV park in town called the Kansas Kountry Inn and stayed there for the night. In the morning they left for Topeka, stopping for lunch and a tour of the Capitol, and then on to the Kansas side of Kansas City. “Hey, if we had a time machine, we could wave to ourselves across the street,” I said, as they peered across the border into the more famous half.

The next day found them in Wichita, where they opted to stop for lunch en route to their eventual destination of Dodge City.

“Hey, isn’t Batman from here.”

“That’s Bat Masterson.”

After an afternoon and evening of exploring the town, they turned in. In the morning I exclaimed, “We better get out of Dodge!”

Colorado

Taking US 50, they entered Colorado after a two hour drive and continued to Pueblo, where they stayed for the night. I sought out and they toured the Federal Consumer Information Center. He had always seen the Public Service Announcements about information that they distributed, and was curious as to what such a facility might be like. He’d always envisioned a throng of people answering the phone, opening letters, stuffing envelopes,

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with pallets of brochures waiting to be distributed to the information-hungry American masses, eager for free goods from the government. The reality was far from his expectations. The pallets of material were there, but the pace was a little more relaxed. The phones weren't continually ringing, but there were a large number of staff handling the ones that were. Rather than call or write, I opted to pick up a few pamphlets and brochures before heading out.

Continuing up Interstate 25 on to Denver, they visited the state capitol, then ventured on to Golden, where they toured the Coors brewery. Refreshed after a cold beer and a night's stay, they continued their trek to the west. They marveled at the Eisenhower Tunnel, at both its elevation and length. Angela was concerned that the RV might not meet the maximum height requirements, but it turned out to not be an issue. They stopped over in Vail and although they didn't ski, they enjoyed some snow play and warmed themselves with hot chocolate by a fire in one of the ski lodges, where they also spent the night.

As they drove through the Glenwood Canyon, they encountered a snow storm that left them stranded for a few hours. Despite the weather, they bundled up and ventured outside to see the rare beauty that the canyon had to offer. Once the road was clear, they enjoyed the remainder of the trip into Grand Junction. Exhausted, but happy, they turned in for the night. Upon arising, they headed south, and continued south to Durango and then headed to Four Corners, where Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona meet. I straddled himself at the monument so that he could simultaneously occupy all four states. Angela, though she thought it silly, was coerced to

do the same.

Utah

Continuing in Utah, they headed north to see the splendor of the various National Parks, including Natural Bridges and Arches before heading west on Interstate 70 and south on interstate 15 to Zion National Park. They also descended once again into Arizona to view the Grand Canyon from its North Rim before heading north toward Salt Lake City and the capitol. I noted on the map the location of Thousand Lake Mountain.

“Let’s go count them!”

“Let’s not.”

In the capital they explored the various historical buildings and learned all about why Utah was called the Beehive state. They drove around the southern edge of Salt Lake, and I was tempted to try floating, but the water was too cold. Instead, I wanted to test the limits of the RV by racing on the Bonneville Salt Flats, but cooler heads prevailed and they headed east instead and into Wyoming.

Wyoming

They followed Interstate 80 to Rock Springs, hoping to find a nice venue for some Rock Music. Unfortunately, Country was the local flavor. An overnight stay let them break up the trip across the wide state, and they arrived in Cheyenne the following afternoon, and visited the capitol. With time to spare, they continued on Interstate 25 up to Casper.

“I ain’t afraid of no ghosts.”

“He’s friendly anyway.”

Finding no hauntings overnight, they headed north to Buffalo, where they saw a few, and then on to Sheridan, where they spent the night.

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Heading East, they stopped in Cody, and visited the Buffalo Bill Cody museum. Although there was an RV park just out of town, they decided to stop over at the Uptown Motel, which was managed by a nice couple originally from California. The following day they continued into Yellowstone National Park. Light snow covered the ground throughout the park, except for the thermal features, and they were excited to see the eruption of Old Faithful, which was being cantankerous, and made them wait 30 minutes past its expected time. They headed south to Grand Teton National Park, and spent the night at a nice resort, enjoying the morning view of the snow covered valley below and the mountains beyond on the exceptionally clear day. Returning to Yellowstone, they continued northwards of Old Faithful, and took the Grand Loop road until they encountered the NE Entrance road. It continued briefly into Montana and the small town of Cooke City, where they ate lunch, then descended once again briefly into Yellowstone and Wyoming. They continued into Montana.

Montana

That too was brief, and they continued on to Billings. A side trip took them down Interstate 90 to the Little Bighorn Battlefield, then they backtracked a bit and headed towards Bozeman. They stopped at Prairie Dog Town and were surprised to find it open so late in the year, although they had to enter on foot. Despite the snow cover, there was still plenty to see. Passing through Bozeman, they continued on to Helena and visited the capitol. They also marveled at the beauty of the St. Helena Cathedral, although parts were under renovation, with its tall twin spires reaching high into the big sky.

Setting out the next morning they visited Glacier National Park, and briefly consider continuing northwards to Banff in Canada, but checking the weather and an impending storm, felt it best to return southward to Missoula, and on to Butte. The following day they left for Idaho.

Idaho

Entering Idaho without any significant fanfare, they continued to Idaho Falls. With the weather becoming colder, they opted to find a hotel for the night, then explored the Snake River and Greenbelt area of the city. The following day they passed through Pocatello en route through Twin Falls and the capital of Boise. Spending the night, they visited the capital and decided to explore the surrounding area. They enjoyed visiting the communities of Nampa and Caldwell, and were warned away by a friendly night watchman in Kuna who advised them that they couldn't park their RV overnight on the street. The long day trip the following day had them arriving in Moscow. Despite their initial reaction and concern that it would be overrun by Communists, they found the college town to be delightful. A short drive the next day to Coeur D'Alene opened the gateway to Sandpoint further north, but weather kept them from proceeding any further, and they returned to Coeur D'Alene and drove west into Washington.

December

Washington

It was quite apparent that upon entering Washington and December simultaneously, that things were going to be a bit cold.

"Why didn't we plan this better?" Angela complained, brushing some snow off of her shoulder as they entered

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the hotel where they planned to stay the night.

"We can weather it," I quipped. "It's only a little snow. Would you prefer hot and humid?"

"Right now, hot sounds pretty good," as she shivered, taking off her heavy coat. "It's nice in here, though." A fire was burning in the lobby's fireplace and she went up to it to warm her hands while I checked in.

"Room for two, please."

"Do you have a reservation?"

"No, we just assumed that at this time of year there would be plenty of rooms available."

"Well, there is a convention in town, and rooms are limited. May I have your name, please?"

"I Mall, and my wife Angela," indicating Angela by the fireplace.

"The I Mall?" The clerk gazed suspiciously at him as if he was trying to stage some elaborate hoax.

"Yes, I am. Didn't know there was more than one."

"I would have expected you to look a little different. Where's your famous long hair? And the outrageous outfits?"

"That's long gone, over a year ago, and the outfits were only a phase. I'm just a normal person now, just trying to lead a normal life."

"We do get an occasional celebrity here. Did you know Bing Crosby lived nearby here when he was a boy? We have a suite named in his honor, which we reserve for special guests. I can book it for you, if you'd like."

"That will be great, we're anxious to get off the road a bit and warm up. Two nights?"

"You got it!"

After a restful two days, the once again ventured out

into the chilly state, heading to Seattle.

In Seattle, they explored the Pike Place Market, and purchased some coffee from a place called Starbucks. It helped to warmed them, but I wanted more.

“I’m not a big fan of coffee,” I stated. “Too bad they didn’t offer tea as well.”

After a day of exploring Pike Place Market, and nearly getting hit by an airborne fish, they settled into their hotel, and looked at the few remaining days ahead of their year long trip.

“It’s coming to an end. We should be home by Christmas.”

The next day, on the way south, they stopped in Olympia and toured the Capitol. A side trip to Tumwater had them searching for Artesians, but they failed to find any. Heading south, they took a side trip to see the devastation of the Mount St. Helens area, and then on to Oregon.

Oregon

Crossing over the Columbia, they headed east to Multnomah Falls. Wanting to climb to the top, they stopped at the lower footbridge, as the coldness of the day finally got to them. Returning to Portland, they visited the International Rose Test Garden, which had been cut back for the winter. However, they managed to find one strong plant that still had a bloom. Resisting the temptation to take the final flower, I merely stopped to smell the roses. They also visited the Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden, which had a few more blooms that the Rose Garden did.

After a night’s stay, they ventured south to Eugene and

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visited the Capitol, and then backtracked and took the road to Bend and spent the night. Catching US 20 the next day they intersected US 95 and made their way into Nevada.

Nevada

Their first stop was the border town of McDermitt. “Finally, big time gambling!” I declared. He dropped in twenty dollars worth of quarters and came out with five dollars. “I guess I won’t be retiring on this!”

“You’re already retired.”

They continued to Winnemucca where they spent the night, parking in a run down trailer park and encountering some real characters. The next day, they headed east to Elko, stopping briefly to lose a few more quarters. “I’ll lose my fortune if this keeps up!” I complained. They continued to Wells and thought about ascending the mountain road up to Angel Lake, but it was impassable for both the RV and the car, due to wintry conditions.

After their overnight stay, they continued south to Ely, stopped for a bite to eat at the Hotel Nevada, and continued southward to Las Vegas.

“Are we sure this is the right Las Vegas, this time?”

“Look around, isn’t it obvious?”

Dusk was setting in, and the strip was starting to light up. They parked the RV at a park on the edge of town, and drove into the city. I converted one hundred dollars into quarters and started hitting the machines. After losing fifty, they moved on to another casino, where their luck improved. I cashed out with three hundred dollars, and Angela netted another hundred. “First money I’ve made all year.”

“Almost enough to fill the gas tank.”

After their night in Sin City, they hit the road, heading north to Carson City, where they visited the capitol, and then on to Reno, the Biggest Little City in the World, and lost another hundred dollars.

“Easy come, Easy go. Well, we should be home tomorrow.”

“Don’t count on it. California is a big state.”

California

Their return to California came via US 395, which they continued south through the Mono Lake area. Their desire to see the old ghost town of Bodie was thwarted when they discovered that the dirt road to the town was unplowed. However, the blanket of fresh fallen snow gave rise to thoughts of a white Christmas, which was only a few days away. They stopped overnight in the Mammoth Lakes area and enjoyed the snow and decorations of the holiday season.

The drive into the Los Angeles Basin was interrupted with some rain storms, but the snow had given way to clear roads. Stopping for a couple of nights in Anaheim, they enjoyed a day in Disneyland. Driving up the coast on US 101, they enjoyed the occasional glimpses of the Pacific until returning inland and heading to San Francisco. After their final overnight stay on the road, they headed homeward. A final swing past the Capitol Building in Sacramento greeted them with the traditional Capitol Christmas Tree.

“Beautiful!”

“Aren’t we going to stop for a tour?”

“We’ve been there before.”

“Merry Christmas.”

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“Merry Christmas.”

Hawaii

I looked at the hash marks on the side of the RV and counted them off. “5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50. Well, we’ve done it. We’ve been to every state, and did it all in a year. I think we can finally celebrate Christmas with all the traditional trappings. While it’s never a white Christmas around here, a least we can have one without going too far.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something? Have you actually counted the states? Yes, you might say there are 50 marks on the side of the RV, but that’s counting Washington, D.C., and that’s not a state.”

I thought for a minute before he realized “Hawaii! And it’s no wonder, since we can’t drive there.”

“We didn’t drive to Alaska, but still we managed that.”

“Looks like it will have to be up in the air again.”

They flew to Honolulu, where they saw the state house, then took island hops to the Big Island, Maui, Kauai and a short trip to Molokai and Lanai. They attempted a visit to Niihau, but were turned away. “Maybe in a few years.”

Celebrating the week after Christmas in the temperate climate was no different than what they had experienced the previous year in Australia, although it was a bit cooler. “Maybe next year.”

“Maybe next year.”

The kids in America arrived home in time to see in the New Year.

1983 - OUR HOUSE

The road trip completed, focus needed to be turned toward creating their new home. After having spent a year on the road, it didn't really feel foreign coming home to nothing, but they knew that inevitably, they would want a family and a place to raise them, and living in an RV would no longer be an option.

"This is what I envision for our house." I showed Angela some sketches he had quickly made. "I want it to be a grand home, as we will be living there for a long time. I'm through with traveling for now."

"I'd like to see us incorporate some of our memories from the road trip. Perhaps something like 'the best the USA has to offer.'"

"What stands out in your memory?"

"Well, there's the White House."

"That would be a little excessive."

"How about all the state Capitols we saw. Surely there must be some inspiration there?"

"Again, too excessive. We saw ranch homes, famous landmarks, but we didn't really look that hard how the

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normal people live.”

“You think we’re normal?”

“It might be time to try to be a little more normal, so to speak. But I don’t want to want for anything either.”

They reviewed I’s sketches, and found that some spoke to their mutual sensibilities, and finally agreed on a direction they wanted to take. They considered a number of custom home contractors, and finally settled on one company whose other work they enjoyed.

“We’ll give them our ideas, then let them fly with it and see what they come up with.”

With that out of the way, I had not forgotten the promises he had made during the year on the road. The first order of business was to contact his uncle Ed in North Dakota and see how things were going there.

“Well, it’s pretty quiet here right now. There’s snow on the ground still, and we really don’t have anything else to do until the spring thaw. We’re used to it, though, and that shouldn’t concern you any.”

“My plan was to make an investment in the family farm, and if we can turn some profits in the future, that will benefit you all. We can modernize some of the equipment, and maybe even expand it a bit. What do you consider your first priority?”

“Well...” he paused as if in thought, but I ran with it.

“A well? You need a water supply?”

“Well, I guess yes, a well. We have one, but it needs to be deeper, a better source. Maybe that’s where we should start.”

“When can we start?”

“Right now wouldn’t be good, because the ground is

frozen. But once we get the thaw, then that would be a good time to start.”

“OK. I’ll keep in touch, then, and when the time is right, we’ll get started.”

It’s next order of business was to contact the young musician he met in Green Bay. He dialed him up, but got the answering machine. “Hi, this is I Mall. We spoke in Green Bay last year, and I’d really like to work out something with you regarding your music. Please call me back, and let’s see what we could do.” He left his contact information and hoped for a call back soon.

“That’s strike two for today.”

Angela corrected him, “You didn’t get any strikes, you set the path for some future projects. Don’t let the thought of no immediate action get you down.”

“It’s just that I’m ready to get back into some things. After constant moving for a year, I don’t feel that I can slow down right now.”

“You don’t have to stop everything, just take it easy for a bit. Life will catch up to you.”

“Maybe it’s time I did some more music. I feel like that is one thing that I did leave behind, and never really looked back.”

“Your old instruments are still at your parents’ place, and you only used the old studio a few times once it was rebuilt after the fire. It’s been sitting idle for some time. Maybe it’s time to check it out.”

I called up his father, “Hey, dad, I want to fire up the old studio and make some magic. Care to help me?”

“Sure, why not? Everything’s the way you left it the last time it was used. Come on by and we’ll check it out

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together.”

I met his father at the studio. Through a few years of disuse, it was evident that there would be some work to be done before music was going to be made. First thing up, the exterior needed a coat of paint, after a wash down to remove the accumulated dirt. Secondly, the interior was covered in dust. Fortunately, the sensitive electronic equipment and instruments were covered, and safe from the elements, so after a few sneezes and runny noses and itchy eyes, the place was cleaned up and ready to go.

“I remember the first time we tried to fire up everything all at once. We blew so many fuses that we should have bought stock.”

“That’s an issue of the past, now,” Henry said. “Everything was brought up to meet the needs of the full band. For what you want to do, I don’t think it will be an issue at all.”

“The guys and I sure spent a lot of time together while we were working up to be the band we became. It was almost as if this was our house. We even ended up sleeping on the floor sometime. And having that refrigerator there wasn’t a bad thing either. Hmm,” I paused, thinking deeply. “With just a little work, Angela and I could move in here while we’re waiting for the new place to be built!”

Henry and I started making the grand plans for conversion of the studio to a full-fledged living space, and soon had a design that could be implemented quickly to turn it into a decent home.

“It’s not quite the palatial estate we envisioned,” I mused, “but I think it’s going to be a good spot to relax and wait until the new one. And maybe I’ll even be able to

record my next hit album!”

With the RV parked right outside, Angela and I began to make their new space into a home.

“It’s nice to be settled down, at least for a while, and to have a solid foundation under our feet.”

“Dad made this place to last,” I noted, “and it’s good to be able to make some use of it again.”

They worked together to domesticate the studio. First order of business was to outfit the room with the refrigerator into a full-fledged kitchen. While there wasn’t really enough space to put in everything they needed, a small oven, a microwave and a table were added. Some cabinets were also added, and in time, the store from the RV had been transferred.

“I don’t think we need to work on a music room so much. The place is pretty much all set up for that.”

Henry had already been at work adding on a room that would be of use as a bedroom, and the bathroom and shower had already been a part of the original design. Before long, they occupied about 800 square feet, and decided that would be enough for now.

“It’s only temporary,” they agreed. “Our new house will be ready in six months.”

The time spent modernizing the studio into a studio apartment quickly moved into the Spring, and I once again contacted his uncle Ed about the work they had planned together.

“The ground is workable, now,” Ed told I, “and we can start to work on the well anytime.”

“I will make some contacts from here, then, to get the

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process started. They will work to your specifications, but refer any expenses to me.”

“Will do.”

The crew started the work in a few days, but when they got to the depth where they thought they might be able to hit a pocket of water, all they got was a black sludge. Moving elsewhere on the farm, they discovered the same thing. Ed contacted I.

“It’s no use, all we are getting is black sludge, and we haven’t been able to find any decent water source. It’s a bust!”

“Black sludge? Let me have someone come out and do some analysis. I have an inkling that it might just turn out to be OK after all.”

After an inspection of the black sludge, it was discovered that there was a lot of oil below the surface, and much greater interest was suddenly made in that than in trying to find more water. By the time all was analyzed, the Mall farm was discovered to be worth a lot more than just farming would provide, and that it was probably best to abandon farming altogether. A new oil boom was about to begin, and the Ed and Mary Mall family had nothing to worry about financially from that point on.

I was concerned that he had not heard back from the young musician in Green Bay, and attempted contact again, only to still receive an answering machine. Again leaving a message, he implored the musician to contact him. He wrote a letter and within a couple of weeks got it back, with the imprint “No Forwarding Address.”

I was beside himself, and wondered about the lost

opportunity that did not materialize. His hope of finding yet another new talent that he felt had as much potential as Reginald Von Happenstance was going to remain an unrealized dream.

Instead, I turned to the studio, and found some solace in composing new music. With no distribution deal, and without a great incentive to make it heard, it instead sat on the shelf, unheard except for a few close friends.

Finally, the new home was ready, and moving day had arrived. I and Angela bid farewell to their small home, and started to fill out the much, much larger space with the possessions they had in storage, as well as new items they had purchased.

In a little private ceremony, I smashed a bottle of champagne against the column at the front entry and declared “I dub thee, our house, Mall Hall!” Looking at the damage caused by the bottle, he also declared “We’ll have to fix that...”

2000 - MUSIC

I's tale of the "missing years" as told to Roger took several weeks, and there were many details that I had glossed over, or had deemed as "not important." Despite the facts, the supplementary material was a delight to fans who had missed out on the subtle references occasionally seen during those years, and mostly regaled to the back pages of any publications. There was even talk of reviving the old fan publications, and one attempt managed to get off the ground, only to fall flat after an emphatic "No" in once again trying to seek a Golden Fingers reunion.

"That part of my life is over," I declared, "and it will be a long time before I seek that road again."

However, the weeks in reviewing events from more than twenty years earlier gave pause to some unfinished business. I's demos that he recorded in 1983 had never been distributed, and as a token of appreciation, he turned a few of them over to Roger for a premiere on his web site. When they had been recorded, the ability to make them available to fans was limited, especially without a distribution deal. With the advent of the web,

providing music directly to the fans over an internet connection became a reality. Although the quality was limited, due to the slow nature of network connections, fans would accept the wait for what was, to them, new music. By recording some of the original demos to CD, I was able to mail them to Roger, who in turn was able to convert them to a lower-fidelity recording, but one that fans would enjoy anyway. The occasional fan would ask for a better version, and though it wasn't a public practice, Roger made CD copies and sent them to a few of his most ardent supporters.

A side effect of the new music was that many fans began looking at their own collections, and several discovered recordings of the band during their 1970s popularity, as well as solo concerts that I himself had performed. The exchange of bootleg material through the fan bulletin board on the "A Most Amazing Man" web site began to worry Roger as to the legality of the practice. With a blessing from I, the practice continued, but before long, a "cease and desist" notice arrived in Roger's e-mail from a law firm that represented the interests of Osgood Martin and Isaac Daly.

Roger contacted I, and I indicated that he had not heard from either of them for several years, but that Isaac had himself had a semi-successful solo career. He was a bit surprised that legal action would be the recourse. Had they fallen on hard times?

While Isaac's recent successes were well known, I realized that he had not heard anything from Ozzie in an even longer period of time than he had considered. Thinking back, he could not recall a single encounter since the band broke up. He mentioned it to Angela.

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“Where’s your memory? He came to our wedding, and we went to his, what was that, ten years ago? Come to think of it, he wasn’t at Sandy’s funeral, though, nor have I heard anything about him in all the years since.”

“He married that girl from the record company, that’s about all I remember. I wonder if she’s somehow behind this cease and desist order concerning the bootleg material from the band?”

“The record company still holds some rights to material released during that time, so maybe they are behind it. I have a hard time thinking that Ozzie would be involved in it. The last I heard, he was living well off of investments that he made during the band’s period of productivity. What would be the incentive?”

“Money is always an incentive, if that’s what he’s after.”

“Don’t be so quick to paint a guilty picture, we need to check this out a little further.”

When a formal letter outlying the charges was delivered, not only was it received by Roger, but another copy was also sent to I, naming him as a co-defendant. A suit was being brought forth to return control of any and all materials that had been illegally recorded at Golden Fingers concerts to the record company. Senior partner at the law firm was Candace Martin, Ozzie’s wife. “He is behind this! He should have known that making a legal issue is not the best way to deal with it, why didn’t he just come to us directly with his concerns? We keep a low profile, but we’re not exactly hermits! He could have contacted us at any time.”

I fumed about the possibility of betrayal by his old friend. I decided to take some action of his own. The law firm kept offices in Los Angeles, so he made the call and

demanded to speak to Candace. "Martin and Martin," said the receptionist as she answered the phone. "How may I direct your call?"

"I need to speak to Candace Martin directly, this is I Mall."

"Ms. Martin is not available to take your call. Would you like to speak to her partner, Mr. Martin?"

I's countenance reddened as he thought of what he would say to Ozzie once he got on the phone, trying to suppress his anger, he indicated through his gritted teeth, "Yes, I'll speak with him."

The line went dead for a few seconds while I was placed on hold. Finally, a click and some background noise indicated someone was coming back on the line. I's rage got the better of him.

"Ozzie, what the hell are you trying to pull with this lawsuit? What are you and your lawyer scum friends up to?" he yelled into the phone.

"Pardon me, sir?" It was the receptionist back on the line. "Mr. Martin is delayed for a minute, I just wanted to let you know the wait would be a little longer." She placed the call back on hold. I continued to fume, and began pacing. "That scum has put me on hold again," he told Angela. "It's obvious he doesn't want to talk!" I slammed the phone on the hook, and complained "I'm not going to be kept on hold for the likes of that twit. I have half a mind to pay them a visit in person!"

"Why don't you? That actually sounds like a good idea. There's always so many opportunities for misunderstandings that a personal meeting could eliminate. It will give you a chance to calm down, and cooler heads will prevail. We'll get to the bottom of this,

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and see that something mutually beneficial comes out of it. Go ahead and book a flight.”

The flight to Los Angeles wasn’t until the morning, and although I was tempted to call back and yell some more, he decided that Angela was right. He booked the flight and a return flight for that evening. “I’ll have this all wrapped up in a couple of hours, so there’s no sense in just getting a one-way ticket.”

The next day, I boarded the plane and touched down in Los Angeles an hour later. A taxi ride to the law firm of Martin and Martin took another hour, but finally he was at the entrance. “Calm yourself,” he told himself. “You can make more friends with honey than vinegar.” He took a deep breath as he opened the door and stepped in. The receptionist looked up as he entered. “May I help you?”

I steeled himself, and controlled his anger. “I’m here’s to see the Martins. Tell them it’s I Mall.”

“Are you expected, sir? We weren’t successful in getting back to you yesterday after we were cut off. I hope you weren’t inconvenienced.”

“Inconvenienced? This whole cease and desist lawsuit is an inconvenience!” His calm demeanor had broken once again.

“Yes, sir, I understand. Ms. Martin or her brother will be able to meet with you in a few minutes.”

“Her brother?” Now it was I’s turn to be confused, he didn’t recall that Ozzie had a sister.

“Yes, Mr. Charles Martin, he is the other partner in this firm.”

The wheels began to turn a little bit, as I realized that Mr. Martin was not Ozzie after all, but still was confused.

She buzzed the office. “Ms. Martin? A Mr. I Mall is here to see you.” A pause. “Yes ma’am, I’ll send him in.” She hung up and indicated the door.

I opened it and tentatively stepped in. “Mr. Mall? Pleased to meet you, I’m Candace Martin.” She held out her hand to shake.

I ignored it and got to the matter directly. “What are you and Ozzie doing? How has this come to a lawsuit, without any attempt at prior communication?”

Now it was Candace’s turn to be confused. “I’m sure I don’t know who this ‘Ozzie’ is that you speak of.”

“Ozzie! Osgood Martin! Your husband?”

“Sir, I am not married, nor have I ever met anyone named Osgood Martin.” She paused in thought for a moment and suddenly her eyes opened in surprise. “You don’t mean that Osgood Martin! Of course, you’re I Mall! How could I not have known?”

Again, confusion set in. “This lawsuit,” as he proffered the papers, “indicates otherwise. It clearly states that you are representing Isaac Daly and Osgood Martin in seeking to block release of fan-made materials of Golden Fingers live recordings. How do you explain that?”

Candace took the papers and gave them a once over. “Sir, I believe you have been the victim of a hoax. This is not our letterhead, and this is certainly not my signature. There is no lawsuit, and as far as I know, no injunction against your fans offering up their material for sale or trade. We don’t even represent the music industry. Our cases here are strictly in the real estate area. I’m afraid your concern with us is unjustified. Prior to yesterday, we have never made any attempt to contact you.”

I sat down, confused as ever as to who would try to run

such an elaborate and believable hoax. And to what purpose?

Candace broke his reverie. "If I may be so bold as to ask, sir. May I have your autograph?"

2001 - FAMILY AFFAIR

Chrissy Mall was turning 16 at the end of the year, and I wanted to give her the biggest Sweet Sixteen party the world had ever known. At least that was I's statement before Angela brought him down to earth.

"I think she would be more inclined to keep it a small family affair, with a few of Chrissy's close friends. The last thing a teenager needs is to get lost in one of your imaginary extravaganzas."

"One can dream, can't they? I just want the best for my little girl!"

"Your little girl is becoming a young lady, and it won't be long before she is behind the wheel of a car. That's when your real troubles will begin," Angela warned. "And the twins aren't that far behind. Before you know it, they'll be teenagers, and we'll have double the trouble."

"Still, Chrissy needs to have a nice party. Who should be invited, then? Family, of course, that'll be my parents, your parents, Spike, Emily and their kids. Uncle Arthur and Aunt Jenny. Maybe even Betty can come in from Oregon. We haven't see her for several years."

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“A few of Chrissy’s friends from school would probably like to come as well. See, we can still keep it small, yet have a good time. No need to alert the media.”

”Then there’s dad’s side of the family.” I began counting the aunts and uncles, and all of the cousins and their kids. “Hmm,” he was lost in thought and looked absently to the ceiling, “and carry the two. Yikes, I don’t think I can count that high!”

“That’s the problem with planning an event like this. We can’t leave anybody out, or they will be offended. I guess our little family affair will be an extravaganza after all. Congratulations on your victory,” she added sarcastically.

“I can’t help it that my dad came from such a large family! And it’s not like he’s at fault. After all, I’m their only child. It’s probably because he came from such a large family that he only wanted one.”

“Well, we better make a list, then” and she began writing. Nelly and Ricky, David and Jennifer, Faith and Michael, Lee and Joe, Craig and Faith, Will and Mandy, Lenny and Gwen. “I think that’s all the aunts and uncles. Fourteen. Then we add your cousins, Nelly had four, didn’t she?”

I nodded, “Three of them are married, and two of them have two kids each.”

Angela did a quick calculation, OK, four plus three plus four more. That’s eleven. Plus the fourteen. That’s twenty-five.”

“Uncle David only has two kids, but they’re both married. Steven has five from six to seventeen and Joel has three.” He counted on his fingers, two cousins plus two wives, plus eight kids between them. “I ran out of fingers,

but I think that's twelve."

"OK, we're up to thirty-seven. Your aunt Faith only has the one, and she's still a teenager herself. Thankfully, that's only one."

"Thirty-eight."

"Aunt Lee has two with Joe, plus the two she had before her divorce from Bill." Angela counted silently, "with all the kids, that's another fifteen."

"You forget the great-grandson."

"Sixteen."

"Fifty-four. Craig and Faith didn't have any kids, but they do have a dog."

"No dogs. And didn't we already count Faith?"

"That was the other Faith."

"Here's the bank breaker. Will and Mandy were a baby factory. They've got seven. I think we need a pad of paper for that one."

I ticked off seven. "Cousin Abigail had two from her first husband, three from the second and two from the third." He ticked off seven more. "At least she's not married now."

"I heard she's pregnant again, so maybe we should include one more as a maybe in case she marries that guy."

"Abby's oldest has a husband and daughter as well." Two more ticks.

"Bonnie has two, plus her husband. That's three."

"Charlie and Charlene have three." Four more.

"David is divorced, and Cynthia has custody of the two kids, but we better count them, just in case." I added two.

"Elaine and Harry have two." Three.

"Frank and Joanne have three." Four more ticks.

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“And finally, Gail. But she’s not married.”

“Nothing to add, then.” I counted up the ticks in groups of five. “Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-three!”

“OK, we’re up to eighty-seven. That’s going to be some guest list!”

“You forgot about Lenny and Gwen. They only have Gerald.”

“OK. Eighty-eight. One for every key on the piano. Nice number.”

“But we didn’t include our immediate family in the count. We named them, but didn’t count them.”

“Ok, adding eleven. Is that it?”

“I think so.” Angela added the two figures. “Ninety-nine! Still, I can’t help thinking we’re leaving someone out.”

“Did you count the five of us?”

“Well, that’s a given. We don’t need to send out invitation for ourselves. But it does make the potential head count one hundred and four.”

“We haven’t made any room from Chrissy’s friends. That’s just family.”

“Oh! That’s right. Better add another twenty. One hundred twenty four.”

“We better write them down by family group, and see if we have everyone’s current address.”

They wrote out the long list, double checking the count, but Angela had the nagging feeling that someone was still missing. They reviewed the list a third time before she exclaimed “How could we forget your Uncle Ed?” Angela added Ed, Mary, Samantha and Sarah to the list. “That’s one hundred twenty-eight.”

As they prepared the invitations, they began to group the names for individual addresses. By the time they were through, they had compiled more than fifty individual addresses.

“That’s over a hundred eighty dollars in postage alone!” I exclaimed.

“Check your decimal point. We’re only talking eighteen dollars.”

“Enough to keep the Post Office running for another year, I suppose.”

“Just wait until we have to do our Christmas cards! We can add a few dozen more to that list.”

“Can’t we just put the Christmas card in with the invitation and save some postage?”

“Saving pennies while spending many dollars elsewhere doesn’t make a lot of sense. Besides, it’s tacky.”

I conceded the point, frugality was not his strong trait.

“So, where are we going to put all these people if they all show up? Most of them are local, so it’s not unlikely. We only have space in the picnic pavilion for forty-eight. I guess we didn’t plan ahead.”

“Picnic seating for forty-eight is plenty. It sits empty most of the time. But we can add some temporary tables. The space allows for at least ten. That should be plenty. We can rent what we need, ten tables, eighty chairs.”

“OK, what about food?”

“Emily is a caterer, silly. I think she can handle that.”

“But she’s a guest. Now who’s talking tacky?”

“She has staff that can handle the details. I’m sure she won’t mind. She loves big events.”

With the guest list coming together as the RSVPs

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started to pour in, the event was shaping up to be the major event that I originally wanted, and not just a simple family affair. Although the November weather was still mild, they knew that early December could be cold and stormy, and without adequate protection, the whole affair could turn into a miserable mess. Henry and Buddy worked together to construct a connecting temporary passageway between the house and the pavilion. Although they were both in their 70s, it didn't slow them down, and with a deadline to meet, they made sure that all the bases were covered.

Angela and Emily worked together on the menu, and decided that simpler was better. Rather than a formal sit-down meal, they agreed to prepare a buffet, with a variety of foods to meet the tastes and preferences of their many guests. Juliette and Annette offered their support as well.

I and Spike handled the musical entertainment, and arranged for one of their favorite groups from the '70s to make a special appearance.

With everyone so busy, Chrissy felt a little pushed to the background. "Dad," she complained to I, "whose party is this anyway? Yours or mine?"

"It's all for you, my sweet child, all for you."

"Then why are we having your favorite band here? What about my choices?"

I realized that he had gotten carried away again, and did not consider Chrissy's own preferences.

"OK, you're right. Who would you want instead?"

"N Sync would be nice. You would do that for me, wouldn't you?"

I gulped a little at the thought. "I'm not quite sure they play birthday parties," I advised.

“O-Town? Ricky Martin?”

All of these acts were surely booked for months to come.

“Tell you what, let me pull in some favors, and I’ll see what I can do. I won’t disappoint you.”

I started the next day making contacts with his friends in the music business, and although he couldn’t come up with a major act, he was able to pull together a supergroup of sorts consisting of various members of some of the top acts. As publicists’ press releases and fan rumors began to grow, the anticipation and word of this unique event began to spread, and when a few of the national magazines picked it up, and even MTV reported on it, I knew that the monster had gotten out of hand.

It was evident that the accommodations for the family affair of just over one hundred were no longer going to be adequate. “We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

“Emily’s catering business is not going to be able to handle a crowd like that,” Angela stated, after hearing of the guesstimates of the potential numbers that could be arriving. “We are going to have to scramble to feed thousands.”

“We don’t have to feed anybody but the invited guests,” I declared. “But we will need to arrange for something bigger than our pavilion to accommodate the crowds.”

After a newer, larger temporary pavilion structure was acquired, space was available for a couple thousand. In the week after Thanksgiving, fans started to gather and temporary campsites were established. Despite a small rainstorm, fans remained steadfast, and an overflow crowd for the one off concert was accommodated, although

space was at a premium. Chrissy's Sweet Sixteen party ended up being one of the major events of the year.

2002 - NOT A GIRL, NOT YET A WOMAN

Chrissy Mall was sixteen, and while she had many friends, not one boy stood above any other that would qualify as a boyfriend. Angela and I weren't particularly encouraged about her starting to date, but she continually dropped hints about getting out a bit. She had taken her driver's test, and failed, only to reschedule and finally pass it on the second try. An ever doting father, I purchased her first vehicle, but avoided the glamour of a sports car, and settled on a simple Corolla.

"Dad, I can't be seen in that," Chrissy complained.

"It's transportation." I countered, "and a lot more than other kids your age have."

"Billy Woldson has a Mustang," she offered. "A blue one."

"You're not Billy Woldson. You have a green Corolla."

Billy Woldson was eighteen, and a senior at the high school. His classic good looks were an attraction to a number of the girls at the school, and Chrissy was no exception. She admired his blue Mustang, and him as well. He played on the football team, and though it was

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the off season, was still popular among his classmates. He was currently the student council president, and it appeared that a football scholarship would send him off to a college in another state.

The legend of Chrissy's party had spread throughout the school, and though many of her classmates had crashed it, Billy had not. As it happened, Billy had noticed Chrissy, but in what might be a surprise to many, he was too shy to ask her out.

He confided in a friend who had crashed the party, and tried to extract some information from him.

"So what did you think of that big party last year? See a lot of action?"

"The place was overrun by girls, that's for sure. And a surprising number of older women, as well."

"Older women?"

"Well, older than us, anyway. Twenty-somethings. Nice." He stared dreamily into the unfocused distance.

The conversation descended into the typical sex talk that ultimately occurs when young men start to talk about girls, and Billy sought a change in direction.

"What's up with that Chrissy Mall, anyway? She sure has got to be stuck up, throwing herself a big party like that. I even heard some of her friends ended up getting a little drunk, and ended up getting kicked out of school for a bit."

"That's just a rumor. Actually, the whole thing was sorta lame. Once they cleared out the place after the concert, all there really was to eat was cake, ice cream and punch. I left pretty early. But then, I hadn't been invited."

"But, Chrissy, how did she look?"

"She was OK, but..." he paused and looked quizzically

at Billy, "You got a thing for her?"

"No..." Billy was defensive. "Just curious. She's cute, though."

"You got a thing for her," he stated decisively. "You should ask her out."

"I'm sure she gets that all the time. Supposedly her dad was someone big at one time. She's probably got guys lined up for the next year."

"Look, all I know is that she was just having fun with her friends at the party, and they were all girls. I don't think she even has a boyfriend. Give it a try."

Billy, secretly relieved that the competition was limited, still was nervous. With his hesitation, however, competition stepped in, in the guise of Craig Lopez.

Craig was a junior at the High School, and was one of the few boys in Chrissy's circle of friends. Since he didn't have a car, he sometimes relied on Chrissy to provide transportation to different school events. After spending a lot of time together, she began to visit him at his job at a local grocery store. Their chats turned into more serious conversations, and the visits increased in frequency. When his birthday arrived in March, she surprised him with a kiss on the cheek. He in turn countered with a request for a date. They made plans to go to a movie, *Catch Me If You Can*, and enjoyed it. But it was Craig's surprisingly forward moves that turned Chrissy against him, "I'm not a girl, but not yet a woman, and I'm not ready to take that step, yet."

"Yet? Soon?"

"No, not soon."

The incident soured their relationship, and soon she stopped stopping by the grocery store, going out of her way to find somewhere else to be.

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Craig was so sure of himself that he wasn't ready to accept defeat. Rather, he started spreading the story that he and Chrissy did the deed, but he found her lacking in finesses, and dropped her. The stories rapidly spread through the school, getting back to her, and she was devastated.

Billy was devastated as well when he heard the stories. He had always considered that Chrissy was one of the "nice" girls. Not one to succumb to peer pressure. Not one to be the school slut, as she was now painted to be. But when elements of Craig's tale began to fall apart, it also became apparent that Chrissy was truly the injured party, and Billy took this opportunity to assure her that she had his support.

Chrissy appreciated the new friendship that Billy was offering, and they started to hang out together. Word spread around school that she was now shopping her reputation, and hitting on the popular football star. Both of them were upset to hear the new set of rumors that were going around, and Billy redoubled his efforts to clear her good name.

Chrissy, in turn, turned to Billy for more emotional support, and they became more of a genuine couple. When it came to asking someone to the Spring Senior Prom, Billy was ready to pop the question.

"Of course I'll go with you," was Chrissy's answer. "It will be fun!"

Chrissy couldn't wait to tell her parents the news, but Angela was skeptical. "What do we really know about Billy? What are his parents like? What part of town is he from?"

Chrissy assured both of them that Billy was a complete

gentleman, and would treat her as a lady.

"He's already eighteen," I noted. "When I was eighteen, I already had a reputation as a bad boy." The facts were anything but.

"He's not going to be you, dad. He's smart, athletic, and...", she paused with a smile on her face. "He has a Mustang."

"So Mustang boy has what in mind? I know what happens after the Prom. I've heard the stories."

"There's nothing to worry about, dad. You can trust me."

"But you're still my little girl, right?"

"I'm not a girl anymore, dad."

"You'll always be my girl, Chrissy."

The time for Prom arrived, and Chrissy shopped with her mother for a nice gown. "Nothing too revealing, you don't want to tempt your beau."

"Mom! Please trust me, nothing's going to happen."

"I know, but you can never be too careful."

"Are you saying that you did something after your Prom? Did you even know dad then?"

"Of course I knew your father; we grew up together. And no, I didn't even go to Prom."

"Then how can you know what's going to happen?"

"I've seen TV. I've read the books."

"Mom. That stuff doesn't happen. It's all just fiction."

"Well, we trust you to make the right choices."

"I will," Chrissy assured her mother.

The big night finally came, and when Billy arrived in his Mustang, I invited him in for the "interrogation."

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“You know how much I adore my little girl, don’t you, son?”

“Yes, of course, sir. And I know how much she adores you. I’ve heard her tell plenty of tales about your exploits.”

It was I’s turn to be defensive. “She knows very little about my days with the band and on the road.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Billy said. “She told me about her birthday party, about breaking her arm when she was little, and a lot of the things that you did while she was growing up.” He paused for a moment, then said “Did you say you were in the band? I played trumpet before I got into football. Did you march in many parades?”

I was surprised that Billy didn’t know more about him, and was a little crestfallen. But he decided to not fill him in with the glorious past. “As a matter of fact, I was in the band. I played clarinet. We got first place in a number of parades. I remember one time...” He got lost in thought when he recalled his pursuit of what turned out to be his cousin Betty, but then further considered it to be an inappropriate story to relate to the young man about to date his daughter. He quickly changed the subject. “I remember one time,” recovering, “when we did a very complicated formation during half-time, and I ran smack into the person marching in front of me. It took a while for me to live that one down.”

They laughed together at the remembrance of other fumbles on the field. Billy related, “I had a similar experience one time on the field. I wasn’t watching well enough and ran into one of our own linebackers. That play cost us the game.”

During their conversation, Chrissy made her grand entrance. The gown highlighted curves that neither I nor Billy had noticed before. I eyed them warily, but Billy was beaming. When he approached her at the bottom of the staircase, the iridescent shimmer almost made her glow, and the glow extended to her face. She knew she was being noticed.

Billy stammered a bit when he offered the corsage that he had brought to accent her already beautiful image. When he went to pin it on her, I could barely hold myself back, his concern mounting about Billy making a move on his little girl. But Billy was a gentleman, and delicately pinned the delicate flower onto her gown's strap.

As they drove off in Billy's Mustang, I noted to Angela. "Not a girl, not yet a woman. But certainly a lovely young lady."

2003 - CRAZY IN LOVE

Chrissy and Billy had been dating for over a year, and one might say they were crazy in love. Although Billy had been awarded a couple of college scholarships out of state, because of Chrissy, he elected to stay local. He still played football, but the exposure of a prestige university might elude him if he chose to pursue it as a career.

Chrissy, now seventeen, worked part-time during her senior year of high school in a local office as an afternoon receptionist. While she didn't need the money, as Angela and I provided her a hefty allowance and doted on her every need, she felt the need to at least be partially self-supporting, if only to avoid the label of being a spoiled brat, as some of her more distant acquaintances were wont to say. She paid for her own gasoline and car insurance, and Billy and she split on dates and dinners.

Because of college and especially during the football season, Billy did not have a steady income, and Chrissy's end of the split held the greater percentage, which was a source of irritation to I.

"Is that freeloader mooching off you again?" I would

say, when she went out to the movies.

“Dad, Billy’s not a freeloader. You know how hard he works on his studies, and he’s doing very well on the college team as well. You remember the award he won last year?” I acknowledged with a nod. “If he was a lazy freeloader, he never would have earned that,” she stated decisively.

“I’m well aware of Billy’s accomplishments, and I am as proud of them as you are. Just trying to protect my little girl.”

“Dad, I’ve told you before, I’m not a little girl. I’ll be eighteen in just a few months.”

“I know, I just can’t envision you all grown up.”

“Better start envisioning, because it’s happening fast.”

I recalled his own courtship of Angela, they were crazy in love as well. Angela had only been nineteen when they married, and had a pre-teen crush on I which I had totally failed to recognize until many years later. In fact, he had virtually ignored Angela as “Spike’s little brat sister” but couldn’t imagine her not being in his life now.

With Chrissy’s Sweet Sixteen extravaganza having gotten out of control, I and Angela had chosen to ignore a public celebration of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in the previous year. Still, I felt that he owed Angela the honor of celebration as their twenty-sixth approached. Angela was not too keen on the idea.

“Even without the throngs that came to Chrissy’s party, we still would have to do the same thing all over again and invite the whole Mall gang again. What was it, eighty-eight?”

“It was one hundred and twenty-eight. It’s up to a hundred and thirty-five now. Abby had her baby, but

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married another guy. Samantha got married. Steven's wife had another baby."

"That's six!"

"Yeah, six, and I don't think they're finished yet." I started recalling new relationships in his head. "David re-married Cynthia."

"I wonder how long that will last?"

"Charlie's son Bert got married, and they had a baby last year."

"Craig and Faith got another dog."

"No dogs!"

"OK, then. A hundred and thirty-four."

"Well, we're never having another party where we invite over a hundred relatives again. It's just too much."

"But I still would like to celebrate. Twenty-five years is a significant achievement, and twenty-six is one more. It's got to be bigger."

"Bigger is not an option for me, right now. I want simple."

"What about renewing our vows? We can invite just those who had been at our wedding."

"We're not even in touch with many of them. Besides, we already know how much we are in love." Despite her admission, Angela was clearly not the romantic one.

Suggestion after suggestion was offered, each of them rejected for various reasons of impracticality or displeasure with a possible outcome, that I finally reached the limit of what he could propose. "I can't think of a single thing that would appeal to you!" he stated in exasperation.

"How about just a quiet dinner at home? Just the two of us. Chrissy will probably want to go out with Billy

anyway, and Tyler and Merry can be shipped off to the grandparents for an evening, right?”

“Can I at least bring in a celebrity chef?”

“Just the two of us. No celebrity chef. But you can pick the menu. We’ll work together to make it.”

“OK, how does Prime Rib sound?”

“Prime Rib sounds good.”

“At last, we agree on something!”

I started working out the menu. Prime rib was the main course, but it needed to be accompanied by some sort of vegetable. He chose asparagus, with a hollandaise sauce.

“You know I’m not fond of asparagus. It makes my pee smell funny.”

“Ok, no asparagus,” I pouted. “Let’s think about an appetizer.”

“I like Brie.”

“OK, Brie with crackers. Maybe some fruit?”

“Raspberries? Yum.”

“We’ll just have that while we sit together and stare into each other’s eyes.”

“That might make eating difficult.”

“We can look away, occasionally. Then we’ll move on to the second course. We’ll serve that at the table.”

“And what will that be?”

I considered carefully, then suggested “Shrimp cocktail?”

“Is shrimp in season?”

“Anything can be in season.”

“Third course?”

I was deep in thought again. “Caesar Salad?”

“Caesar Salad sounds good. Adds a nice Roman touch. A little bit of Italy.”

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“Caesar Salad was created in Mexico.”

“Ok, so it adds some Mexican flavor, then.”

“Not really.”

“Fourth course?”

“Something to cleanse the palate, I would think. A Grapefruit Star Anise Granita!” he said with authority.

“You just thought that up yourself?”

“No, I looked it up online,” I admitted.

“Sounds good, though.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“Are we ever going to get to the prime rib? I’m getting full already.”

“It’s the very next course. With a side of Yorkshire Pudding.”

“A dessert in the middle of the meal?”

“It’s not a dessert, just a pastry.”

“You looked that up too, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Next course?”

“We’re not finished with the fifth course, yet!”

“But I’m already full. What else?”

“Asiago and sage scalloped potatoes.”

“Sounds... interesting.”

“Interesting? Sounds fantastic!”

“Are we done?”

“Done? We’re just getting started!”

“How long can this meal go on?”

“OK, two more... make that three more courses.”

“Are you going to be buying me a new wardrobe as well? Because I surely won’t be able to fit into my current one after this meal!”

“Sixth course: dessert!”

“There’s always room for Jello, I guess.”

“Nope, cherries jubilee flambé!”

“You’ll set the house on fire...”

“Maybe just a little. We’ll have the fire department on standby.”

“Two more?”

“Seventh course: cheese platter.”

“We had cheese already.”

“Well this rounds it out.”

“And finally?”

“And finally...” I held the anticipation to a maximum.

“Yes?”

“Latte!”

“Latte.”

“Yes, something to relax by.”

“So we finally get something to drink, after all of that.”

“It’s not just a drink. It’s something to savor.”

“Still, I’m going to be thirsty.”

“Well, there is the vast selection of wine and aperitifs as well.”

“And you’ve thought this all out as well. Do you even know what an aperitif is?”

“Not as much, but maybe a little glass of the bubbly to go with the brie?”

“Does that go?”

“Sounds like it might. A red for the main course, I would think.”

“Sounds like you really know your wines.”

“Er, not as much. Red meat, red wine. White meat, white wine. Makes sense, right?”

“Maybe just a glass of water to be safe, OK?”

“I’ll work it out, trust me.”

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I was true to his word, and studied up on wines and other drinks that would be appropriate at various parts of the meal, and when the time for the anniversary dinner arrived, the two of them began working out the logistics of the preparation of the meal, without involving anyone else.

“So can we put this together without a lot of trouble?”

“We can try. And if it doesn’t work out, we’ll practice and try it again next year.”

“Maybe we should go out to eat like we always do.”

“Nope. This will work.”

First order of business was shopping. I prepared the list of all the ingredients they would need to make this sumptuous feast. Angela reviewed it.

“You know you’re only cooking for two, here? There’s enough quantity to practically feed an army. A very hungry army at that.”

“Maybe we can adjust the quantities to a more appropriate level. Is a five pound roast OK?”

“Two pounds would be better.”

“But five pounds would give us leftovers. And it would cook better.”

“If you say so. Do we have room for all these leftovers? And will we ever eat them?”

“I can imagine myself having prime rib hash for breakfast. Or a sandwich. Or we could give some to the dog.”

“No dogs!”

“No dog?”

“OK, five pounds.”

“How about a big bag of shrimp? That’s five pounds, too.”

“*One* pound.”

“One pound.”

“Cocktail sauce, and then there are the cheeses. One pound each?”

“One pound total.”

“We need a half pound of asiago.”

“Ok, one and a half pounds total.”

“OK. Lettuce, raspberries, potatoes, grapefruit, star anise. Cherries?”

“Not in season. But you need a can, not fresh.”

“Can of cherries.” I looked over the list. “I think we have everything we need. Some of this we already have at home. Let’s shop!”

They worked together as a team, and with careful planning and preparation, put together a feast that would please a king and queen.

“You are my queen, my dear,” as I served up the first course, carefully slicing the Brie, placing it on a cracker and gently placing it in Angela’s mouth. He poured two glasses of Champagne, and served the two of them. “To 26 years! May we have 26 more!”

“And 26 more beyond that,” Angela added. They were just two kids, crazy in love.

2004 - 1985

“I think it’s time to revisit the ‘no dogs’ policy,” I stated resolutely. “We haven’t had a dog since 1985. You know how much I’ve always wanted another. Fido was my best friend.”

“Fido also bit our new baby daughter,” Angela accused. “Or have you forgotten? She spent two days in the hospital at Christmas, and that’s why we have a ‘no dogs’ policy.”

”But there are no babies in the house anymore, Chrissy’s 18, the twins are 14. You know how Tyler has always kept asking. He needs a best friend, just like my dad had with Greta, just like I had with Fido.”

“You had Fido for two years. How could he have been your best friend?”

“Two years is fourteen dog years. Do you know how many best friends I had in fourteen years?”

“As I recall, none.”

I, stung, countered “That’s what dogs are for!”

“No...”, she began firmly, then relented. “OK, we’ll think about getting another dog.”

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because I have a big surprise. Tyler!"

Tyler entered the room, carrying a puppy.

"You already have the dog? I thought we were going to think about it? You didn't even consult me?"

"Look into his eyes, how can you say no to that?"

Angela had to admit she was touched by the large sad eyes of the puppy, and it melted her heart on the spot. She reached out a hand to pet him, and the puppy took a small nip.

"Did he just bite me? What did I tell you?"

"That wasn't a bite, that was a playful nip. That's what puppies do."

"Well, we will want to 'nip' that in the bud. I do not want that to develop into a habit."

"Bud! That's a great name. Hey, Bud! What do you think?" He patted Bud on the head.

"Wouldn't Nipper make more sense?"

"It's Bud."

"Bud? Buddy's my dad's name. Why do you want to name him after my dad?"

"It's Bud, not Buddy. Big difference."

Tyler put Bud down on the ground, and he started scampering around on the slick floor. As he slid into the table leg and came to a sudden stop, he whimpered a bit, and then squatted, leaving a puddle on the ground.

"Oh, no!" Angela cried. "Are we going to have to deal with that as well?"

"That's part of having a puppy. He'll get housebroken."

I grabbed a section of newspaper, and laid it out on the floor, then placed Bud squarely in the middle. "That's where you do your business, boy."

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“I will not have him ‘do his business’ in the middle of the kitchen! Find someplace other to train him.”

With the mild weather, a corner of the garage was cleared to be the puppy’s own area. I set up a small barrier so that Bud wouldn’t have free roam, laid some newspaper in the corner for him to do his business, and bought a dog bed and some extra blankets to make him comfortable. A water and food bowl, and it was the perfect environment to raise a puppy.

The first night was rough. Bud yipped and cried all night, and no one in the house was able to sleep very well. I was up several times in the night to try to calm him, and once he was quieted and I returned to bed, he started up again.

“We need to bring him in, he’s lonely out there”

“No dogs in the house!” Angela still wanted to fight her fight.

Bleary-eyed in the morning, the family dragged themselves out of bed. The puppy had finally fallen asleep. “Why couldn’t he have done that hours ago?” Angela complained. “It’s all your fault!”

“My fault! What did I do?”

“You brought him home.”

I conceded the point. “It will pass in a couple of days, I’m sure.”

The “couple of days” stretched to a week, and the family’s patience was stretched to the breaking point. Even I was having second thoughts.

“Maybe there is something wrong with him. I’m going to take him to the vet to have him checked out.”

I made an appointment and brought the puppy in. The vet checked him over. “There’s nothing wrong with him,

but he does need to get his shots.”

While Bud took the first one in stride, the second made him wince with pain, and he nipped at the vet. “Bad dog!” I cried.

“It’s OK, that’s a normal reaction. That particular shot stings a bit.”

The vet continued to examine Bud, looking in his ears, taking a stool sample, checking his tiny teeth. “Everything checks out, though he probably will need some worm medicine. It common for all dogs.”

“Is that what’s keeping him crying all night?”

“No, he wouldn’t even notice it. What he needs is a companion. He’s lonely.”

“Lonely? The kids play with him all day long. He gets plenty of attention.”

“You say he only cries at night, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s all alone?”

“Yes.”

“Lonely. You may want to get a second dog.”

“Another dog? I had a hard time selling my wife on the one.”

“Tell her that it will actually be easier on all of you. It’s not double the effort, the dogs will keep each other entertained, and you will get some rest.”

“Rest would be nice.”

Angela was surprisingly receptive to the idea of getting another dog, and Merry was ecstatic as well. “I want a girl dog!” she stated.

“A female might be a calming influence on Bud,” Angela mentioned. “Let’s go to the shelter and see what we can do.”

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* * *

At the shelter, they were many dogs to choose from, but very few cute puppies. The best they could do was a one year old female who had been dubbed Pandora.

“Sounds ominous.”

The folks at the shelter ensured them that Pandora was gentle, and a very friendly dog. An older female would have a positive effect on Bud, and everybody’s life would be easier. Pandora joined the Mall household.

Bud and Pandora got along famously, and they enjoyed running in the yard, Tyler and Merry enjoyed having their own pets, and occasionally remembered their duties to feed, brush and clean up after them. When they did forget, Angela and I picked up the slack, and Angela grew to love the two animals. In 1985, Fido had been I’s dog, and Angela really didn’t want anything to do with him. But in 2004, Bud and Pandora were truly family dogs. They took them to obedience classes, where they learned to heel, perform some tricks, and become well-behaved members of the family. Angela had even mentioned that the dogs were better behaved than the children had been.

Occasionally, the dogs would bark at night, but a quick rebuke would calm them down quickly, and usually they would quiet down on their own accord, without any intervention. One night, however, the dogs started making a racket and showed no signs of letting up. It was Chrissy’s turn to get them to settle, so she went outside and saw them coupled together, with Pandora wincing as if in pain. Trying to separate them to no avail, Chrissy realized what was happening. “Oh, gross!” she cried and ran into the house. “The dogs are doing it!” she

exclaimed, crudely.

Tyler and Merry ran outside to see, and watched in fascination. “What are they doing?” Tyler asked, before realizing himself what he had already learned about in school. “Cool!” was his only reaction.

As Pandora’s pregnancy progressed over the next few weeks, she became more complacent, and tended to lay around lazily throughout the day. Bud, still practically a puppy himself, tried to engage her in activities, but she would rather just take it easy and be waited on. To keep her comfortable, I asked Henry to help him built her a private shelter, in which she could escape Bud’s attention, and she even learned to pull the door closed to ensure her privacy. Though Bud would often bark to get her to pay attention to him, he gradually gave up, and found some other activity to entertain himself.

One morning the family heard more than just Bud’s barking, but a distinct set of crying, not unlike a baby’s cry. Going outside, they opened Pandora’s box and found six new little lives, connected to their mother, savoring their first meal.

Merry and Tyler got the naming job for the new pups.

Tyler was first. “This one is Samson, because he has such long hair.”

“This one is Princess, because she’s so pretty,” Merry offered.

“This one is Teddy, because he looks like a little Teddy bear.” Tyler named him, but Merry approved with an “Aww...”

“This little girl is Pepper, because she’s sprinkled with black.” As if confirming and accepting, the puppy sneezed.

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“This one is Shadow, because he’s all black.” Tyler looked thoughtful, then said “Maybe he should be Ninja.” He thought some more. “No, Shadow,” he stated decisively.

“And this one is Morgan,” Merry stated.

“Morgan?”

“Yes, Morgan. She looks like a Morgan.”

“More like a Gorgon. I think I’ll call her Gorgon, instead.”

“I get to name her. You got your three.”

“OK. Morgan,” then he snickered under his breath “Gorgon.”

The new family of eight continued to grow, and all of the problems of raising a puppy nine months earlier returned, but with mom and dad taking charge, the puppies were kept a little more obedient and less disruptive than their father had been. When they had reached six weeks old, the reality had to be faced: finding homes for them. “We went from no dogs to eight dogs, and we just can’t keep up with them all,” Angela advised. “I know it’s going to be tough, but we are going to have to send them out to some other families for them to enjoy.”

“Even Morgan?” a sad Merry cried. Morgan had become her favorite.

“Even Morgan. If we keep Morgan, then we have to keep Shadow as well. And four dogs is still more than two dogs. Two dogs is the limit.”

No matter the complaints coming from the twins, homes were found for each of them, with Morgan finding one with one of Merry’s friends. “See, you’ll be able to visit her often,” Angela offered as she wiped away Merry’s tear. “It will be like she never left.”

Despite Merry's attachment to Morgan, Chrissy was even more despondent, given to fits of crying, anger and shifting moods more often than she changed clothes. Angela confronted her. "We still have Bud and Pandora, it's not like were losing all of them."

"It's not the dogs, mom," Chrissy started to cry. "I'm pregnant."

2005 - AN HONEST MISTAKE

Angela's first reaction to Chrissy's admission had been one of shock. "How could this have happened?"

"Uh, the usual way. You know, the birds and the bees and all that."

"We raised you to be a good girl, and now you've gotten yourself into trouble. What will your father say?"

"Mom, how many times have I told you I'm not a girl. I'm nineteen, I am a woman now. And this just proves the point."

"Is that what you wanted, to prove a point?"

"No, this wasn't my goal. But Billy and I made a mistake, an honest mistake."

"It's more than a mistake, it's a disaster." Despite all of her experience over the last thirty or more years, this was one she never had expected, or at least, had convinced herself to never expect it.

"So now you're expecting?"

"Yes."

"Does Billy know?"

"No. I haven't talked to him about it. But he may

suspect something.”

“He needs to know, and soon.” Angela paused. “You’ll have to get married.”

“We already plan to do that. We’ve talked about it for a long time. We we’re just waiting for the right time.”

“Well, you didn’t apparently wait this time, and now look at the mess you’re in. Pregnant! Your father will be devastated!”

“He doesn’t have to know, does he? Can’t we just take care of it quietly?”

“Take care of it? You mean an abortion? I’d never go for that. Your father would never go for that, and you should never go for that.”

“No, not that way, I mean give it up for adoption.”

“And how do you expect to keep this from your father? You live under the same roof, he sees you every morning, throughout the day, and every evening before you go to bed. I’m sure he will notice.”

“There are ways to keep it hidden. Loose clothes, carrying something, standing behind furniture. I see it on TV all the time.”

“That is not going to fly, and we are not going to keep your father out of this!”

Despite her indications otherwise, Angela did not immediately inform I and he was blissfully unaware of his daughter’s delicate condition throughout the holidays and into the new year. When he woke up on January 1, he was as excited as a little kid, running around the house. “It’s the new year! Happy New Year! Happy 2005!”

Angela tried to calm him down, but knowing that his mood would turn immediately sour once he finally got the news, tried to find a way of easing into the admission.

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“Honey, 2005 is not such an eventful year. Consider 2001, now that was a big one. Even 2000, the new millennium!”

“The new millennium was 2001. 2000 was a mistake on the calendar. A Y2K bug.”

“But 2005, nothing big there. No major events. The twins turn 15, Chrissy will be 20. No major events.”

“No Quinceañera for Merry?” I was dejected. He liked a good party.

“We’re not Hispanic. We’ll do a Sweet Sixteen party for her next year. But not with thousands of people.” The memory of the events a little over three years earlier were still a bit of a sore spot.

Angela grew strangely quiet and I anxiously anticipated her next words.

“Maybe a wedding.”

“You want to repeat our vows? I thought you were against that.”

“It wouldn’t be a wedding for us. It would be for Chrissy.”

I looked puzzled, “Billy proposed? This is how I find out? But that would be wonderful,” he said, brightening. “My little girl, married!”

But then realization set in, “These things take time. Some brides wait over a year to get every detail perfect. I don’t see that happening until next year, at the earliest.”

“It won’t take a lot of time and planning. They want a simple ceremony, with only immediate family. None of your uncles, aunts, cousins and their kids. No masses of hundreds. Just something simple.”

“But... but... but...” I was beside myself. “I like a good party.”

“It will be low key. No sense drawing attention, just a simple ceremony. That’s all they want.”

“But my little girl draws attention in everything she does. She’s a rock star’s daughter. It will be the wedding of the century!”

“The century is not even five years old, so that’s not shooting very high.”

“Still, I won’t allow it to be anything but the biggest event of the year, then.”

“Believe me, you’ll want it to be subdued. Maybe even just a justice of the peace.”

“I don’t understand. We’ve always celebrated big. Why not?”

Angela steeled herself for the admission. “She’s pregnant.”

Is face whitened. “Pregnant? How? When?”

“How? The usual way, the same way we were. When? It happened last year around Thanksgiving. According to schedule, she’s due in August.”

“My little girl... pregnant?” He was strangely silent for a long time as Angela let him gather his thoughts and come to terms with his emotions.

“I’m going to be a grandfather!” he shouted. “I’m going to be a grandfather!”

Plans for a March wedding progressed, and arrangements were kept simple. Henry and Juliet, Buddy and Annette, Spike and Emily, and their children Adrian and Priscilla, and Billy’s parents, Joe and Emma, were the sole guests. Merry was the maid of honor, and Tyler was Billy’s best man. Simple, quiet, in fifteen minutes the ceremony was over.

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“A letdown, not at all what I wanted to see for Chrissy,” I complained afterward to Angela. “The only bright side is that I will get to be a grandfather.”

“Billy is a good man. He is there to support Chrissy, and will make a good father.”

“I like Billy fine, and we will support them however and if ever they need it. We’ll be there.”

Chrissy’s paunch was becoming visible and it was no secret to those gathered for the reason of the occasion. Yet, there was little talk of the eventual outcome. That could wait for later. Today they were celebrating a happy occasion.

Chrissy and Billy opted to skip a honeymoon, to concentrate on preparations for the new child. Although they had visited briefly with the doctor, they had not followed up with all of the needed appointments, and Angela insisted that they go for an extensive pre-natal checkup. “You need to be more responsible now, you are a woman, no longer a little girl, and you and your husband will be bringing a new life into this world. See your doctor.”

Chrissy made an appointment for a full checkup the next week. As the days ticked off toward the appointment all the symptoms were exhibiting their full force. She was sick daily, she could even feel kicks, and her abdomen was becoming even more swollen. On the day of the appointment, Angela accompanied her for support with Billy also providing the support he could offer in this new and intimidating adventure. They hoped to find out if it was a boy or a girl, which was I’s ever present question: “When are we going to find out?” They were hoping this

would be the day.

The doctor began the examination with blood tests, urine test, general health check, listening with a stethoscope in hopes of hearing the baby's heartbeat. Puzzled, he prepared for an ultrasound, spreading the lubricant across Chrissy's belly, and moving the transducer around seeking an image of the fetus.

Angela tapped into the doctor's puzzlement. "Is there something wrong?" she asked fearfully.

The doctor looked again at the screen, trying from as many angles as each could perform. Finally, he stated "You're not pregnant."

"Not pregnant? Do I look like a woman who is not pregnant?"

"The images don't lie. You are not pregnant, and as far as I can tell, you never have been. The blood tests will confirm it, but there is no evidence. You're not pregnant."

"I don't understand. I'm sick all the time, my body aches, my stomach is getting bigger. I even felt him kick!"

"It's a condition called pseudocyesis."

"Pseudocywhatsis?"

"Pseudocyesis. False pregnancy. It's rare, but many of the symptoms simulate pregnancy."

"Are you sure I didn't lose the baby?"

"There never was a baby. You're not pregnant." The doctor hoped repeated statements of the fact would finally hit home.

"No boy? No girl?"

"No boy. No girl. No baby."

Chrissy reached out for her mother, breaking down. "There's no baby. It was all for nothing!"

Angela quietly calmed her, and Billy gave her additional

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emotional support.

“I was so sure. Now what?” as she began to recover to face reality.

The doctor advised, “We can arrange for counseling, therapy as needed. A vitamin and exercise program will help to get your body back to normal.”

Chrissy sniffled, and tried to compose herself.

“It may take a few weeks, but you will be fine,” the doctor advised.

Working through the shock of discovering there was never a pregnancy wore on the new couple, but they weathered this first crisis of their marriage, and came out of it wiser, but cautious. Their delayed honeymoon was finally scheduled, and they took a week long Caribbean cruise, enjoying themselves and their own company fully for the first time in their young marriage. When they returned and began their new life together in earnest, they were happy, and knew that their decision to marry, for any reason, was not an honest mistake, but a true life choice that was the best one they had ever made.

When Chrissy became sick after returning from the cruise, they credited it to some bug picked up in the islands, but it continued well beyond the time they should have expected. They visited the doctor, and he failed to diagnose any illness, and ran through another battery of tests. Nothing seemed to make sense, but he decided to perform one more test, just to be sure. He looked at the results, and offered a simple statement to the two of them.

“You’re pregnant.”

2006 - YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL

"I'm fat!" Chrissy complained.

"You're beautiful," Billy stated. "You glow."

"I'm still fat. Look at me." She observed herself sideways in the mirror. "I stick out to forever."

"Twins will do that to you." The ultrasound had revealed twins, and now in her third trimester, there was no doubt she was really pregnant at this time. A boy and a girl.

"Damn these genes, anyway." Chrissy complained. "I blame my mother."

"And who does she blame? Her mother only had one, and there are no other twins going back at least three generations that we know of. Or on the other side, either. You're just lucky, I guess."

"Lucky? Luck wins you the lottery, or a jackpot in Vegas."

"You can't gamble, you're only twenty. And you can't drink either. You're pregnant."

"Do you have to constantly remind me? I wake up every morning and have to shift this big body around

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during the day. And the heat doesn't help, either."

"You're still beautiful," Billy assured her.

"Hah!" and Chrissy left it at that.

Angela and I couldn't wait for the arrival of their first grandchildren. After the disappointment of the false pregnancy, the fact of a sudden pregnancy so soon afterwards was overwhelming. When they found out there would be both a boy and a girl, they were beside themselves. Angela rushed out to start buying baby clothes, and all the trappings that come with a newborn. There were cribs, car seats, high chairs, bibs, pacifiers, stuffed animals, easy reader books, the list went on and on, and everything in double quantities. Chrissy's old room was converted into a temporary storage area, and the danger of even exceeding that space became very real.

"How much do two little babies need?" I inquired.

"Only the best for our grandchildren! When I was pregnant with Chrissy, and later with the twins, I didn't get to enjoy any of this. I had to bear the children, but I didn't get to have any of the fun. I'm sure Chrissy is just as miserable as I often was. But I wouldn't have traded it for all the world." She didn't want to appear ungrateful.

"We have good kids, and Chrissy's will be good too."

I set to work on assembling a crib.

"Tell me again why we have four of these?"

"Two we will give to Chrissy and Billy. Two we'll keep here at home for baby sleepovers."

I was already beginning to regret his enthusiasm for grandchildren. "And how often will that be?"

"As often as we can. I wouldn't mind if they lived here all the time!"

“We’ve been through that, years ago. You really relish the 3 AM feedings, changing diapers, staying up with them while they’re sick, getting peed on, getting thrown up on?” I continued his litany as if it was crazy that anyone wanted children at all. “I thought you got tired of that with all the puppies. They’re just like little kids, too.”

“Puppies are cute. Puppies are adorable. Puppies can be given away. But grandchildren are beyond all that. Grandchildren touch your heart like no other can, even your own children.”

“My philosophy is spoil ‘em rotten, then send them back to mom and dad to deal with. That’s what I’m looking forward to.”

I returned to the assembly of the crib.

“You are so wrong about that. You’ll see after they’re born. They will melt your heart. There won’t be a single moment that you’ll want to be separated.”

I doubted that that would be the case, and returned once again to the assembly of the crib. When he finished, he gave it a good shake to check for soundness. One end fell off, and then the whole structure collapsed. He looked around, and noticed some extras parts. “Maybe these have something to do with that,” as he pointed out the disaster.

He picked up the instructions, reviewed and determined that not only were the missing parts essential, that they needed to be used at the beginning of the assembly. Everything had to come apart.

“Are these even the right instructions? These instructions are no good!” he exclaimed. “That’s why I like to hire professionals. I’m no good at this!”

He started from scratch, and finally got to the end with a stable, and apparently safely constructed piece of fine

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furniture. “There we are. Done!” he stated with a sense of real accomplishment.

“Done with one, that is. There are three more,” Angela pointed out.

I looked dejectedly at the three unopened boxes. “Oh.”

He set to work on each in turn, and after three hours, had completed two of them. “At least they didn’t fall apart,” he said wearily, but also proudly.

Taking a break before tackling the final one, he heard the phone ring. Angela answered, and the tone of her excited conversation indicated that something was afoot. Hanging up, she cried up the stairs to I. “The babies are coming early. They’re on the way to the hospital.”

Angela and I jumped into the car and headed to the hospital themselves, eager to await the birth of the new twins, but anxious that there were still three weeks to go before the due date.

“It’s not unusual to be early for twins,” I assured her.

“Still, it’s not the best of circumstances,” she said worriedly.

Their fears were allayed when Liam I Woldson and Mia Angelica Woldson were born at 3:45 that afternoon, weighing in a just over five pounds each. The Malls were grandparents.

All vitals were fine, despite their smaller size, and the new grandparents each picked up their new grandchildren. I held Mia in his arms, gently caressing her silky hair. She barely could open her eyes, and her little cries almost sounded like a new puppy. Liam was as bald as a cue ball, but Angela didn’t mind.

I looked with love at Mia. “I think she just became my favorite granddaughter.”

He looked over at Angela, holding Liam, “You’re beautiful, grandma.” He told her. “Your glow is radiant, you’ve never been lovelier.”

He laid his granddaughter into the bassinet and leaned toward Angela to give her a kiss.

“I’ve never been happier in my life,” he told her.

“I’m pregnant.”

2007 - PARTY LIKE A ROCKSTAR

I's initial reaction to Angela's revelation had been one of total and utter shock. He had been able to accept the pregnancy of Pandora. He had been able to accept the pregnancy of Chrissy, even despite the fact that he never wanted to see her grow up. He had been able to accept the two pregnancies that Angela had before. But this one made no sense at all. Angela was nearly fifty years old, she was a grandmother, he was a grandfather, little Chrissy was a mother herself. The news left him speechless, senseless, without any sense of time or place. He fell into a faint and his dreams took over.

He dreamed of his former life where he would party like a rockstar, he dreamed of a future life, where his golden years would be filled with changing diapers, where babies were everywhere, and there was no option this time to give them away to good families to take care of until they could take care of themselves. He dreamed of a current life where his wife had just revealed that she was pregnant, and the cycle would start again. There was no escape.

Angela had tried valiantly to revive him, concerned that the sudden faint and fall had somehow caused injury. She took a wet washcloth, rubbed his face with it, wished she had some smelling salts, as if anyone kept a supply of them on hand.

Finally I came to. The room was swirling, Angela's face was looming up close. I couldn't even recognize his surroundings.

He could hear Angela say "I, I was kidding. I'm not pregnant. It was a joke. I didn't know you would react so badly. Please forgive me."

I couldn't tell if what he was hearing was reality or the reality of what he wanted to hear. He passed again into unconsciousness and the dreams took over again. He found himself again revisiting and revising the past, creating events in his mind that never happened. He found himself backstage after a show, imbibing in liters of liquor, dozens of pills, cadres of women. Trips within trips within trips. He found himself at the edge of a tall building, ready to fly. He took the leap and soared over the city. He looked down to the city below. He recognized the lights of Las Vegas, the hotels and casinos, he flew over the Eiffel Tower, over New York City. He found the city transformed and suddenly he *was* over New York City. He recognized the World Trade Center restored. He saw Central Park. He saw the lights of Broadway. He saw throngs of people in Times Square on New Year's Eve and he saw it suddenly transform to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. He transformed into a balloon himself, tethered to dozens of people trying to pull him down to earth. As he reached the ground, he ran. He crossed rivers and bridges, he crossed wide expanses of

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open fields, he climbed mountains. He suffered snow and rainstorms and heat waves and dense fog. He covered deserts and fought thirst and fever and fatigue and he woke up in a sweat, still uncertain of his surroundings and its reality.

Angela's voice returned to his hearing. "I, I, wake up! Are you ok?"

The room was coming into focus. It was his own bedroom. It was his own bed. His wife was at his side, shaking him awake.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What day is it?"

"You're at home. It's Tuesday. You're having a bad dream."

"Tuesday the what?"

"Tuesday the thirteenth."

"Tuesday the thirteenth of what?"

"Tuesday the thirteenth of March."

"Tuesday the thirteenth of March of what?"

Angela, finally exasperated, grabbed the calendar from the wall and threw it at him. "It's 2007. What year are you living in?"

I took a moment to reorient and come to his senses. "I had that dream again. The one where you told me you were pregnant."

"You know I was kidding. If I'd known this would visit you over and over again, I wouldn't have done it. Would you get over it already?"

"I've been trying to shake it off for months. I just can't seem to."

"You're having a mid life crisis then. You're not able face the fact that you're a grandfather."

"I'm well beyond the age where I would have a midlife

crisis,” I said in defense. “That happens in the forties, right?”

“Mid life is middle of life. You always said you’d live to be 113. You’re 53 now, so you’re in the middle of your life.”

“By that account, I still have a few years before I arrive. I’m still young then. Crisis averted.”

This new revelation seemed to give I a second wind.

“Whatever,” was Angela’s only reply.

It’s realization that he had yet to reach mid life was a relief to him, and a recognition that he still had a life to live. His own philosophy to not be the type of rockstar that flamed out and burned out and dropped out caused him to wonder if he had missed out on the type of life that he should have had. The one that his position dictated that he should have had. Had he made a mistake?

The first order of business was to dress like the rockstar he used to be. He still held on to the costumes that he had worn in concert. Tyler had asked him about them, had wanted to try them on, but they were off limits. I hadn’t even tried them on since 1978, nearly 30 years ago. The first thing that he tried were the stage pants, skin tight and bulge revealing. Slipping into the first leg, then into the second, he was able to pull them almost to mid thigh. Taking a deep breath, he pulled them up higher and managed to get the waist band up to his middle section. The material was made to stretch, but even it had its limits. Trying the zipper proved to be an impossible task, even after he sucked in as much breath into his chest. The final insult was the sound of fabric ripping, shredding down the thighs and splitting in the back. The pants

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ruined, he peeled them off and examined them. Useless, even as a museum piece.

“Certainly the shirt will fit. Those were always roomy,” he told himself. He slipped it over his head and took a look in the mirror. What he saw was not a pretty sight. Although roomy, almost blousy, in the past, it tightened up where it didn’t do so before. But the real problem was that not only was it thirty years out of style, it also looked plain ridiculous on a fifty-three year old man, rockstar or not.

He didn’t even bother with the fringed leather vest. He already knew that it looked ridiculous, even in the seventies. He tossed it on the pile with the rest.

The old platform shoes still fit, and added three more inches to his six foot frame, but when he tried to take a step, he nearly tripped on his own feet. When he did gain his balance, they thundered for every step taken. Off they came.

The *pièce de resistance* was the signature feathered hat. It had been the accessory that came to be the most single recognizable aspect of I Mall’s personality. It fit, too, but the feather hadn’t weathered well, and bits of it got stuck up his nose and sent him into a fit of sneezing.

Wiping his nose afterward, he decided that the rockstar look was no longer feasible. Certainly, however, he still had the chops to lay out the best sounds possible. His show bass and amp had been sequestered in a closet since the last time he had tried to play. The result back then had not been his best, but he figured he now knew what his mistakes had been, and made sure to avoid them. Practicing for a couple of hours in silence before plugging the amp in had him ready, and the first notes out were as bad as they could possibly be. Trying to tune the strings,

he could not find any setting that made it sound good. Giving a final twist, one of the strings broke lashing across his face.

“Being a rockstar is a lot harder than I remembered it to be,” he complained. “And look at my hands. I’ve got blisters on my fingers!”

I had to face the facts. It appeared that his days partying like a rockstar were well behind him, despite the fact that he had not yet even reached middle age.

2008 - TEARDROPS ON MY GUITAR

With two grandchildren growing like weeds, and entering their terrible twos, I had his hands full as an active grandfather. Whenever the twins came to visit, everything else dropped and their full attention was devoted to the well-being and entertainment of the children. The house was not exactly baby-proofed, and often I and Angela found themselves scrambling to keep one or the other from getting into a dangerous situation.

When the twins were born, there was some mention of it in the local press, and references that the great I Mall was now grandfather, but the publicity died down after a few weeks, and life returned to normal for the couple. I took the time between grandchild visits to hone up his musical skills, which he had found a bit lacking and evident when he had tried to revive his rockstar days in the previous year.

His first order of business was to get his bass guitar refurbished. In addition to new strings, the finish of the body needed a bit of touching up as well. "Look at these sweat marks, one might think there were teardrops on my

guitar,” he complained to Angela. “They have ruined the finish. I suppose I could consider them battle scars, but I’d rather see this unique instrument restored to its former glory.”

He took it into a local music shop, and requested that it be restored. The best new strings, adjustments to the bridge, some correction to a slight warp in the neck, and of course the finish.

“For a job like that, we’ll have to send it out,” the guitar tech told him. “This one deserves special treatment, and we can’t do it locally. We’ll have to keep it a few days.”

“That’s fine,” I told him. “I’m not in a hurry.” He left the guitar.

Two weeks later, he called and checked on the repair, and it still had not been completed.

“These things take awhile,” he was told.

Another two weeks, and still no guitar.

“It’s almost done,” he was told again.

Finally, he made a personal visit to the store, and was shocked to discover the guitar, still in the condition he left it, on display in the window with a large sign that said “Win this guitar, originally owned by I Mall!”

He stormed into the shop, and demanded to the manager the return of his guitar. “I trusted you to repair it, and instead, you are trying to give it away!”

“Mr. Mall, you are mistaken, your guitar is in the back, getting its finishing touches. We just got it back yesterday, and are putting on the new strings as we speak.”

“Then how do you explain my guitar on display in the window?”

“That’s not your guitar.”

“The sign says ‘Win this guitar, originally owned by I

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Mall!’ I’d say that pretty much identifies it as mine.”

“The sign says ‘just like the one originally owned by I Mall.’ It’s a copy, lovingly copied to exact detail, including the teardrop shaped stains. We couldn’t bear to see your original disappear completely, so we had this one made. We’re raffling it off, with the proceeds going to the charity of your choice. I must admit that the words ‘just like the one’ are a bit small. That’s to generate more interest.”

”And you didn’t think to consult me first?” I accused. “What makes you think that I would approve this?”

“You’re well known for your continuing philanthropy,” the manager indicated. “We thought you’d be honored. It’s a bit devious, perhaps, but our heart was in the right place, wouldn’t you agree?”

I did have to agree, and gave his consent to continue with the raffle. However, when the final results came in, the take was only a thousand dollars, and the guitar had cost five hundreds dollars to reproduce, so the proceeds netted a measly five hundred.

The raffle had one unexpected consequence, and that was raising the awareness of a man named Cory Heart, the same one that I had befriended in 1982 and vowed to make a star. Cory had been playing in a small bar in Green Bay, Wisconsin, when I had “discovered” him. Efforts to contact him had been unsuccessful, and Cory’s career never materialized. Now, more than 25 years later, Cory set his mind upon I again.

It wasn’t the first time that Cory had tried to get I’s attention. He could never understand why I had never tried to fulfill his promise. He had expected a quick contact after their encounter, but months passed, and no

word. Cory thought about giving up his dream of making it big, but decided instead that he need to pursue it. He sold everything, and relocated to California, hoping to be discovered by someone else that would follow through and make him a star.

For more than fifteen years he toiled and worked small gigs to get attention. He recorded demo tapes and shopped them around to industry insiders, but couldn't get a chance to hit the big time. He had to support himself with odd jobs, ones that kept him from ever finding any type of stable income. Finally, he decided to target I Mall a second time, but this time was not for a career, it was for revenge. He studied I's moves, he followed what little there was to be said in the music press. He frequented the web sites that pined for new music, for reunions, for any news that could be found about the former rock star.

Every opportunity to know the location of I was noted, and he became a mysterious stalker, never quite revealing himself, inserting himself into innocuous situations, ones where he wouldn't be recognized.

His first real successful effort was to initiate a lawsuit, hoping to defame I and possibly to gain some financial compensation in return. He discovered there was a law firm of Martin and Martin in Los Angeles, the heart of the entertainment industry. The lead partner even had the same name as the woman married to a former member of Golden Fingers. He created a phony letterhead, and concocted an elaborate "cease and desist" case, suing for damages, hoping that I's reaction would be to attempt to settle. However, I took it upon himself to uncover the deception and no followup action was ever realized.

His effort failed, he tried to insinuate himself into a

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more personal arena. When word came that the Malls were sponsoring a major gathering at their home, under the guise of a “Sweet Sixteen” party, he was one of the gate crashers. But the crowds were so overwhelming that he couldn’t get close to I and the family.

He befriended a high school student from Chrissy’s Mall’s school hoping to cause him to seduce her, possibly impregnate her and cause a scandal that would not only shame her family, but lead directly to the shame of I Mall. He didn’t count on Chrissy seeing through the ruse, and falling into the arms of another man she would end up marrying.

He even came face to face with I Mall when I was shopping for dinner items. Cory was working behind the butcher counter, and sold him a five pound prime rib, supposedly for some special occasion. He even engaged him in conversation, but I did not recognize him, nor did he find an opportunity to lash out. He briefly considered providing him a bad cut of meat, but was unable to arrange for it on this chance meeting.

He encountered him once again while working a stint at the local animal shelter, and directed him to one of the unwanted older dogs, figuring that it would be nothing but trouble to someone who was more interested in a new puppy.

He watched closely Chrissy’s scandalous pregnancy, waiting for the opportunity to expose the entire family for the corrupted excesses it was now expelling. When her pregnancy was unsubstantiated, his plan went unexecuted.

He encountered I again while working at a baby furniture store, and switched incorrect instructions into

the boxes, hoping to frustrate him. He never knew if it had made any difference. He was desperately running out of ideas.

He schemed and evaluated and developed and withdrew and concocted and assembled and mulled over plans for two years, finally coming up with something that would achieve the ends he so desperately sought: the complete ruin of I Mall.

His final attempt to ruin I was his most elaborate. He would go under deep cover, get I Mall into a compromising situation, make sure the media was there to capture the whole incident, and watch his former potential mentor go up in eternal flames. He first set out on a personal transformation. He shaved his entire body, from head to toe, and took it upon himself to establish himself as the “it” party girl, Cory Heart. He didn’t even have to change his name. That would even make it more perfect when he took I down.

He bought a wig, makeup, and a complete wardrobe. He inserted himself into the night life of the town, making a name for himself, or herself, as he needed to be fully convincing. He adopted the new personality so thoroughly that he even started to create his own following. She was the popular girl to be seen with, despite her early forties appearance, she exuded a youthful vigor that made her the talk of the town. The final scene of the takedown was to be one of the biggest social events of the year, and she arranged for Angela and I to be on the guest list, to help in the charity fundraiser that would ensure that media and crowds were present. Her plan was to publicly encounter I, make every attempt to seduce him, then reveal herself for whom she really was, scandalizing I and his family and

generations to follow.

The night of the social event arrived, and the crowd started to gather. Or what should have been a crowd started to gather. The event had hardly made a blip on anyone's social calendar, and though Angela and I were attending, and I made a personal \$25,000 donation to the cause, the event was deemed a dismal failure. Cory's plan to embarrass I fell flat, and he left, tears in his eyes, teardrops falling on the bass guitar that he had won earlier in the year, now being used as a publicity gimmick.

2009 - HEARTLESS

Cory's attempts at revenge had failed miserably, and he had given up his quest. He realized that the dark path he had chosen had not achieved the ends he had envisioned, that the devious attempts to gain I's attention and ruin him in a spectacular public manner were all prone to failure. He decided that he would try a more positive, direct approach. He would write him a letter.

Dear I Mall,

I hope this finds you well. You may not remember me, but I first met you back in 1982, when you and your wife stopped in a small bar in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I was playing drums, and my style not only intrigued you, but you offered to help me start a career. I must admit that your lack of response left me heartless, and full of anger for many years. I would like to hope that this method of direct communication might possibly open up again the possibility that we may work together, that those wounds that have so deeply affected me all this time may finally be healed.

Please consider contacting me, and I wait for your reply.

Signed, Cory Heart.

Cory sealed the envelope, and put it in the mail. It was

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his last, final attempt to seek out the recognition he thought he so deserved.

When I received the mail from Cory, he too was surprised. He had tried for some time to make contact, and could not understand why there had never been a response. He was also surprised that Cory's return address was nearby. He had always assumed that Cory had remained in Wisconsin. Rather than write him back, he contacted him by telephone.

"Cory, this is I Mall. It's so good to hear from you after all these years."

"I was afraid you'd forgotten about me, I waited for your contact, but never got anything."

"I tried over and over again to contact you, but my letters kept coming back. I had given up, then saw how successful you'd become, and figured that you no longer needed any assistance from me. I read about your meteoric rise, and was very happy for you. I did send my congratulations, but that came back as well."

"My meteoric rise? How do you mean? After I left Wisconsin, I had no end of rejection. I barely was able to support myself, no thanks to you. As much as I tried, nothing. I only wanted some advice, but you couldn't even give that." Cory abruptly hung up the phone.

I was stunned. "What a heartless response. I guess failure can do that to you." I remembered his own struggles with fame and decided to be the better man and give the kid a second chance. "Kid?" he thought to himself. "He's got to be in his forties by now."

Rather than risk another hang up, he decided a personal visit was in order. He looked up the address on

the letter he received and punched it into his GPS. It was in the next town, but in an area with which he wasn't familiar. A thirty minute drive and he was knocking at the door.

It opened, and a bedraggled figure, barely recognizable as the young man he had once encouraged looked out at him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Our call was disconnected, so I thought a personal visit would be in order. Let's start this conversation again."

"I have nothing to say to you." The door slammed.

I pounded on the door, relentlessly until Cory gave in and answered.

"Haven't you done enough damage? Can't you just leave me alone?"

I couldn't believe this was the same person. The letter he had received sounded sincere and courteous. The door appeared to be open to continue the conversation from many years before.

"Hear me out. I followed your career. I applauded your success. I was thankful that, despite my being unable to contact you, you had the big breakthrough with 'Sunglasses at Night'. I thought that it was a clever reference to our meeting in that bar, where you never removed your sunglasses. I didn't know that it was a gimmick."

It was Cory's turn to be stunned. I had thrown out so much inaccurate information at him that he stood there speechless for a full minute. Finally, he spoke.

"Your think I'm Corey Hart?"

"Of course I do. That's what you told me back in 1982. 'Just send me a letter care of this bar to Corey Hart.'"

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That's what I did. It came back."

"I am Cory Heart. H-E-A-R-T. And no 'e' in Cory. I thought I got past that years ago, and here you bring that up again."

Once again, it was I's turn to be confused. "You're not the Corey Hart that sang 'Sunglasses at Night?' A successful recording career and great popularity especially in Canada and internationally as well?"

"No, I've never been to Canada. I tried making it in a world where Corey Hart became popular, but my attempts were always in vain. I was always told, 'There's already a Corey Hart. We don't need another. Maybe you should change your name.' That was never an option for me, I was born long before him."

"When were you born?"

"I was born in January of 1962. He was born in May."

"Long before?"

"Long enough."

"Well, Cory, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. I had no way of knowing. You never spelled your name for me, you never took off your sunglasses. How was I to know? No wonder the letters kept coming back. I was sending them to the wrong person!"

I looked thoughtfully at the ground, then continued, "Are you still interested in pursuing a music career? I'm not that active anymore myself, but I can do what I can to help you get started."

"That was a dream of mine for many years, but the dream faded. I've learned to accept my fate, my lot in life. It's not what I would have chosen, but it's what I got."

"What you got was the shaft, I'd say. You deserved better. I believed in you, and I think that you had the

talent to go far. Think you still do?"

"I haven't played drums for over ten years. I've lost touch with the instrument. I've moved on."

"Then what can I do to make it up to you? Name it, and it's yours."

"If I asked for a million dollars, would you give it?"

"If I offered a million dollars would you take it?"

Cory considered the question for a moment. "Actually, I guess not. I'd rather have earned it on my own. I'm proud to be Cory Heart. I'm proud to have survived, if not thrived. I wouldn't take your million dollars."

"But would you take a job where earning a million dollars could be a possibility?"

"Of course I'd take that job. Do you have one?"

"No, not at the moment, but I know where a talent like yours could come in very handy, working in the studio, backing up other musicians. In time, I bet you could even find your own voice again and make the mark you have sought."

"I told you, I've lost touch with the instrument. I can't play."

"Can't, or won't? It's like riding a bicycle, once you've learned, you don't unlearn. Can you come to my home studio for a tryout? Do you know where I live?"

I was hesitant to admit that he'd been there before. "I have a general idea."

I wrote down the directions and passed them to Cory. "Come by tomorrow, and we'll jam."

The next day, Cory arrived as promised, and I led him into the home studio. Cory sat behind the drum kit, and I plugged in his bass. Cory started with a steady beat, and I

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added some bass lines. Cory began responding with some alterations of his own, and I began adding his melodic runs that he had become famous for. Cory started making magic, and the two of them discovered that music made together was a new magical, mystical experience.

“What did I tell you? You haven’t lost it at all, you’ve just buried it. All it took was the will to let it reveal itself. We can make this happen.”

I took Cory to the Eclectic Fry studios, and introduced him to Max Fry. Max was now into his sixties, but still actively pursuing new talent and finding the unfindable. Explaining Cory’s untapped talent, I convinced Max to allow them to recreate what they had done in I’s home. Impressed, Max agreed to put Cory on as a studio musician, ready to sit in with whomever wanted to record. Cory’s ship had finally come in, and I had finally found his protégé, one who would finally find success.

2010 - TEENAGE DREAM

"I'm going to write a Rock Opera," I stated decisively.

"A rock opera."

"Yes, a Rock Opera."

Angela looked at the calendar. "It says 2010, but I guess it must be 1972."

"There are contemporary Rock Operas."

"Name one."

"*American Idiot*, for one."

"OK, I'll grant you that."

"There are works by Savatage and Trans-Siberian Orchestra."

Angela had seen Trans-Siberian Orchestra. "OK, that's a big one."

"I'm going to write a Rock Opera. It was one of my teenage dreams."

"Ok, I'll bite. A rock opera about what?"

"About me. I already have the title picked out. *Only Golden Fingers Could Play So Heavy*."

"You already wrote that song, and it already tells your story. Why visit the same topic over and over?"

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“It’s what I know. It’s easiest to write from what you know, right?”

“But it takes imagination and engenders surprise when you find something no one else has done. Try working on that instead.”

“I’m going to write a Rock Opera!”

“OK, you’re going to write a rock opera. Big deal.”

“Where’s the encouragement? Where’s the words of kindness?”

“OK. You go, boy. Write your heart out. But you need a better idea.”

I gave it some consideration. “Aha, I’ll make my novel into a Rock Opera!” He started humming a tune. “There’s the first one!”

“Your novel. When did you ever write a novel?”

“You remember, *A Life Without Pain*. Remember?” He hoped she remembered.

“I don’t remember.”

“The tragic story of Clark Wilson, and his search for a comfortable existence.”

“That old thing? You haven’t touched that for more than ten years. I even told you you’d never finish it.”

“But the story has to be told! The world needs to hear! The world needs relief!”

“I could use some relief right now,” Angela mumbled as she left the room.

I set to work on his magnum opus by beginning with the central theme.

A life without pain

It’s all that I seek

It’s been unbearable

For more than a week

*I hunt for relief
I search for a cure
The pain is unbearable
If only it weren't*

I stopped and reread his words. "Gold!" He continued.

*A life without pain
To once again have joy
To live life pain free
As when I was a boy
To get up out of bed
Without having to scream
To float through the world
As was my own teenage dream*

"Heading for number one!" He needed a bridge.

*People tell me I'll never feel relief
People tell me to turn over a new leaf.
People tell me to live with the pain.
All I can tell them is I never will again.*

I could just imagine the pure emotion that the right singer could bring to this song.

*Life without pain
It's all that I seek
The world may turn
The bones they may creak
The pain free existence
Is more than a dream
The doctor and I
Will make a great team*

He sat down at the piano in his private studio, and started putting a melody to it. "*A Life without pain*," he sang as Tyler walked into the studio. He stopped.

"What is it son? Daddy's working."

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“Daddy? Geez, dad, I’m twenty. You haven’t been `daddy` for fifteen years.”

“I’m just trying to get a mind set for a few years ago. I’m writing a Rock Opera.”

“So I heard from mom.”

“It’s about a world free from pain, told from the perspective of its protagonist, Clark Wilson.”

“Sounds compelling.” Tyler left the room.

He continued working on the melody, arriving at just the perfect match of music and lyric. “It has to have a joyful feel. No darkness here,” he told himself.

After working out the basic melody, he started up the recording software to lay out the basic tracks. He began with the basic piano track, a lilting, almost danceable little jig. He followed with some drum patterns that were built in. “I’ll have Cory lay those down later. These are just for reference.”

Adding only a little guitar and then the bass, the underlying track was done, at least in demo form. He readied himself to record the vocal track.

“*A life without pain,*” he began when Mia walked in.

“Dad, you’ve been at it for hours. Can’t you take a break? I have finals tomorrow. They’re important to me. I can’t study with all this racket.”

“I’m writing a Rock Opera!”

“Yes, we all know you’re writing a rock opera.”

“Not just a rock opera. A Rock Opera!”

“OK, yeah. Well, please take a break.”

I looked up at the clock. It had been hours. He was surprised at how much time had passed. He was in his element. Time for a break.

He emerged from the seclusion of the studio and back

into the real world of his family. Chrissy, Billy, Liam and Mia were visiting. "I didn't hear you come in. What's the occasion?"

"Just a visit. We hadn't been over for a few days."

"I'm writing a Rock Opera!"

"So I've been told. Whoopee!" her lack of enthusiasm no way dulled I's.

"This is serious stuff," I proclaimed. "The world will not know what hit them when it is released."

Angela offered her comment, "I could use a world without pain. I've got a headache."

I was oblivious to Angela's subtlety. "See, that's what I'm talking about. Everybody suffers pain, everybody seeks relief. This will be the prescription!"

I hurried back to the studio, also oblivious to the rest of the family.

"I'm on a roll, and not about to quit now," he exclaimed. He thought for a bit, then declared. "Dear Doctor!" He began to write.

*Dear Doctor, I need you to see
The grief of pain that's bothering me
The months and years that I've suffered along
I hope you will prescribe something strong.*

*Dear Doctor, I know you're seeing someone
Else at the moment, but soon you'll be done.
I await the expertise you advise
I'll know when I see it in you eyes.*

*Dear Doctor, please tell me you'll come by a cure
A magical potion, of that I am sure
The moments of agony awaiting your call*

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It's torture, but gratitude, you'll have it all.

"Another masterpiece!" he declared. "I can't wait to hear it in its fully realized form."

Again, he set the recording software to supply a drum track: simple, understated, plaintive.

"I think this needs that music that imitates a cry for help. Not quite the blues, not quite a death knell."

He took out the acoustic guitar, and added some simple chords, and sang a melody, emerging from his throat at as if being born. Notes that the world had never heard before.

Adding the bass track, he varied from his signature sound, and just laid a very simple upper register line, almost a wolf's call. He played the resulting track back, and tears came into his eyes. "That's what I'm looking for. Deep sadness, pleading for relief."

Moving to the keyboards, he laid down a barely audible track, subtle, tender, pleading. Tears continued to flow, soaking his shirt.

"It needs strings." He switched registers and add a violin solo that would make angels cry. Exhausted, he looked to the clock and discovered it had become the next day. He needed sleep.

Waking at 6 AM the next morning, he was refreshed and ready to hit it again. "I'm writing a Rock Opera!" It had become his mantra.

"Wake me when you're done," was Angela's response.

I mulled over what his next song should be. He considered other forms of bodily pain. He considered toothaches, headaches, broken bones, stubbed toes,

gastroenteritis, sore throat, earache. All seemed ripe for its own exploration. But then, he considered as he looked inward, "What about emotional pain? It's as real as any other."

He recalled his father mentioning a song called "My Boots are Covered in Manure," that was a regional hit for Angela's father's band way back in the forties. "That sound like it would be a painful experience, it would cause heartache. I could make my own version, my own interpretation." He started writing.

*The boss told me, "Bob,
If you're keeping this job
You must go to the field
and bring in the cattle."*

*I told him I would
Or at least that I could
If it wasn't for one thing
keeping me out of the saddle.*

*It's the lady I seek
I've only known her a week
She won't look my way
But I'll try again today*

*She told me for sure
It's a curse I endure
For you see, these boots
are covered with manure*

*It's the part I hate most
I would normally boast*

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*But I'm a cowboy whose boots
are covered in manure.*

*My sweetie I've lost
And oh what a cost
She cannot see past
The smell that is cast*

*The boots, the boots
are covered in manure
The boots, the boots
are covered in manure*

*I'd quit in a flash
If I didn't need the cash
My needs are so few
If I only could get her*

*The pay is OK
But for the rest of the day
It stinks, it stinks
And I know I'll never get her*

*'Cause these boots are covered,
so covered, they're covered
In the stench of manure, from cattle and chickens.*

Did I forget to tell you about the chickens?

He liked that last little line about the chickens. It would give just the little bit of hope, that ray of sunshine, that hope that relief may be just around the corner.

“It must be Country song, no doubt about it.”

I had never written a Country song, but figured it wouldn't be too hard. Simple beat, three chords, guitar accompaniment. Not much else to it. He laid down the track.

After it was done, he sent a copy to his father and then called him on the phone. "Take a listen, dad. Tell me what you think."

Henry retrieved the file and listened on the spot. "It doesn't sound like the same song. The words are different and the melody isn't at all like the original."

"That's the point dad, it's a new take on a old concept. I think it will be a hit."

Surprisingly enough, the song did gain some airplay, released under his "Arthur Potsworth" pseudonym that he had last used nearly thirty years earlier. No one ever knew it was really I Mall.

The Rock Opera did not get finished, and did not get released. The teenage dream was unfulfilled.

2011 - WHAT'S MY NAME?

It's failure to complete his Rock Opera left him, the eternal optimist, in a dark funk. "I was the greatest of all time! I ruled the charts. I was instantly recognizable. Now I wonder to myself 'What's my name? Who am I?'" Angela had not seen him this way since before they were married.

"It's just some songs. You'll pick it up again someday. Maybe with a different premise."

"A different premise? That was my dream, my gift to the world. To show them how to combat the pain in their lives, to turn it around, to live life with full relief! Now all I have is the pain of failure. Everything is worse!" He hung his head in shame.

"I'm fifty-seven years old. My life is officially half over. I've reached my peak, and the rest is downhill from here. I can't take it anymore."

"You're overreacting a bit, don't you think? Life is not over. You've got fifty-six years to continue to make a difference. Look what you've accomplished in the first half. Number one, you had a holiday declared in your honor for the day you were born, by the President of the

United States, no less. You were visited by a renowned scientist and a musician that set you on the road to a career that no other musician has matched. You have two loving parents that supported you through your early years, you have me who supported you through other dark times. You have fans that have documented your life, you have three wonderful children, two wonderful grandchildren. You have two dogs you adore. You've set up charities, and given away more money than a normal person would ever hope to earn. You've seen the country, you seen most of the world. You've earned your privacy and the right to be just an ordinary citizen. That's a life worth celebrating."

I considered the good points, but continued his own litany "Friends have died, scandal followed us, I was sued..."

"That was a hoax."

"I was sued as a hoax, but never found the perpetrator. I broke my daughter's arm. I had to hide from the world. I failed in my first production attempt. What's my name? Nobody McNobody, that's who."

"You're only focusing on the bad things. Everybody has a little bad luck in their lives, many more than any you've had. It's only temporary, nothing that has happened left you any worse. They were just bumps in the road."

"But I've reached the peak, and it's all downhill from here."

"Ok, I'll agree with you. It is downhill. But look at it in a different way."

"How? Down is down. There's nothing but the bottom. And once you get there, where do you go?"

"No where else but up. See? There a positive waiting

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for you there.”

“At the bottom is the end. There’s no up. It’s just oblivion for the rest of my non-life.”

“You don’t expect to be in Heaven?”

“What will Heaven ever get me but more heartache?”

“Most would disagree with you on that. Consider this.”

I waited for a positive sign, but Angela fell silent.

“Consider what?”

“Consider this. Look at your life as a journey by car, around the state, across the country, throughout the world. You don’t just drive to where you’re going. You experience the trip for all it offers. You climb a hill, you struggle, you get to the top and you see the view and all that the world has to offer. You smell the fresh air, you see beautiful sunrises and sunsets. You feel accomplishment in your little victory. Then you head downhill. But downhill is only another direction. It’s not a state of life. You come off that peak, and see the whole world below, all that it offers, the vast array of possibilities. You’re coasting, you’re accelerating. You’re getting great gas mileage. Downhill is the thrill of a lifetime. It’s like the roller coaster. Up the hill is the anticipation, but down the hill is what you’ve been anticipating. It’s the most thrilling part.”

I considered her words. “I like roller coasters,” he admitted. His mood brightened. “I love roller coasters! We’re building a roller coaster!”

Angela did not expect this change in direction, but was relieved to see I’s mood improve. For her, though, another bump in the road.

I’s desire to build a roller coaster was not short lived like some of his other ideas. He really knew that he wanted to

succeed on this one.

“Not only a roller coaster. I’m going to build our own private amusement park!”

As usual, he solicited the help of his father and father-in-law. Both were now over eighty, but both also had great insights and ideas when it came to seeing a job through. They might not be able to swing a hammer with as much intensity as when they were young, but they still had a lot to offer.

Together they considered the layout of the park. Looking at the area where the impromptu concert for Chrissy’s sixteenth birthday had taken place, they agreed that it was an ideal location.

Angela’s concern, however, continued to mount. “To what end will this park be? Are we going to run a business?”

“No business here. This will be a labor of love.” Which to Angela only meant he hadn’t really thought this one through.

For weeks they drew up plans, met with contractors, laid out physical boundaries on the actual grounds. “I want the roller coaster to be the central piece. But I also don’t want it to be the only piece. There will be a fun house, a drop zone, even a merry-go-round for the little ones.” The twins were nearing their fifth birthday.

Angela couldn’t help herself, feeding from I’s own excitement. “I like bumper cars.”

“Then we’ll add bumper cars as well. It will teach the kids to drive.”

“The kids are in their twenties. They already drive. And I certainly wouldn’t want to get behind the wheel of anyone whose sole experience is in a bumper car.”

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“We’ll put in a shooting gallery, a ring toss, even some refreshment stands. It will be a real fair!”

“Can’t we just go to the fair instead? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“This will be better!”

Angela was beginning to regret giving I the pep talk.

Construction began, and crews of workers were brought in to create I’s new dream. The basic infrastructure of electrical work, water supply, sanitary facilities, all went in first. Then the gaming area, then the food concessions, finally the rides. The fun house was the first to be erected. I’s preference was to have everything built to his own specifications, but not being an engineer, cooler heads prevailed, and most of the amusements were purchased as completed units, ready for assembly. It proved to be a much faster way of establishing the festive atmosphere and in a short time, the park was taking shape. The roller coaster was the biggest project, and it had to be one of the best, in I’s opinion. He called in a local expert on roller coasters, someone who had ridden many throughout the world, and who had personally designed them as a hobby. I’s grand vision of the world’s largest roller coaster was a bit extreme, even in the eyes of the expert, and he was able to talk him into a more manageable model. He assured him that although it wouldn’t be the biggest, it would provide just as many thrills.

The time for the grand opening was nearing, and a vital, final detail had yet to be determined. “What’s my name?” I pondered allowed.

Angela told him, "You're I Mall. Builder of dreams!"

"I know who I am. I was asking on behalf of the park. A good park needs a good name. I think I'll call it Mallywood!"

"Mallywood?"

"Mallywood!"

"Sounds stupid. Let run it past the kids, first. You want to attract the younger generation, don't you. Find something that appeals to them."

I thought a bit more, "Mall World?" he asked tentatively.

"Better, but not great."

"Mall of America?"

"They already have one."

"Mall Zone?"

"Must everything have your name attached? Explore the possibilities, make it a name for the ages. Something simple. Something direct. Something without confusion. Like 'The Park'."

"The Park?"

"The Park. Simple. To the point. When people ask, 'Where are you going?'" they will say 'To The Park' and everyone will know. It will be an institution."

"The Park.... The Park... I continued to let the words roll off his tongue. The Park..."

"Don't wear it out before we even open."

"OK, park, what's your name? The Park!"

Opening day arrived, and thousands were lined up for entry. But this time, it was expected.

"I never thought we would be doing this type of thing all over again," Angela said. "But I think this will be a

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great adventure. And look,” she said as she indicated the crowd. “Very little is your own family.”

I had arranged for bands to be playing throughout The Park. He asked Reginald Von Happenstein to perform a set, and surprisingly, his music from thirty years earlier sounded more contemporary in today’s music scene. Reginald handled most of the instruments, Cory took care of the drums, and I even sat in on bass for a few songs. In a crowded, festive atmosphere, the music did not engender the raw emotions that it once did in more intimate surroundings, but it did captivate the audience, and many that day signed up for downloads of the albums originally released in the late seventies. Reginald had finally discovered a new fan base, and his life was re-energized as a result.

The roller coaster was ready for its premiere. The bright lights were visible even in the day’s sunshine, and I and Angela took the first car. It climbed to the top of the first hill, and at the peak, I caught a glimpse of the entire park. Still, they had not yet reached the final peak. The thrill of the short ride down was interrupted by a sudden upward swing again, only to be followed by another down. Then, suddenly, they were pinned to the back of the car as the coaster headed uphill at a seventy degree angle. Higher and higher they climbed; I wondered how high it could go. Was the air getting thinner, was that deep space he was seeing? Finally, the peak arrived, and the car stopped momentarily, as if taking a rest. The view from there was magnificent, they could see the crowds already in The Park. The crowds waiting to come in. The crowds enjoying food, games, rides, music. “This it it! We’ve arrived!” The remainder of the coaster pulled up behind

at the lead car headed over the top, heading downhill. It picked up speed, the air rushed past their faces. Just as they thought it could not get more intense, it moved into a loop, and the world spun, seemingly out of control. Coming out of the loop, the coaster began to slow, and came to a rest.

“Downhill is the best part,” I exclaimed. “Let’s do it again.”

2012 - A THOUSAND YEARS

“A thousand years. What will our lives be like in a thousand years?” I wondered aloud.

“We’ll be dead,” Angela stated matter of factly. “We’ve got fifty, tops.”

I did a quick calculation. “Fifty-five, at least. But I didn’t mean us, specifically. I meant us as human beings. What will we be like?”

“We’ll be lucky if there is a place for humans. Look at the earth. Global warming, corrupt politicians. Economic collapse. Failed relationships. Overpopulation. Air pollution. A TV season that sucks.”

“Bright and cheery this morning, eh? But I’m serious, what will humanity be like in a thousand years? What does 3012 hold for us?”

“It depends on your outlook. Will there be a steady decline for everything that has happened, or will there be greater heights to achieve? I’m thinking decline.”

“It seems to me that not long ago you felt the very opposite. Yes, there are declines, but there’s always something brighter ahead. What happened to the

attitude?”

“I guess I watch the news too much. It gets you down.”

“Then hope for a better future means turning around the hopes of everybody else. Don’t listen to the news. It’s all just sensationalist hogwash. It’s what they want us to hear, but not what’s really happening. Look at history, how often have we heard about doomsday being just around the corner, yet here we still are. Some are better off, some are worse off, but it all balances out, and the world continues. And it will for another thousand years as well, I’m sure.”

“Do you think people in 1012 asked the same question? What will 2012 be like?”

“Do you think they even thought like that?”

“I’m sure some did. Why else would they have set up institutions that were meant to be perennial? Churches, governments. Some fell, some rose to prominence. Look, even some of the structures from thousands of years earlier still exist. It’s a cycle.”

“Who will see that we do last another thousand years? The Government? I don’t think so.”

“The solution to the future might be to look to the past. Did they consider that everything was doomed? Was there hope? Was there anticipation? What if our ancestors gave up all hope, abandoned their desire for a family? We would never have been born!”

I paused in thought. “I wonder who our ancestors even were. Do you think there is somebody famous somewhere along the line?”

Angela pondered a bit, “I never knew of anybody before my grandparents. I mean, I knew there were, but we never really talked about them. It would be nice to

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know more. I don't really have any clue at all about the Samson side of the family at all. When my grandfather died, nobody ever really talked about it."

"Then it's time we found out about them," I stated. "We will find your roots."

Together they got onto the computer and Googled the Samson name. "Over sixteen million results. This might take awhile."

"Where were your grandparents from?"

Angela tried to recall the rare story she heard as a child. "I think they came from Indiana, or maybe Illinois. One of those 'I' states."

"You'll have to be more precise than that."

Angela thought some more. "Indiana, definitely Indiana. Somewhere near the Kentucky border, I think."

I Googled "samson indiana." "That barely pared it down a bit. In fact, it's even more. It will be a thousand years to get through all that."

Try "Samson and Barrett together. I think that was my grandmother's maiden name."

"Here's something about someone named Samson that killed someone named Barrett. In Indiana."

"That would not make a happy marriage. We'll skip that one. Besides, that happened only a few years ago. Not relevant."

"Ok. We'll look for something in the early 1900s." He Googled "samson barrett indiana 1900."

"Only two hits! Payday!"

They looked through the census records that came up, but there was no combination of Samson and Barrett to be found.

"Are you sure they were from Indiana?"

“I know they lived there at one time, but try Kentucky instead.”

Again, only two hits, but one of them was the same census document. “This other one looks promising.”

They scanned through it, and though it seemed to have a number of family members and their pictures from the earlier century and even before, nothing indicated that any of them had a relationship to their own family.

“There has to be a key to finding something about your family. They didn’t just get dropped off by an advanced civilization from the stars, now, did they?”

“I was thinking the same thing. Maybe so.” But both decided to dismiss that idea as ridiculous.

I took out the 1900 restriction. Millions again.

“The name ‘Sampson’ keeps coming up. Maybe the family changed it?”

“The only story that I’ve ever heard was that we were descended from Samson in the Bible. I doubt that’s true.”

“Well, let’s make the assumption that ‘Sampson’ is also a family name and see where that takes us.”

Googling “Sampson Barrett Kentucky.”

“Here’s a Sampson that married a Barrett!” the excitement of discovery began to rise, until they discovered that it happened in 1965.

“Unless my grandparents were time travelers, I don’t think that would be them.”

“Oh, but what if? The stories they could tell.”

“They’re dead.”

“Maybe they traveled a thousand years in the future, maybe they knew where humanity was going. Maybe they set the course of history themselves!”

“They weren’t time travelers.”

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“OK, let’s try 1890.”

“They weren’t even born yet. Try 1920. That would be more in the right range.”

The search paid off, and they found a Marriage Index covering the correct dates. They scanned through the dozens of pages, and finally found the key entry. The marriage of Edward Samson and Hillary Barrett was recorded in New Albany, Indiana on January 18, 1924. “Success!”

Angela was so excited, she couldn’t wait to call her mother Annette. “Mom, we found online records indicating that grandma and grandpa were married in Indiana in 1924!”

“Of course they were married in 1924,” Annette replied. “We celebrated their wedding anniversary for many years. We have pictures of their wedding. What’s with the excitement?”

Angela’s excitement waned, “You mean we’ve been online for hours, only to find that you had this information all along? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, dear, I didn’t know you were asking. What else do you need to know?”

“What about grandma’s parents? What do you know about the Barretts?”

“My grandma Barrett died when I was a teenager, but grandpa Barrett lived to be eighty. Let me think. I believe that was 1965. You were about eight years old.”

“I don’t remember him at all.”

“Well, he didn’t live here. He still lived in Indiana. His health declined after grandma died, and he never traveled much. You never got a chance to meet him. But I have a lots of fond memories of the two of them.”

“What about before them? Your great-grandparents?”

“Well, let’s see. Grandma Barrett’s mother was born in 1869 and her father was born in 1863. And his father before him was born in 1835. He fought in the Civil War.”

“How come I’ve never heard any of this? Didn’t you think it was important? A Civil War hero as an ancestor?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to declare him a hero. Sure, he fought valiantly, and our side won. But there was such a cost. He had a brother that didn’t make it.”

“Is there more?”

“On the Samson side we can trace it back to the Revolutionary War. Before that, into England. Some lines suggest that we go all the way back to Charlemagne. I guess that’s why your father always called you his little princess.”

Angela was stunned to learn there was so much family history that she had never discovered. Charlemagne traced back more than a thousand years before. She never knew that she had such a deep history.

When she told I of the discoveries that she had made, it was I’s turn to be a little forlorn. “My roots go back four generations at best. I have heard of my great-grandparents coming in from Europe back in the late 1800s. That’s as far back as anyone knows. Why was I cursed to be an immigrant?”

“You were born in this country. But everyone is a immigrant to a certain extent.”

“I’m an American, but can hardly prove it. Third generation. Impressive. You go back dozens. And hundreds before that, probably.”

“Look at it this way. We are here now. We are here to stay. We have three children, two grandchildren, probably

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more on the way. The family will grow. Only a few years from now you'll be a great-grandfather yourself, then a great-great-grandfather. At one hundred thirteen, I think you might even be a great-great-great grandfather. Those children will look back seven generations, and then many of mine as their heritage. You may even discover more about your ancestors in Europe. Look at a thousand years out. That's fifty generations. By the time 3012 rolls around, you'll have been responsible for thousands of descendants. Each one with a little I Mall blood running through their veins. Each one carrying a little bit of music. Who knows? Perhaps future world leaders. Perhaps great scientists. Perhaps a musician that will even outdo you. Perhaps a builder of greater amusement parks that you could even imagine. Perhaps explorers in space, the first to set foot on a distant planet. Maybe time travelers. Maybe they're already here. Maybe you've encountered them in your life. Maybe they helped you be what you've become."

I pondered the possibilities of what the next thousand years would become. Where his legacy might lead the world. Where everything depended on him and his success. But then the reality set in, but it was not harsh.

"We are all in this together. For us to see another thousand years and beyond is the responsibility of everyone alive today. Everyone must do their part to make this a better world."

"That's the idea," Angela agreed.

2013 - THE WIRE

“We are getting down to the wire.” I stated.

“What wire would that be?” Angela asked.

“My sixtieth birthday. It’s coming up in just a few months.”

“And why is that any different than any other?”

“I will officially be an Old Man.” He spoke as if the Capital Letters were the most important part.

“Look at yourself in the mirror. You’re already an old man.”

“Fifty-nine is not old. But sixty is ancient. Why I remember...” as he chomped his gums.

“You have your teeth, there’s no reason to pretend otherwise.”

“I have most of my teeth. I did have the wisdom teeth pulled out.”

“So that’s what happened.”

“Older, yet wiser. Isn’t that what they say?”

“OK, I’ll accept the older. Otherwise you’re still a kid. I’m not sure you’ve ever grown up. What grown man owns his own amusement park, and runs around as if he’s

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a teenager?”

“That not youth, that’s retirement. It’s fun. You should try it sometime.”

A great portion of their time over the past few months had them bantering like this, an aging couple, still in love, still happy despite some pitfalls, but generally still in the prime of their lives.

“What do you want to still do in your life?” Angela asked. “You’ve pretty much done it all.”

“I haven’t done it all. Not by a long shot. I haven’t hunted elephants.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to hunt elephants.”

“I don’t. It’s barbaric. But I haven’t done it.”

“Do you want to, now?”

“No.”

“Take it off your list.”

“How do you know I had a list?”

“Everybody has a list. You can take off elephant hunting.”

“It was never on the list.”

“So you’re saying there’s a list after all?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, saying there is, what else is on it?”

“I want to be a rock and roll star.”

“You’ve already done it.”

“I didn’t say the list was only things I haven’t done. It’s an old list. I started it when I was ten.”

“Did you check that one off?”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“I want to finish my book.”

“Are we going to deal with that again? I thought you

gave that up.”

“It’s still on the list.”

“Take it off.”

“Not until it’s finished.”

“And when will that be?”

“Maybe by the time I’m seventy. I don’t need to finish the list this year. Gotta pace myself.”

“Might as well add your Rock Opera as well, you never finished that as well.”

“It’s on the list. I think I’ll finish that before the novel.”

“The Rock Opera is based on the novel. How is that going to work out?”

“It’s been done. I can do it. Give me thirty days, and I can finish them both.”

“Think you can find thirty days sometime in the next ten years?”

“It can happen.”

“Thirty days to write a Rock Opera and finish a book. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Give me thirty days each and I’ll have them done before I turn sixty.”

“That’s only three months from now. You need to get cracking.”

“I’ve got a month, then. Time enough to work on my list.”

“What else is on your list?”

“We need to go Christmas shopping.”

“That’s four months away. And why is it on your bucket list?”

“It’s not a bucket list. It’s a to do list.”

“You’ve kept a to do list for fifty years?”

“Yes. Doesn’t everyone?”

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“No.”

“So, Christmas shopping?”

“We’ll get to it in a couple of months.”

“In a couple of months I’ll be deep in my novel. Or maybe the Rock Opera. Gotta decide. Are you trying to set me up for failure?”

“No. Are you going to be working on those twenty-four hours a day? I’m sure you’ll find time for Christmas shopping.”

“Christmas comes three weeks after my birthday. Can’t we do it then?”

“We’ll see. What else?”

“A trip to Antarctica.”

“Antarctica. The South Pole?”

“Yes, Antarctica. We’ll go for Christmas. It’ll be warm then. I read that on Christmas two years ago it got all the way up to ten degrees.”

“Ooh. Balmy. Make sure to pack your swim suit.”

“Don’t be silly, there’s no lake at the South Pole.”

“OK. Antarctica. Not this year. Too busy.”

I seemed dejected. “That was a bucket list item. Before sixty.”

“Can’t do it all. We’ll go to the zoo and see the penguins. What else? Maybe something not so extreme.”

I searched the list. “Hmm. OK, how about this? North Pole?”

“No North Pole either. You can visit the polar bear exhibit as well.”

“Well, that’s it. That’s my list.”

“You’ve kept a list for fifty years, and are down to the last two items?”

“Three. You forgot Christmas shopping.”

“OK, three items. Let me see that list.” I handed it over.

Angela scanned the list, and hundreds of items were on it, and hundreds had been lined through. Every significant thing they had done had been on the list and crossed off. Some had stars by them.

“What do the stars mean?”

“It’s my ranking system. One star means I might do it again, if I’m forced to and there’s time. Five stars means a must do again.”

“And no stars means ‘never again’?”

“No. No stars means I just haven’t ranked it. Maybe I should add that to the list. Number two thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine. Rank unranked items.”

“Two thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine? One more and you’ll have three thousand?”

“I guess so. I haven’t been keeping track.”

Angela looked at the list again. “I think you have. Where do you find the time?”

“I’m retired.”

“I’m tired, too. Of this stupid list.” She went to tear it up.

I mortified, shouted “NO!”

“I’m just kidding, I can see what this means to you. But let’s look at reality straight in the face for once. A trip to the North Pole or the South Pole is not going to happen this year. We will go Christmas shopping. So why not come up with just two more things, something you’ve never done, something you can say you’ve accomplished before your sixtieth birthday.”

I thought long and hard. “Give me a couple of days. This is a big decision.”

* * *

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A week passed before they resumed their conversation on the to do list. “Well, any ideas?”

“How about ‘Eat kangaroo meat?’”

“We did that when we lived in Australia. And wasn’t that already on your list?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How about you unplug for forty-eight hours? No phone, no computer, no TV.”

“No. Not something I want to do. That would be a negative stars activity.”

“Make wine?”

“We’ve done that.”

“From grapes you stomped yourself.”

I considered it. “That could be fun. Put it on the list.”

“Learn Esperanto?”

“Mi jam faris ĝin. Kvin cent.”

“What?”

“I’ve already done that. Five hundred.”

“It’s checked off, but there are no stars.”

“Some things only need to be done once. The ranking system’s not perfect.”

“Learn to work the saxophone.”

“How do you work the saxophone?”

“Just playing around with the old song lyric. Learn to play the saxophone?”

“I played clarinet. Same thing.”

“No, it’s not. Playing the saxophone is a whole different skill. You can build from playing clarinet, but there’s a lot more to learn beyond that.”

I thought about all the instruments he’d played over his lifetime. Of course the standard rock instruments were all in his repertoire, and many of the band instruments and

strings he had mastered. But as he came to consider it, saxophone was never among them. Although saxophone had been a featured instrument in many of his recorded songs and in live performance, he had always hired the gig out to a notable player, or used the synthesizer as a substitute. He did not know how to play the saxophone.

“OK. Put that on the list. Is that it?”

“Unless you want to go for the even three thousand.”

“OK. One more. How about something kinky?”

“Kinky?”

“Yeah, on the edge. Something we’d never think about doing, then do it.”

“What would be your idea of kinky?” Angela was a little apprehensive.

“Something naked.”

“You’re naked every day. Each time you step into the shower.”

“But not outside?”

“In public?”

“Doesn’t have to be in public. We have a big place, we have an amusement park. How about a roller coaster ride in the buff? Just you and I.”

“No way I’m doing that. That is too kinky.”

“Think about it. We shut off all the lights. No one will be around. We’ll drink a bottle of the wine we’ll be making. We’ll slip outside with nothing but towels on, climb into the front car, strip off the towel, and engage the remote control. It will be fun. I’ll bring the saxophone and serenade you with a sweet tune.”

“Well... We’ll see.”

Angela considered all the crazy things they had done, and looked again at I’s list. There were some things on

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there a lot more extreme than a couple of old fools baring it all on a roller coaster. She decided it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to be impulsive and act like a crazy fool.

"When?"

"I've got to learn to play saxophone first. And stomp some grapes. Give it a month."

I worked the saxophone daily, and found he was able to adapt his knowledge of the clarinet somewhat, but also discovered the other skills necessary to be more than just a mediocre player. When he wasn't practicing, he studied the art of wine making, bought a big barrel and some prime grapes, and stomped until the product was ready for the wine making process. Together they went through all the steps and finally delivered a couple of bottles of their homemade wine. One would be used to initiate their naked ride, the other would age until it was fully ready.

"We are really down to the wire now," I declared. "I've no more time before I have to continue on my Rock Opera and book, and get that Christmas shopping out of the way. It's tonight or never!"

"Is never still a possibility?"

"No, it's not."

Angela and I both stripped off their clothes, and each wrapped a towel around themselves. I took out the saxophone, and began playing a lovely romantic ballad that he had found the time to write. They poured themselves a glass of wine, and stepped outside in the chill night air and headed for the roller coaster. The lights were brightly lit, and I made sure to hit the switch, so that they would have their privacy. Taking a seat in the first car, they

clinked their glasses and cheered their exploit. Sipping the wine, they both immediately spit it out. "That's awful," they both said simultaneously and spit it out, "That's quite possibly one of the worst things I've ever tasted." They laughed as they poured out the remainder over the side, then allowed the glasses to crash below.

They stripped off their towels, took a deep breath, hit the remote control and the coaster made its rise.

2014 - STORY OF MY LIFE

“I’ve done it all. My to do list is complete, my novel is written, my Rock Opera is completed, recorded, and ready to hit the world by storm. Three thousand items, finished before I turned sixty. My greatest accomplishment!”

“After me, of course?” Angela inquired.

“After you, of course,” I quickly corrected. “You were on the list, remember?”

“And the kids?”

“And the kids. They were on the list.”

“And the grandkids?”

“All three of them. And counting.”

“On the list?”

“No,” I admitted. “I didn’t think of them when I was making it.”

“But you added stuff all the time. If you had added them, we wouldn’t have had to get on the roller coaster naked. The seats were cold!”

“I apologize for that.”

“And the great grandkids?”

“OK. There aren’t any yet. Give it twenty years.”

“And Christmas shopping?”

“That’s always on the list.”

“And the dogs?”

“Dogs do not rank ahead of completing the list. But they were on the list.”

“Dogs were on the list, but not your grandchildren?”

“I started it when I was a kid. I wanted a dog.”

“So, your fourth greatest accomplishment.”

I held up the glass of properly aged wine in a toast “My fourth greatest accomplishment!” Together they sipped, and this time, the experience was much more pleasant. “Not the finest, but good nonetheless. And the purple stains are nearly faded from my feet as well.” He reconsidered his toast, and continued. “And of course, to my greatest accomplishment, my second greatest accomplishment and my third greatest accomplishment as well!” They took another sip.

“What will you do with your life now?” Angela asked, “It seems you’ve done everything. What else can there be?”

“There are my five star items. Maybe even some of the four star items. OK, even three and two. But don’t make me do any one star. Once was enough. We can revisit the others again. I don’t think we spent enough time in Helena, for example, and we never actually got to Banff. It wasn’t on my list. We can start a new one.”

“We don’t need to make a list. We can just do, and see what life has to offer.”

“That’s been the story of my life. Impulsive. Ready to take on whatever life offers us. Being adventurous. Within reason, of course.”

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“Of course.”

“You notice there were no extreme activities on my list? No parachuting, no bungee jumping. No bear wrestling. No being shot out of a cannon”

“I distinctly remember you being shot out of a cannon on your 1976 tour. Night after night.”

“Oh, that’s right. But it was a small cannon, and not real at that. There were wires.”

”And all this time I thought it was real. Faker.”

“You do what you gotta do.”

“You do what you gotta do,” Angela agreed.

“What I gotta do is get some real food. How about we hit that new place in town?”

“Is it on your list?”

“There is no list. I’m done. One thing I’m sure of, I’ll never hit the road again. Leave it to the younger generation. I’m retired. Story of my life.”