

The Monday Morning Memo

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It's ten after four in the morning and I just woke up because I finally figured it out. Forty-four years old, in my sleep, I figured it out: they called him "Sundown" because he was dim, not very bright.

I could never figure out why they called him Sundown.

I was six years old and we lived at 404 Grandview Boulevard in Muskogee, Oklahoma where Mrs. Hamilton was my first grade teacher and I played with RG Wilton on the playground during recess and I got in two fights with Dan Beck and won them both by getting him in a choke hold until snot came out his nose. President Kennedy had been assassinated the previous year when we lived in Beaumont. That's how I can always remember the year when a thing happened. All I have to do is remember the house or the town or the school because we moved every year except for Muskogee where we lived for 2 years.

His real name was Duane and he was in his early twenties I guess and I was a little bit afraid of him. You could tell that he was always trying to fit in with my Dad and Al Pinkerton and Ron the manager from Sears who never once saw me but who had the foofy little poodle who was trained to go and sit wherever he pointed his ink pen. I remember Ophelia Pinkerton who was my sister's age and more than a little overweight and how she dialed the adjustment on the bathroom scales backwards by fifteen pounds when her mom promised her those expensive new boots if she would lose some weight. Ophelia had to cut the boot-tops off just above the ankles because her legs were too fat to fit inside. I remember the teenage girl who pulled out her guitar in the clubhouse of the Muskogee Round-Up Club and sang "In Them Old Cotton Fields Back Home" so badly that I was embarrassed for her but now I realize that country music is supposed to be sung like that. To call it a clubhouse was a laugh. It was really just a filthy old one-bedroom house that was on the farm where they built the arena for the Muskogee Round-Up Club, which is where I jumped down into the hole they had dug for the footings of the new grandstands and didn't see the re-bar sticking up from the ground. I still have the scar on my knee.

I guess that's why I'm so angry about the misspelling I noticed four days ago on the Oklahoma State University sign at Hill's Café, redneck central for every posing rodeo-circuit four-wheel-drive tobacco chewing moron in the area. I mean, even though it was just some pompous thing from the athletics department it still represents a major university and that doesn't speak too well of higher education. But then nobody ever said that OSU was good for much besides veterinary medicine and maybe those guys don't need to spell right anyway. *"The Power and the Glory of the Oklahoma State University Athletics Department will Never be Intrusted to the Meek or the Timid."* Aside from being a stupid, pretentious, and redneck thing to say, everyone knows that entrusted isn't spelled with an "i" unless you're a good football player I guess. Then you can spell it any way you want and they'll give you a passing grade and a degree and pay your tuition, too.

I've never liked cowboys or athletes but I always felt bad for Duane because he wasn't stupid due to misplaced priorities like a redneck or a jock, he was physically stupid. Organically, I mean. Like he had a high fever when he was a baby or something.

I can't remember Duane's last name. I'm not certain I ever knew it.

# # # #

I also don't remember the name of the gritty caretaker at the Muskogee Round-Up Club but he had a boy who was a couple of years older than me who didn't go to school. They let Mr. gritty and his wife and son live in the clubhouse as payment for being the caretakers I guess. Anyway we didn't use it as a clubhouse anymore. Once he and my Dad and me all squeezed into the cab of his truck which didn't have any interior except that he had pasted nude centerfolds from magazines all over the inside. I looked down through a hole that was rusted in the floorboard and saw the road going by and when we drove through the pasture the tall grass would stick up through the hole. There was also one of those curved-to-fit-your-butt glass bottles with some whiskey in it and I wondered a little why he didn't seem to be worried that it might fall out. His wife was prettier than you would expect considering how bad his teeth were and how he smelled.

My Dad sold the caretaker my Shetland pony Dink without asking me if it would be okay or even telling me that he had done it. The first I heard about it was from the caretaker's son who now owned Dink and could ride him any time he wanted. It's kind of tough when you learn from another kid that your pony isn't yours anymore but my dad had decided that it was time for me to start riding full-size horses and become a rodeo roper of calves and all like Jim Shoulders the World Champion All-Around Cowboy that no one would shut up about.

The only cowboy I ever liked was an old man named Dan Bradley who owned Leo Tag, the most famous stud horse in the world. Leo Tag's sire was Leo and his dam was Tag-along and that's how he got his name and he was the most valuable quarter horse in the world worth two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars because it cost a thousand dollars just to breed your mare to him. Dan Bradley kept Leo Tag in a fancy metal barn big enough to have an indoor arena with several dozen stalls for horses all around it and even though he was incredibly rich he took the time to show me how to get the kinks out of my calf rope and when I asked him if I could buy Leo Tag he didn't ignore me or laugh or even smile like I was cute or something.

"How much can you pay?" is all he asked me just like I was a grown man.

I got scared because now everyone was looking at me and it grew real quiet and my throat got tight and tears leaked out the corners of my eyes but Dan Bradley acted like he didn't see.

"I can pay you a quarter a week until he's paid for."

Dan Bradley looked right at me and said, "I don't want to sell Leo Tag right now, but I will promise you that if I ever do sell him, it'll be to you." And then he shook my hand and we went on with our calf roping lesson and then later when all the grownups went out to the barn to see Leo Tag in his fancy white leggings and green jacket like he was a Kentucky Derby horse or something Dan Bradley got everyone's attention and said that it had been more than ten years since anyone had ridden Leo Tag but that today he was going to let me ride him and become known as "the last man ever to ride Leo Tag." And then he told everyone that if Leo Tag was ever sold that it would be to me and that we had the deal all worked out. Since he was a stallion they didn't put a saddle on him or put a bit in his mouth but Dan Bradley just lifted me up and sat me on top and then led him around the indoor arena with a halter.

Dan Bradley's son was Dirk Bradley the World Champion calf roper but Dirk didn't ride bulls and all so he never became World Champion All-Around Cowboy like Jim Shoulders who everyone won't shut up about.

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The only person who could compete with Mr. gritty for the World Champion All-Around Gritty Award was Shinny of Shinny's gas station where we always bought gas. They say Shinny jimmied his gas pumps so that he could put 21 gallons into an 18 gallon tank but other than Shinny of Shinny's gas station there was really no competition.

Another thing about Al Pinkerton is that he was dapper even though he was portly which means overweight. He wore his cowboy hat cocked to one side and pulled down low over one eye which I could never do and make it look right. I can't remember which eye.

Al Pinkerton also made more money than most people so Ophelia could cut the tops off of expensive boots and Mrs. Pinkerton could wear fancy make-up and go to the hairdresser all the time and drive a brand new Chrysler with a very unusual back glass. It could roll down. I don't mean a back window like in a back door or anything but the actual back glass which is opposite the windshield. And it was even electric which means that Al Pinkerton could roll it down any time he wanted even if he was driving. The only other Al I know about is Al Allnutt who married my grandmother Evelyn for a little while after my grandfather died before I was born but we don't talk about him.



Sometimes when the weather was too bad for my dad to make me ride horses I could go and play with other kids at their house and do the things that they do. Tom Borman was my age and his brother Steve was the age of my sister and I think maybe he liked her but she never came over with me because she had her own friend Lela Horn. Both Bormans were good in sports especially baseball and their dad worked for the Chevy dealer and every night he would come home in a brand new car sometimes even an SS 396. If Tom Borman told me once he told

me a thousand times that his dad took him 100 miles an hour in the SS 396 and it was just like World Champion All-Around Cowboy Jim Shoulders that everyone won't shut up about. One thing about the Bormans is that their front teeth stick out a little bit especially Steve but they let me ride their bikes which are real Schwinn's which everyone knows are the best. When the Bormans' mom and dad weren't home they would get out their 22-caliber rifles which they were never supposed to touch unless their parents were home and sometimes they would even load bullets in them and all but they never pointed them at me or anything because everyone knows you can go to jail for that even Duane. Another thing you can go to jail for is letting a minor have beer but Mr. Borman kept a whole keg of beer in their refrigerator with a tap on it so that all you had to do was turn it sideways and beer would come out even if you were underage. Sometimes after Tom and Steve would load their rifles they would get a glass of beer and drink it because you can't tell how much beer is missing from things that are made of aluminum.

The same year that Mr. Borman brought home the new SS 396 was the year that my dad traded our '56 Chevy which my mom loved for a '54 International pickup which didn't run but dad said we needed a truck to pull the horse trailer. We didn't have a horse trailer but I helped him put a new starter on it and then it ran sometimes and we put stock racks on the back but you can't get a horse to step up that high so we never actually hauled horses in it but I liked the stock racks anyway. Sometimes I would stand on the bottom board right behind the cab and hang onto the top board while my dad was driving and I looked like General Douglas MacArthur or something. The Bormans' house was between our house and the Muskogee Round-Up Club but the Bormans were never looking. My dad didn't tell my mom that he was taking away the car she loved but he's like that sometimes he'll even give away your pony to another kid and then let you find out about it.

Another thing that happened that year was that Colin who lived across the street and who was just one year

older than me burned down the Lutheran church by breaking in and stuffing the songbooks into the piano and then setting it all on fire. I forget the name of his friend who helped him but Colin's dad was a Marine and there was a lot of trouble over it and they moved away after that. On the other side of me was a boy my age who was always throwing asphalt chunks at us that he picked up from the edge of the street but he wasn't as good a thrower as Steve Borman who played baseball so one day when he raised up from behind his fort Steve threw an asphalt chunk sidearm and hit him just above his eyebrow. Blood was everywhere and the kid was screaming and I think there was some trouble between the parents but the kid never threw asphalt after that. His dad had a ham radio though and it was always messing up our television reception until one day he was laying on the sofa and just died of a heart attack or something. When my parents told me about it at dinner I said, "Well at least he won't be messing up our television signal" which was completely true and all but they said that I shouldn't have said it and shouldn't feel that way.

# # # #

I'm not saying that Colin should have burned down the church or anything but everyone knows that if God had wanted pianos in the church he would have said so in the Bible which is why it was interesting that Colin started the fire in the piano just like he was an angel of God or something. It even says in Revelations that "Thou shalt be cursed with a curse if thou addest even one jot or one tittle to all that is written herein" and everyone knows that a piano is much bigger than a jot or a tittle. At least you know that if you're Church of Christ which we were.

The people who moved into the house where Colin lived were the exact opposite of him but they didn't live there very long and I can't remember the boy's name who was my age. But I do remember that on the day they moved away he went to each house where he had a friend and he asked the friend to come over and then he made a big production out of giving him one of his toys while his mother stood there watching. Not just some little toy either but one of his very best ones. He gave me his air rifle which was almost brand new because he knew that I liked it. It was sort of a tender moment and all and it bothers me a lot that I can't remember his name but they didn't really live there very long. I think they were Mormon or something.

It was at the end of the second grade just before we moved to Skiatook that we had a big outdoor program with lights and everything on the lawn of Hilldale Elementary where I went to school and Mrs. Shelton was my second grade teacher. We did exercises while a record player played "Go You Chicken Fat Go" over the loudspeakers and all the parents were there watching and all except for my dad who was off with my sister at a rodeo competition where she was trying to win points so that she could become Oklahoma Junior Rodeo Association State Champion 12 and Under. But my mom came so it's really just the same I guess. My sister was a better rider than me partly because she is 3 and a half years older and the exact same

horses would run a few tenths of a second faster for her than for me in barrel racing and flag racing and pole bending and all so she won blue ribbons and trophies and the hand-tooled Billy Cook Roping Saddle with OJRA STATE CHAMPION 12 AND UNDER stamped on the stirrups and I got a whole tennis shoe box of second place ribbons which are usually red.

It says in the Bible that God speaks with a still, small voice sometimes like when after Elijah killed the 400 prophets of Baal by calling down fire from heaven to burn up the offering on Mount Carmel and then went to hide in a cave in the mountains. It says there was an earthquake but that God was not in the earthquake. And then there was a mighty wind but God was not in the wind. And then there was a fire but God was not in the fire. Then Elijah heard a tiny voice and covered his face and walked out of the cave and God said, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" I think God spoke in a tiny voice like that in the Lutheran church but I would never say that because if I did it would probably be just like the time I said we wouldn't have to worry about our television reception any more. It's in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Kings if you don't believe me.

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One more thing about Duane. Like most people who are not very bright he was also extremely strong. I think God gives them that so they won't get pushed around so bad by people who are smarter than them. It's that tiny voice of God again I think. The worst thing Duane ever did is that he robbed a liquor store and got thrown in jail for it until the judge realized that he wasn't smart enough to rob a liquor store and let him go. My mom read about it in the newspaper because I think she knew Duane's last name.

Duane could probably spell if he wanted to. Maybe even win a spelling bee. At least good enough to beat the jocks at the Oklahoma State University Athletics Department who can't even spell "entrust."

The worst thing about moving to Skiatook is that I had to be the new kid again. No way out of it. But Tommy lived across the street and to the left and he was okay I guess. But Damon lived across the street and to the right and he wasn't. As soon as I heard his name I knew it fit him because Damon should have been spelled "Daemon" which is an overseas way of spelling "demon" like the ones Jesus cast into a herd of swine in the region of the Gadarenes in the book of Matthew. Luke tells the same story except that he spells it "Gerasenes" but he might have gone to Oklahoma State University or something.



Third grade in Skiatook is where I can't even remember my teacher's face or name which is another way of saying that it was not my best year so I was glad when we moved to Broken Arrow where Mrs. Fishler was my teacher. Tommy across the street and to the left was okay but maybe a little bit too much of a jock and all. When the Ford dealer on Main Street sponsored the Punt, Pass and Kick competition Tommy won the gold medal which is probably just as big as the ones they give at the Olympics. I would have done better except that I tried too hard on the kicking part which is my

best skill. My foot hit the top of the ball so that it just tumbled off the tee and went exactly four feet, seven inches. I was glad that the people measuring didn't laugh or anything. Damon from across the street and to the right would have laughed for sure but he wasn't there because he knew he didn't stand a chance against Tommy.

The best thing about Skiatook is that there is an old drug store on Main Street just five blocks from our house that had a soda fountain where you could get a Salty Dog for a nickel which is just crushed ice covered in lime juice and salt. They also sold these little bottles of cinnamon oil which were just the right size to stick toothpicks in to make cinnamon toothpicks which is what my sister did all the time. I don't want to talk about the Skiatook Round-Up Club. Another thing about Skiatook is that's the year we had to go visit my aunt Molly who got sent to reform school. Molly had a boyfriend in Ardmore named Cody Luntz who my mom thinks is sort of responsible for my Grandmother deciding to kill herself. It was some kind of drug deal or something but Cody Luntz shot a shotgun from a moving vehicle which is a felony even if you aren't pointing the gun at someone which Cody Luntz was. He went to prison and my aunt Molly went to reform school because she was underage to go to prison or even to drink beer which I also know she did.

Molly's reform school was Catholic but that didn't really matter because Molly wasn't anything especially not Church of Christ. Once when we visited Molly on a Sunday she sang some rock and roll religious songs with all of Cody Luntz's other girlfriends in the Chapel at the reform school which was surrounded by a high chain link fence with razor wire at the top. They had a piano and an organ like the Lutheran Church in Muskogee but we've already talked about that.

When Molly got out of reform school I didn't see her again until the summer I went to work for my Granddad



who spent his whole life running an ice delivery service in Ardmore. You know those bags of crushed ice at all the gas stations and convenience stores and bait shops and all? My Grandfather would buy 300 pound blocks of ice at the ice plant and then haul it to one of his crushing sites which is really just a gigantic walk-in freezer somewhere and then crush the ice and bag it and take it to those little freezers at the gas stations and convenience stores and bait shops and all which he also owns. The freezers I mean. He would keep those freezers filled with crushed ice and the convenience stores would pay us in cash from the cash register and then sell the ice for more than they paid us for it. That's what my grandfather did for more than fifty years starting when he was just nine years old. It was a very good business. Even when he was old my grandfather could reach out with one hand and snag a 300 pound block of ice with a pair of tongs and swing it up on his back as he walked past it without even breaking stride. I've seen him do it. He was maybe even stronger than Duane.

I lived with my granddad in his house which Molly also lived in but at night both of them were always gone so I just watched TV. By this time Molly was about 24 but was not yet married to Cody Luntz who was still in prison. We sacked ice together every day but she was not what you would call a pleasant person until finally we got into a fight with ice hooks and ice picks and that's when my mom drove four hours from Broken Arrow to get me and bring me home. She never spoke to her father or to her sister Molly again which was really sad because Grandmother had killed herself just two years earlier and I figure Grandad was sad enough already. But then he married Phyllis from down the street who he was dating when I worked for him sacking ice. Mom thinks they might have been dating even longer.

Mom is extremely pretty and elegant like Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. And even though she got pregnant and dropped out of school when she was just 16 she is still one of the world's smartest people. She even took the IQ test and was immediately accepted into Mensa where they give you a funny little hat pin with a yellow plastic head to wear in your hair or your clothes so that other geniuses will know that you are smart like they are.

When Cody Luntz got out of prison he married my aunt Molly. Did I mention she is red-headed? They were married a few years and then Cody went to sleep with a cold one night and never woke up. Molly woke up in bed next to a dead man. But since my Mom who is smart thinks maybe Cody and Molly had something to do with my grandmother killing herself I think that a person might be able to listen real close and hear the tiny voice of God but I would never say that.

My dad has good handwriting and my mom can spell any word. They call it the Palmer Method. The handwriting I mean.

We didn't go to the Church of Christ in Skiatook but went instead to the Church of Christ in Collinsville which is fourteen miles away. I don't know why. Altogether I had 8 years perfect attendance without ever missing a service which means Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night. *"Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhort one another so much the more as you see the day approaching."* You'll find that verse in the tenth chapter of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament which anyone can tell you who is Church of Christ. And the day they're talking about is definitely Wednesday night because that's how you can really tell the depth of a person's commitment.

Halfway between our house and the school was a large field of grass which burned completely and I picked up over a dollar's worth of pop bottles which I cashed at the grocery store next to the Ford dealer that gave Tommy the gold medal for Punt, Pass and Kick. The store gave me back the deposits for all the bottles even the ones that were old and the ones the fire turned black. I don't know how it started.

We moved from our first house in Skiatook that was near Main Street to another one in Skiatook that was out in the country but I didn't have to change schools or anything because there was only one. That's where we got Pearl and Kay. They had been abandoned or something because they were living on June bugs that were attracted to the security light that was on a pole behind the house even though no one lived in it. Kay looked exactly like Lassie and Pearl was part beagle, part cocker spaniel and probably part wiener dog which is also called dachshund. She weighed exactly seventeen pounds because I would stand on the scales and weigh myself and then stand on the scales holding Pearl and the difference between the two numbers was how much Pearl weighed. I got the idea for doing that from reading about Archimedes and how he used the displacement of water in his bathtub to determine the mass of irregular objects. Pearl and me on those scales wasn't exactly the same thing but it's sort of the same so I'm sure you get the idea.



Out in the country there are no other houses so Tommy couldn't live across the street and to the left anymore. Mom called her Pitiful Pearl and she was the smartest and best friend I ever had. Ever. One thing you better not do was act like you were going to hit me or anything even if you were my dad because Pearl would act like she was going to bite you no matter who you were. Nobody ever decided to see if she would really bite them though. Most people saw that she wasn't bluffing or joking and just decided that maybe it wasn't such a smart idea to yell at me or act mad or anything. Once my dad was

having a bad day and Pearl was near his feet so he kicked her and she flew off the ground and landed about five feet away so I tried to kill him but I wasn't big enough and Pearl wasn't really hurt so we just ran away.

Do you want me to tell you what I did one time that I never told anyone about? I went in my room and closed the door and prayed to God and I remember exactly what I said. I did it because my sister and I never really got along to say the least and Pearl was the smartest dog to ever live and she was my very best friend. When I was sad she would act all sad and lick my cheek and look up in my face and then if I smiled a little she would wiggle and dance around and act all happy. No one could cheer me up like Pearl. She always slept in my room and sometimes when I woke up she would be in bed with me. I said "God, I know how people are always making promises to you and then breaking them and how they always want to bargain with you like they actually had something to bargain with that you needed. So I just want to say up front that I don't have anything to offer in return and I'm not going to make any promises because I would probably just break them anyway and this is too important to depend on whether or not I can keep up my end of the bargain. So let's not make this about how good I am but about how good you are, okay? The reason I'm asking you to do this is because you're God and no one else is and I think that you might be willing to do this for me just because I asked you and without any other reason. So here's what I'm asking. I want you to guard Pearl and keep her from being run over by a car even if she walks out in front of one and keep her from getting lost even though we don't have a fence and don't ever let anyone kill her or give her away or steal her and make sure that she never gets any diseases or gets in a fight with another dog or an animal that might hurt her. And even though she's already a grown dog I want you to give her such a long life that she doesn't get old and die until I'm engaged to be married. And when it's time for her to die I want you to make it absolutely painless and make sure that she doesn't know that she's dying and make sure that you give me twenty-four hours advance notice, okay? Because she and I will have a lot to talk about and I don't

want it to be a surprise. I don't have a clue how you're going to give me twenty-four hours notice but you'll figure something out. After all, you're God, right? And as long as we're being honest here, I just want to say that I'm not going to pray this prayer over and over and over like you didn't hear me the first time. I know that you're listening and I know that you can do this if you want. In Jesus' name, amen." And then I got up and went outside and never prayed that prayer again.

# # # #

When my dad decided to start selling insurance for MFA he had to take a test which was about his personality and later they gave him a big envelope with a confidential report in it which was all about his personality but it was sealed and he wasn't supposed to open it at all but was supposed to give it to the interviewer which was two days from now. He really, really, really wanted to open that envelope and see what it said about him but my mom hid it from him until the morning of the interview because she said they probably had a way of telling if you opened it even if you steamed it open carefully and then resealed it. She figured there probably wasn't even a personality report inside but that it was just a test of honesty and trustworthiness and the real test was whether or not you would open the envelope. Anyway that's how we got to Broken Arrow, a booming town which did not have an MFA insurance office.

Fourth grade was in Broken Arrow and my teacher was Mrs. Fishler at Southside Elementary. Fifth grade was in Broken Arrow and my teacher was Mr. McMillan at Haskell Elementary. Sixth grade was in Broken Arrow and my teacher was Mr. Woolcott at Northeast Elementary. So you can see that we still moved every year even though we didn't necessarily go to a different town, just to a different school but by this time I was getting to be an expert at being the new kid. The secret is not to go out at recess with the other kids but just to stay in the classroom and read a book. Spelling is easy when you read enough good books. You can just look at a word and immediately know if it's spelled right or not. And good books never have anything in them about dads who give away your pony or favorite grandmothers who kill themselves or anything like that.

Our first house in Broken Arrow was at 508 West Pittsburgh right across Elm Street from the farm where my dad kept all the horses that I had to feed and water before I walked to school every day. It was no big deal, really, except that there was no water in their pasture so I had to carry five-gallon buckets of it about two hundred yards which is hard to do when you're in the fourth grade even if you're big for your age. The secret is to carry two five-gallon buckets instead of just one so they balance each other out and you don't get pulled over to one side. No big thing really. You don't have to be World Champion All-Around Cowboy Jim Shoulders or anything like that. You would be surprised how much a horse can drink, though.

One day I spotted a quarter in the dust near the gate except that this quarter was actually underground. I'm not saying that I have X-ray vision or anything like that. Not even Duane believes those ads in the back of comic books about X-ray glasses that cost two dollars and let you see through a girl's clothes. It's just that the dust near the gate was about as fine as talcum powder and even though there was at least an eighth of an inch of it on top of the quarter I could still see a perfect circle in the dirt that didn't have any reason to be there and was exactly the diameter of George Washington's head. And this was back in the days when they only gave you two cents deposit when you turned in pop bottles that you found in the ditch and candy bars were just a nickel and a Dr. Pepper was a dime.

# # # #

Mrs. Fishler was an extremely good teacher even though she was very old. The best thing she did was make us lay our heads down on our desks for a little while each day while she read us a chapter from Charlotte's Web. She was also the first teacher ever to tell me that I should become a writer, which I am today. And she understood that some people like to stay in at recess and read books instead of doing things outdoors even though later that year my best friend became Shane Greeley who was such a good friend that I asked him to be the best man at my wedding. So I started going outside with Shane during recess and doing most of my reading at night and that was okay with Mrs. Fishler, too. She didn't bug you to go outside if you didn't want to.



Shane Greeley and I read a lot of the same books in elementary school and when we were old enough to drive we listened to a lot of the same music even though our taste was very different in girls. Shane only lived two blocks away so when I didn't have to go ride horses at the Broken Arrow Round-Up Club I could run to his house and we could play spies or make paper airplanes or float boats made from scrap lumber in the St. Lawrence seaway which was the creek that ran next to my house. We called it that because it was shaped exactly like the St.

Lawrence seaway which we had studied during geography in Mrs. Fishler's class. I could take you there and show you if you really wanted to see it but most people don't.

Shane Greeley and I stayed friends even after my dad moved us so far out on 101<sup>st</sup> street that our house

was past the Boy Scout camp that no one swims at because it's too far away. That's true friendship.

# # # #

One thing that Shane Greeley and I did together in the fourth grade was play Kohoolies. Probably no one else in the world ever played Kohoolies because they wouldn't have thought of it like we did. I remember specifically that it was the fourth grade instead of another grade because it was in the bathroom of the house at 508 West Pittsburgh which also had the St. Lawrence seaway. That was a good house.

To play Kohoolies first you have to read the Dig Allen book *Trappers of Venus* where Dig Allen goes to Venus whose atmosphere is very hot and steamy. The house at 508 West Pittsburgh had one of those natural gas heaters built into the wall that could be adjusted so that you could make it extremely hot and steamy like Venus especially if you turned on the shower in the bathtub as hot as it would go. I forget the rest of the rules for playing Kohoolies but that's the main one. The rest of the Dig Allen books were called *The Forgotten Star*, *Captives in Space*, *Journey to Jupiter*, *Robots of Saturn*, and *Lost City of Uranus*. Dig Allen was also red-headed but he wasn't like aunt Molly at all.

Another thing which made the house on Pittsburgh a good house was that it was across the street from the farm where we kept our horses which means that there were no houses on that side of Elm street only a row of pine trees next to the road that Shane Greeley and I would make snowballs behind and loft them over the pine trees with perfect timing so that they would land on the windshields of cars that were driving down Elm street. I was better at this that you might think even though I didn't play Little League for the Bankers like Shane Greeley which everyone knows is the best team. Those were the days all right but only when it was snowing. Those days and rainy days are the only ones where you don't have to go to the Broken Arrow Round-Up Club and ride horses with a bunch of people who never heard of Dig Allen or anything but only want to talk about You Know Who that everyone won't shut up about. Fourth grade was a very rainy and snowy year.

Martin Luther King was assassinated during the spring of that year by a redneck with three first names. It was on a Thursday.

I don't know why I remember that.

The pine trees that Shane Greeley and I used to hide behind are all gone now because that farm was made into a housing addition so no one finds quarters there anymore. Right where that gate was is probably someone's living room or something.

Did I already say that my dad bought thirty acres out past Boy Scout Camp Russell? That was fifth grade, Mr. McMillan, Haskell Elementary. It was also the only year that I ever had to ride bus fourteen and our house was the very first stop on the bus route so I could always get the back seat and save it to share with Bo Todd who also rode bus fourteen. Being the first house means that I had to get up earlier than any of the other kids and sit there for the whole bus route which was very long because you'd be surprised how many kids you can get in one of those school busses. The main difference between Bo Todd and me aside from the fact that he was sixth grade and I was only fifth is that he was an actual farm kid so all that stuff about castrating horses and cows and pigs and all didn't bother him. He thought it was perfectly normal. The good news is that being first on the bus route in the morning means that you're also the first one they let off the bus after school so you can play with your dog Pearl who waits for you asleep on the front porch until she hears the doors open on bus fourteen and then starts running around the yard and showing off. We didn't have Kay anymore.



One day I got off the bus and saw that our car was in the driveway which it never was when the bus dropped us off because my dad had to drive it to work and all. It gave me a very bad feeling which I knew was correct when I saw my mom's face and my dad's face when my sister and I walked into the living room. I started crying when they told us to sit down because somehow I knew what was coming.

Grown-ups think that eleven year-olds can't figure things out and don't know what you're talking about when you make veiled comments about your secretary to some of your employees at Club America. And yes, even a fifth grader is smart enough to figure out that Club America which was supposed to sell memberships for discounts on meals at fine restaurants and entertainment events and all had SCAM written all over it and those men who worked for you were just oily posers who looked up to you because you were thirty-two and they were just twenty-five or something and LeAnn was only twenty which was only six years older than my sister.

You can figure a lot of things out when you're eleven. More than you think.



In the Church of Christ we didn't miss a service for eight years and then when we quit going Leonard Petty came over to our house and said he was concerned about our souls and about eternal darkness and all. But mom said to pay no attention to him since no one from the church ever came to visit us after my dad disappeared with that girl LeAnn even though they all knew that my mom and my sister and me didn't have any money even for food and that was two years ago and where was all their concern then? No one cared about us or worried about us as long as we were sitting in those pews three times a week and had perfect attendance. At least that's what my mom said. For two whole years after Dad left we continued to show up three times a week and no one in the Church of Christ cared that my mom didn't have a high school diploma and didn't have a job and didn't have any money to buy food or pay utilities but all she had was two kids and one of them wanted to be in band. But that scene with Leonard Petty and all happened in the seventh grade at 1943 South Lions which was two whole houses later. I'm sorry for skipping ahead two years. I'll try to get back on track.

Do you want me to go back and tell you about Beaumont, Texas, where we lived when I was five years old, back before we moved to Muskogee and met Al Pinkerton and Duane and started buying horses that everyone hates to ride? In Beaumont my best friend's name was Brett Mackey which is funny because my dad's seventh wife was a Mackey before he married her but she was not from the same family of Mackeys as my friend Brett Mackey. My mom was wife number one and they were married for sixteen years and his only kids are my sister and me. Mom never remarried but my dad did three more times after the Mackey woman which makes ten in all but he says that there weren't nearly that many but there were and I met every one of them and can name them in perfect order. After my mom was LeAnn then Charlene, Diane, Naomi, Lesley, Sissy, Donna and then one whose name I can't remember right now and then Eddie. Which is funny because my dad is the oldest son of a Church of Christ minister who died when my dad was fourteen. My sister was born two years later.

Yes, Eddie was a woman. It's just that her name was Eddie, that's all. My dad may have his faults but that's definitely not one of them.

Anyway Beaumont is about one hour north of Houston on the Gulf of Mexico if you're driving a car. Beaumont means "beautiful mountain" in French which is funny because there isn't a mountain or even a hill for a hundred and fifty miles in any direction especially east which is the ocean. In Beaumont it rains so hard that the streets will fill up with water all the way to the top of the curb and when you're five years old you can float boats that you made from scraps of lumber until they go down the storm drain never to be seen again unless they show up in China or something. And at night the mosquitoes are so thick around the



streetlights that a special truck will come and blow insecticide fog up by them with a special tube about as big as the heat and air conditioning ducts in your attic.

The people who lived between our house and Brett Mackey who was also five years old had three kids named Kerry and Cash and Bets who was a girl and completely covered with giant freckles from her head to her toes almost like a Dalmatian. I know this for certain because one day she was getting spanked and was screaming so loud that everyone in the neighborhood was wondering what was happening and then the front door of her house burst open and Bets came running out completely naked with her mother right behind her except with her clothes on. Kerry was my age and Bets was my sister's age and Cash was in between but we didn't hardly ever play with them because Cash and Kerry were always trying to get me to do homosexual things with them which of course I never did. Even Duane is too smart for the tricks that Kerry and Cash would try to pull.

Brett Mackey was a little bit like the Bormans in that he owned 22-caliber bullets that he was never supposed to touch but did anyway. The whole problem with Cash and Kerry got easier to handle when Kerry took one of Brett's bullets and put it on the floor of the garage at Brett's house and then started hitting it with a hammer to see if he could make it fire. Mr. Mackey walked into the garage and saw what was happening and said the bullet could have gone off and shot through the garage wall into the kitchen and killed Brett's mom who was making dinner so it wasn't much of a problem avoiding Cash and Kerry after that. The bullet never did fire but it could have and nobody's mom deserves to be shot while making dinner for her family. I have to admit though that I was amazed at how flat you can smash a 22-caliber bullet without it ever firing.

# # # #

After we moved away from the 30 acres that my dad had bought for the horses it was time for fifth grade to be over and my mom and my sister and me moved into an apartment behind a convenience store that was right across the street from the Church of Christ which everybody knows is on 71<sup>st</sup> street. The Munn family was also Church of Christ and Roger Munn was my age and his little brother was Mickey. A strange thing about the Munn family is that Mr. Munn thought it was important for everyone to know that his boys weren't hippies so he would oil their heads down with Vitalis and comb their hair with a precision-straight part which was made even worse by the fact that their hair was black. To be honest it made them look like a family of ducks. The three of them including Mr. Munn looked like they were all the exact same person just in three different sizes. Once I spent the night at Roger Munn's house so I could watch Neil Armstrong land on the moon on their TV and the next morning I was told to line up with Roger and Mickey so that Mr. Munn could oil my head down with Vitalis. When he opened the bathroom pantry and pulled out a giant economy-

size bottle of hair oil it would have been scary enough even if there weren't two-dozen identical bottles behind it which there were. It may have been the scariest moment of my life.

We only lived in the apartment behind the convenience store for one summer because my mom was able to get a job as a filing clerk and then we moved to 603 North Ash which is where I lived during sixth grade and went to Northeast Elementary in the old part of town. It was a strange year and there were lots of tornadoes.

You're not going to believe me but the person that I spent the most time with in the sixth grade at Northeast Elementary was named Tommy Roady. First there was Tom Borman in Muskogee and then there was Tommy in Skiatook across the street and to the left and now another kid named Tommy? It was just a coincidence though. Tommy Roady's dad was a highway patrolman but I never once met him even though I was over there all the time. Tommy Roady had a brother named Andy Roady who was the same age as my sister but you definitely don't want to hear about him. Shane Greeley was still going to Southside Elementary like both of us did in the fourth grade. He didn't ever go to Haskell Elementary or Northeast Elementary like I did. Roger Munn went to Oak Crest.

Sixth grade was the year that I started mowing other people's lawns for money and building go-karts and mini-bikes from old side-shaft lawnmower engines and the lady that we shared a back fence with who was always in her garden gave me a box of books which included all of the Tom Corbett Space Cadet series which is even better than Dig Allen if you can believe it. Tom Corbett is another Tom which is also just a coincidence. Tom Corbett's friends were Roger Manning who was kind of sarcastic and Astro who was a natural born rocket mechanic. He didn't have a last name though, just Astro.

One of the things that we did a lot when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade was have dinner at Jed and Cheryl Kingsley's house who was my mom's lawyer. I think they probably asked us to come to their house a lot because they knew we didn't have any money but I'm only guessing. They never said that or anything. The best thing about going to Jed and Cheryl Kingsley's house is that Benny and Dexter were usually there and they were in high school and college but not at Oklahoma State University. Benny and Dexter would wrestle with me and take me with them when they went places. One of the things that Benny did when he wasn't in medical school was work on his Ford GT-40 that looked exactly like a real one except that this one had a Porsche engine on a Volkswagen frame. If it wasn't for that you would have thought that it was a real Ford GT-40 which everyone knows is the most beautiful car ever made even if it wasn't painted yet. They called it a GT-40 because the roof was only 40 inches off the ground and the reason Ford built it was because they had been in negotiations with Enzo Ferrari to buy his company and then he backed out at the last minute so they designed a car to kick his butt. Sometimes he would take me riding in it even though it wasn't even finished

or legal or anything and we would go right down Main Street and honk the horn. At least that's what Benny said and he should know.

Benny's brother Dexter drove a green Karmann Ghia and that's not the only way he was different from Benny either. Dexter was loud and smiled a lot and had a dark suntan and big muscles and curly hair and a girlfriend named Pam which Benny didn't have any of. But Benny had glasses and Dexter didn't so I guess it was really pretty equal. Dexter worked for the city of Broken Arrow where he rode on the back of a garbage truck and grabbed people's garbage cans and dumped them in until it was full. One day something happened which was very sad and made Dexter quit working for the city of Broken Arrow and begin working for Quik-Trip which is a convenience store. A little boy was following real close right behind the garbage truck on his bicycle and when it stopped and began backing up he fell down and the truck ran over his head and he died and guess who found him then? I don't know who picks up the garbage now.

Benny would invite me into his room even though I was only 11 and listen to the Moody Blues and Grand Funk Railroad on his stereo. One time Benny's mom Cheryl was telling my mom that the saddest day she could ever remember was when Benny was eleven like me but Cheryl didn't know that I could hear her talking from the other room. Benny wasn't there that day. She said that they sent out invitations to all of the kids in Benny's class at school for them to come over to Benny's birthday party and Benny sat on top of the gate post in the front yard and waited for the other kids to show up but none ever did. Sometimes Benny would act frustrated and a little bit angry but not at me or anything just in general. But that wasn't all the time. Mostly Benny was pretty happy. About 4 years later when Benny was getting out of medical school he got married and then his wife had a baby about 4 and a half months later and Benny said you know how to make them faster when you're a doctor but I think he was just making it up. I never did tell Benny that I knew about the birthday party because he probably would have just been embarrassed and who needs that?

One more thing. Benny and Dexter never talked about horses at all and I don't think they ever even heard of World Champion All-Around Cowboy Jim Shoulders that nobody cares about.

# # # #

One thing I forgot to tell you about is Henrietta and Leon Wyatt. It was during the summer after sixth grade when all the kids were going to Burnt Cabin summer camp and they asked my mother if they could pay to send my sister and me to camp with the other kids which was fifteen dollars each for two weeks. I wanted to go but my sister didn't because she was three and a half years older than me and kids her age didn't go to Burnt Cabin summer camp so much. I won't even try to tell you what a great time I had but when I was older and started making a lot of money I sent Henrietta and Leon Wyatt a one hundred dollar bouquet of

flowers just to say thank you. Do you know how big that is? And any time I hear about kids whose moms don't have money to send them to camp I always pay it for them in honor of Henrietta and Leon Wyatt who never had kids of their own.

Did you know that recall cues are something that everybody has but most people don't know that they have them? One of my recall cues is the movie "True Grit" starring John Wayne or even just the name of the movie or a picture of him wearing an eye patch. The movie is about a 14 year-old girl whose father has been murdered and she hires John Wayne who is a fat and cranky one-eyed U.S. marshal to help her track him down. The murderer's name is Tom Chaney and the girl's name is Mattie Ross but in real life it's Kim Darby. My dad took my sister and me to see that movie at the movie theater and then I didn't see or talk to him again for six years. Glen Campbell was in it too.

Every day during her lunch hour my mom would drive to a better place to work and fill out a job application. She said that sooner or later she would get hired either at American Airlines or Shell Oil Company both of which were good places to work but for different reasons. Shell Oil Company finally hired her at their credit card center in Tulsa which isn't very far from Broken Arrow and since it was non-union she could get promoted faster than if it was all done by seniority. This good job allowed us to get an FHA 221d2 loan for a brand new house at 1943 South Lions for \$15,000 except that my mom asked the builder to build a brick flower bed in front of ours so that it would look different from the other houses on our street and that made it \$15,100. At the end of the summer I started seventh grade at Sequoyah Junior High and things began to get better. The only sad thing was that Shane Greeley was at Central Junior High, not Sequoyah, but nothing could be done about it. I went there for all three years – seventh grade, eighth grade, and ninth grade and boy do I have stories to tell you about that.

# # # #

In the seventh grade you have a different teacher every hour so you really don't have just one teacher anymore and then at the end of the day you go to athletics and let goofball coaches yell silly platitudes at you. Or maybe it's different where you live. About having a different teacher every hour I mean. Nothing is quite so sad as a grown man barking at the top of his lungs to several dozen big-eyed adolescents, "If you succeed in football, you'll succeed in life!" And did you ever meet a coach who *didn't* believe in giving "a hundred and ten percent?" I think that's why they never let coaches teach math class.

A. E. Housman wrote a seven-stanza poem called *To An Athlete Dying Young* in which he suggests that it's a smart thing to die young if you're a star athlete because you're never going to receive that kind of hero-worship again. I remember a little bit of how it goes;

"The time you won your town the race we chaired you through the market-place. Man and boy stood cheering by, and home we brought you shoulder-high. Today, the road all runners come, shoulder-high we bring you home and set you at your threshold down, townsman of a stiller town. Smart lad, to slip betimes away from fields where glory does not stay... Eyes the shady night has shut cannot see the record cut... Now you will not swell the rout of lads that wore their honors out... runners whom renown outran and the name died before the man."

It was in the seventh grade that I figured out that while there were lots of coaches who are teachers, there were very few teachers who are coaches. But maybe it's different where you live.

# # # #

Zack Masterson's dad owned a pawn shop and sometimes he would let me and Zack work for him polishing rings and carrying things into the attic and stuff. Zack had a brother named Greg who was in college and a sister named Alicia who was the same age as my sister and a little sister named Jenny who was in the second grade. They were Catholic.



I think the Mastersons may have been the first normal family I ever knew. Not only did Mr. and Mrs. Masterson like each other but all of the kids liked each other, too. Alicia and Greg were always happy to give us a ride somewhere and they gave us good advice and did whatever they could to help us out. And Jenny never pestered us or made trouble either. Zack had a stereo that his dad had brought home from the pawn shop for him and we used to listen to the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel. He also had his own TV from the pawnshop, too. One night we were watching Mannix when one of the Dugans, I can't remember if it was Don or Jim, suddenly appeared on the screen right in the middle of an episode. It wasn't a commercial break or anything. One of the Dugans was the weatherman and the other Dugan hosted a fishing show. I can't remember which one it was

but they were both famous TV personalities in Tulsa which was 14 miles away and had all the TV stations. Anyway, the Dugan was sitting in a cheap kitchen chair on the cement studio floor with a stupid grin on his face and his middle finger saluting the cameraman. And then just as suddenly he was gone and we were watching Mannix again and there was only one Dugan brother after that.

Zack Masterson was good at boxing which is a sport they taught at Subiaco Academy which is a private boy's school in another state where his dad and his brother went and which Zack was going to have to start attending in the ninth grade. It looks like a giant medieval castle on a hilltop in rural Arkansas and is also an abbey for Benedictine monks. In the summers they had a two-week summer camp where boys would come from all over America and you didn't just swim in a lake but in an Olympic pool and there was a fieldhouse and a go-kart track and a boxing ring and every other thing you can think of. Summer camps like that aren't \$15 for 2 weeks like Burnt Cabin; they're \$90 for 2 weeks which is about two thirds of how much our house payment was every month and my mom's little sister Kathleen had to move in with us to help us even pay that much. But I never told people stuff like that. I didn't want them to think that we were poor or anything. Anyway, one day Zack Masterson's dad brought home a huge amount of stuff from the attic of the pawn shop which was too out-of-date to sell there and had a big garage sale and then guess who they sent to Subiaco Academy summer camp for 2 weeks with Zack? One day we helped the monks haul hay from the pasture by loading the bales of hay onto the back of a flatbed truck and then unloading them in the barn. It was hot and bright and dusty and golden when we looked up and saw a wall of purple rain coming slowly at us from the east. We barely got the hay into the barn before the rain arrived. When it was over, we all piled onto the truck and one of the monks drove us to the drive-in theater where we saw a vampire movie. Brad from Georgia said, "Well that ain't nothin' but a big ol' tick" and we all started laughing and the movie wasn't scary after that.

The next day about seven of us piled into an old army jeep and went several miles down a dirt road to a swimming place called Blue Hole because it was so deep. On the way back I was standing in the jeep holding onto the roll bar when a low hanging branch lashed across my chest when I wasn't looking and ripped open the inside of my arm a little but I didn't let it bother me because I was at summer camp with my friend Zack Masterson. I still have the scar. After my arm quit bleeding I went to the go-kart time trials which is where everyone races the same go-kart against each other on an obstacle course set up in one of the parking lots. I came in second which is pretty good considering there were about 200 guys who tried. On boxing day I boxed the biggest kid in the camp named Jerry Schultze but he wasn't necessarily the best boxer so I won. Nobody wanted to box Zack Masterson even when he offered to box with only one hand. All of us were thirteen then.

Later that year my dog had puppies. When it came time to find homes for them my mom put a classified ad

in the newspaper that said, "Authentic Precious Pearl puppies Free to good homes" and then it gave our telephone number. When people called to ask what a Precious Pearl puppy was we would just tell them that they were puppies from our dog Precious Pearl and then when we told them a little bit about Pearl everyone wanted a puppy. That was when I started to learn about advertising.

In his book *Sweet Thursday*, John Steinbeck says, "Looking back, you can usually find the moment of the birth of a new era, whereas, when it happened, it was one day hooked on to the tail of another."

I think I know exactly what he was saying.

# # # #

Another person that Zack and I ran around with a lot was Barry Maxwell who was actually a year older than us but his mom held him back in the second grade so he was in our class. Barry was big like a bull and he could flare his nostrils like one too which I've never been able to do. One thing I learned from Barry is never to light a fart. Everyone says that they burn with a blue flame but no one ever tells you how you're supposed to get the match close enough without burning yourself. And of course no one else ever wants to hold the match so you have to do it yourself while looking in a mirror and that just never seems to work out. At least that's what Barry told me and I have no reason to doubt him.

In the seventh grade after football season you have to choose between wrestling and basketball. Zack and Barry were both in wrestling but I chose basketball because I was tall and skinny but since both practices ended at about the same time we always walked home together. One day after practice we walked across the street and went behind the church with about 75 other guys because Billy Tucker was supposed to fight Lenny Hardesty. When we got there Billy was waiting for him but Lenny wasn't there yet. Billy Tucker was one of those guys who was just your average guy except that he was more than a little overweight like Ophelia Pinkerton. Lenny Hardesty on the other hand was an interesting character who ran around with a much older crowd. What made Lenny interesting is that he was over six feet tall in the seventh grade but he probably only weighed about 110 pounds and his shoe size was 16AAA which is narrow enough to walk along the top of a picket fence. Anyway when Lenny showed it was quite a scene because he had one of his high-school friends drive him up in a black Monte Carlo with dark tinted windows and then the door opened and Lenny stepped out smoking a cigarette and all and holding a beer. In the floor of the car were a bicycle chain and some brass knuckles and a short baseball bat and some other stuff so the guys all said "Oooooow" and "Ahhhhhhh" and began to get nervous about what might be about to happen. Then Lenny made a big show out of putting on a pair of tight-fitting black leather gloves and laying out all of his weapons including an old brown beer bottle. Lenny said "Your choice of weapons" and Billy Tucker just

looked a little impatient and said "Suit yourself, I'm good to go," so Lenny slipped the brass knuckles over his gloves and then began to close in on Billy who promptly grabbed his arm and slung him to the ground and did a belly flop on top of him. Suddenly we couldn't see Lenny anymore. We could hear him a little so we knew he was under there somewhere but he was all crumpled up like a mosquito. Most of the noises coming out from under Billy were muffled cuss words and "Get offa me! Get offa me!" but Billy didn't get off until Lenny said "I give up." When Billy Tucker got up off the ground his face was flushed and when Lenny Hardesty got up his face was flushed too. I don't remember what the fight was about.

# # # #

Eighth grade was like seventh grade but different. For one thing Zack Masterson was always in love with someone usually Connie Plagman. Sometimes when we were walking somewhere Zack would start singing a radio song except that he would change the words to be about Connie Plagman which was funny because Connie didn't like him and Zack couldn't sing very well. He would sing all sincere and dreamlike with a faraway look in his eyes which I realize now was mostly hormones.

Some people are in love with being in love. Barry Maxwell was definitely not one of these people. But Barry never gave Zack a hard time about Connie Plagman or anything because Zack Masterson was not just a good boxer, he was unbelievable good. Muhammad Ali good. And absolutely fearless. But somehow deep inside we all knew that Barry could probably just "Billy Tucker" Zack's butt so no one ever let it get started.

It was during eighth grade that my mom started dating for the first time since she was sixteen years old. Steve was an assistant manager at one of those steak houses where you push a tray and pay for your steak up front and then wait for them to call your number. Looking back, I wish I had been less of a jerk toward Steve because he was really a pretty good guy, but when you're thirteen years old, no one is good enough to date your mother so I was really never very nice to him even though he tried really hard to make me like him.





Steve and Pearl

Steve's dream was to drive an 18-wheeler so my mom encouraged him to pursue his dream and go to truck-driving school. They dated for about a year and a half and then he found a financial backer who was willing to set him up in his own restaurant in Kansas City so he asked my mom to marry him and he'd move us all to Kansas City. Mom thought about it for a few days and then told him no – that she had a good job at Shell Oil Company and a nice house with an FHA 221d2 loan and a son and a daughter who had friends in Broken Arrow and my mom and Steve never spoke again.

Eighth grade was when I had the perfect pair of shoes. They were Converse All-Stars which are

canvas and high-top and since it's not cool to ride a bicycle in the eighth grade I walked in them so much that the rubber soles were worn so thin that I could step on a dime and tell you if it was heads or tails. It was like wearing moccasins which I also wore sometimes. One night in particular I was glad to be wearing my All-Stars with the paper-thin soles. It was Halloween and Zack and Barry and me were looking for mischief when you might say mischief found us. We were walking down a side street when a car with a loud muffler full of older boys pulled up alongside us and all four doors exploded open and 27 boys leaped out shouting "Git'em!Git'em!Git'em!" and the "em" they were talking about was us. You'd be surprised how fast you can run when you're basically barefoot and everyone else is wearing shoes.

Mitch Phillips and Carl Adney were in the ninth grade at Sequoyah Junior High which means they were one year older than us. They had that muscular "alpha male" thing going on just like Dexter Kingsley except that Dexter was muscular and vain and funny. Mitch and Carl were muscular and vain and mean. In other words they would deliberately hit you in the face with a basketball and then say, "sorry, it slipped" and walk away laughing.

At night in the eighth grade you stand under the street light on the corner and talk about things that seemed important at the time but that no one can remember anymore.

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Elinor Metzger lived one block away so that I could stand on the back porch of my house and she could stand on the front porch of her house and we could see each other across the three back yards between us. We used to do that a lot at night but she was never my girlfriend. One night during the summer between eighth and ninth grade we were looking at our 8<sup>th</sup> grade yearbooks together over the phone. We were turning the pages together and making comments about the people on each page when I turned a page and saw a girl that I'd never seen before. "Who is this Pennie Collier?" I asked. Elinor said that she had a couple of classes with Pennie and that she was nice. "I'm going to marry that girl," I said, which was funny because I never said that about a girl before and I never said it again.

When we started back to school we were ninth graders and Zack Masterson was at Subiaco Academy in Arkansas which meant it was pretty much just Barry and me. Pennie Collier was in my home room class which was Civics taught by Coach Marks in one of the portable buildings outside so on Open House Night Pennie's mom and dad came with her to that room. Mr. Collier was a stern looking man but since I had decided to marry his daughter I felt I should introduce myself which was almost as scary as looking into a roaring ocean of Vitalis in the Munn's bathroom pantry. But at least Pennie Collier now knew my name.



In February the ninth grade girls host a school-wide thing called the Sweetheart Banquet which is really just a dress-up party in the cafeteria where the girls invite the boys instead of the boys inviting the girls. Pennie asked me to be her date and I still have pictures of her in a pink and white formal gown and me in a pink and white tuxedo. I had a motorcycle back then because in Oklahoma you could get a motorcycle license when you were fourteen years old but my mom's boyfriend drove us in his car. Pennie and I remained friends for the next two years but we were never really boyfriend and girlfriend or anything like that. Toward the end of that year Barry Maxwell turned sixteen and got his driver's license because he was fifteen months older than me

and Barry's grandmother bought him a brand new 1972 Mustang so we spent most of our time on the road. His grandmother also had an old two-story house in Muskogee which was only about an hour away and the whole upper floor was ours. It was from the upstairs of Barry's grandmother's house that he and I plotted

our takeover of the world.

Summer came and summer went and then it was time for high school to start which is definitely a whole other thing.

# # # #

One day Cliff Sanders who was Church of Christ called to ask me if I wanted to help him pick up trash from the fields surrounding the new Oil Coolers of America factory at the edge of town. He said that we'd make minimum wage which was \$3.35 an hour and since I needed the money I immediately agreed to help. It turns out that one of the owners was Church of Christ which is how Cliff got the job. I didn't attend very much anymore but most of the people still considered me to be one of them, which caused a lot more problems than you might think. Church of Christ people tend to be tolerant of your weaknesses and opinions as long as your weaknesses and opinions are the same as theirs and then it's biblical and all. But God help you if you have a weakness in an area where they have a fixation or an opinion where they have an obsession. But I would never say that or anything.

Anyway, we did such a good job picking up trash that they offered Cliff and me a job on the night shift cutting fin-tubes. If you've ever seen any kind of cooling unit you've seen fin tubes before which are basically metal tubes with razor-sharp aluminum fins for transferring the heat from the liquid inside. And then there's a fan on the other side pulling air through the fin tubes so it's kind of a giant radiator for hot crude oil and natural gas except that the fan blades are about eight feet long. The metal shop where we worked was loud and dangerous since our chop-saw used friction blades which exploded a lot since they spun at 14,000 RPM but I always stood a little to the side so the blades wouldn't rip into my guts when they exploded like they did to Richard Blankenship who was transferred to the purchasing office when he got out of intensive care. We worked most nights until about 10PM and then on Saturdays from 6AM till noon. I was still working there when I got married.

When you're a sophomore at Broken Arrow High School you can enroll in Athletics and get out of school an hour early so that you can go to practice. This would be a really good thing except that they expect you to play a sport. So each spring Cliff Sanders and I would try out for the tennis team and then about three weeks into it when we all competed to see who was going to be on the traveling team we'd both make sure that we lost the crucial match and got cut from the team. I'm not sure what we'd have done if Cliff and I ever had to play each other but that never happened and there's no rule that says you've got to be good enough to make the team so we both got credit for athletics each year by whacking a tennis ball around the court for three weeks in the spring.

When I was in grade school I was knee-deep in guys named Tommy but at Oil Coolers of America it was guys named Dale. The first one was the son of the owner's secretary but he went to high school in a neighboring town so Cliff and I didn't know him. On the day that he was introduced to us as the newest of the schoolboys Cliff took one look at his olive complexion and said, "What are you, some kinda Porta-Rikkan or somethin'?" Cliff Sanders was racist which everyone knows is stupid unless they're racist, too.

Dale answered, "No, I ain't no Rikkan," but Cliff never called him anything but "Rikkan" after that and pretty soon the nickname stuck so now we were down to just four Dales. First there was the Dale Ackerson who paid a dollar to see me eat a giant jalapeno pepper in just one bite and who sold me his '68 Cougar for just \$150 after he wrecked it. Then there was Dale Montgomery who was 325 pounds and worked part-time as a bail bondsman's helper. Then there was Dale the uptight shop foreman who never figured out that Cliff and I had a key made to the supply cabinet by getting the serial number off the bottom of his precious padlock. And last was Dale the big Irishman who lifted me off my feet with an uppercut to the jaw when I was just 16 and 155 pounds and he was 32 and 240 and I objected to him stealing my cheeseburger but I got even with the Irishman in a way that changed his life forever. Cliff's name for me was "Dean" but I never knew why.

# # # #

My mom started dating a new guy named Gene who was an expert auto mechanic and could throw a knife and stick it from across the room which I saw him do more than once. Gene helped me fix up the Cougar I bought from Dale Ackerson and we spent a lot of time together but I don't think my mom ever felt left out or anything. Auctions were another thing Gene taught me about. I would go with him to estate auctions where he would buy stuff that was under priced and then sell it for a lot more money. At the end of every auction people wander around with a dazed look in their eye because they're just beginning to realize how much stuff they bought and now it's time to get it all home. I made a lot of money hauling stuff for people who drove sports cars to auctions. I had a 1948 3/4 ton GMC 5-window pickup; the one with the curved widows in the back corners of the cab that everybody wants. Gene hauled his stuff in a 1960 Ford station wagon with an iron rack built on top which was the ugliest station wagon Henry ever made even though Gene's had a 360 Y-block with Boondocker tires on white-spoked rims. Between the two of us we could haul the contents of an entire 3-bedroom home if there was at least one mattress Gene could lay across the top to help tie everything down. And that includes all major household appliances. More than once I had to help unload a few layers off the top of Gene's station wagon so he could get under a low-hanging telephone wire. I think the record was 17 feet 3 inches. But there was no such thing as making two trips because Gene had too much pride.

Before I bought the Cougar from Dale Ackerson I rode to school and to work every day with Cliff Sanders whose dad had given him a brand new olive green Vega station wagon with an automatic transmission and a 4-cylinder engine that was the size of a loaf of bread. When a traffic light turned green the Vega didn't have enough acceleration to make it to the other side of the intersection before it turned yellow again and when Cliff stomped the accelerator to the floor the car didn't go any faster it just made a different noise. Sometimes I'd say, "Make it make that noise, Cliff," and he'd stomp the pedal and nothing would change except the sound of the engine and we'd both laugh until we couldn't see. But Cliff got me back when I bought my Cougar. Anytime I was driving and we were outside of Broken Arrow he'd wait until we were alongside a carload of mean-looking thugs and then yell at them and give them the finger. Of course they would always start chasing us but Cliff knew there was absolutely no way I'd ever let them catch us so the worst that could happen was that I would get a ticket for speeding or reckless driving or endangering human life or something and that was perfectly okay with Cliff.

The guys with the coolest car were the twins, Rod and Todd, whose dad bought them a new Starsky and Hutch Gran Torino; red with that gigantic white C-stripe that swept from the roof down to the headlights. Very 70's. The next year he traded their Gran Torino in on a metallic brown Corvette. Earthtones were also big in the 1970's. I was glad when that decade ended.

We had an open campus at Broken Arrow High which means you could go out for lunch instead of eating in the cafeteria so my friends and I always went to Fred's Drive-in where the back room was reserved especially for us. Fred had a menu that included all of the edible items you've ever heard of and several more you never knew were edible and every day as we walked in Fred would hand our meals over the half-door as we walked past and we'd slap whatever amount of money he named on the counter. All of this happened in a matter of seconds. It was really an amazing thing to watch. And as we were walking out the door each day we'd call out what we wanted Fred to have ready the next day and he'd always have whatever we shouted, even when we all talked at once. Fred never made a mistake. Once someone told me he wasn't even the original Fred, that he'd just bought the drive-in and kept the name. Either way, he made us feel like we belonged there so we always slapped down whatever amount of money he named.

## ##

Mrs. Birdsong was from the deep South and talked even slower than we did. She was an excellent algebra teacher, though, not like that mechanical wind-up toy Mr. Felix that I had for geometry the following year. I had been in Mrs. Birdsong's class for only a few weeks when she began to wonder if I was cheating because I never showed how I came up with the answers on the test, I'd just write down the answers. So one day before class started she walked back to my desk and read a number of different word-problems to

me from a book. The problems mostly had to do with airplanes flying in different directions at different speeds and how far apart would they be in so many minutes and things like that. Each time I gave her the answer she would just smile and read me another question. Finally the bell rang and she closed her book and said, "You've the gift of intuitive reasoning. You're a very fortunate boy." And Mrs. Birdsong gave me A's and we never had a problem. The following year Mr. Felix announced on the first day of class that he would be assigning us an hour's homework every night and picking it up the next day but that four out of five days he'd throw all the papers away without ever looking at them. But *one* day each week he would actually grade the homework papers and that our final semester grade would be the composite of our homework grades averaged with our weekly test grades. He then stood very erect and challenged us by saying, "If you think you're smart enough to figure out which days I'm going to grade the homework and turn it in only on those days, then go right ahead. But I warn you that I myself don't know in advance which days I'll grade." The concept of meaningless labor seemed grossly unfair to me especially since Mr. Felix had such a smug authoritarian Barney Fife attitude so I raised my hand and said, "If it's not important enough to you to even look at it, why should it be important enough to me to spend an hour doing it?" Well as you might expect, this made Mr. Felix very angry and he said that as punishment I was going to have to do two hours homework. So I said that was perfectly okay with me since *not* doing two hours homework was just as easy as *not* doing one hour.

You don't have to be a math-whiz to know that 98s and 100s on each week's Geometry test averaged with a zero for each week's Geometry homework brought my overall score down to a 49.5 which everyone knows is failing. But it really hit the fan when the results of the whoop-dee-doo nationally standardized tests came in and the school counselors wanted to know how I could in the top percentile in every subject yet carry a grade average in the bottom one third of my class. That's when they began to look at my Geometry test scores compared to my final grade and they noticed I flunked Driver's Education because I wouldn't color the coloring books the coaches gave to us to color and other things like that. But I had gotten all A's in Chemistry and Biology and the other classes that were taught by actual teachers. Finally they decided that it would be easier to just change my Fs to Ds so that I could graduate instead of explaining to the school board how a kid who gets an A on every test can still flunk out of school. I once used similar logic to convince a foaming-at-the-mouth policeman to let me out of jail.

It all started when Rod and Todd suggested that we race back to the high school from Frank's Drive-in which was obviously a stupid thing to do but when you're seventeen you're stupid sometimes so I agreed and they took off in their Corvette before I even got into my car. By the time I got the Cougar started Rod and Todd were halfway to the traffic light at Elm street which turned red before they could get there which means they had to stop so I took the God-given opportunity to swerve into the parking lot beside them and cut across it at a high rate of speed. Two seconds later I shot off the curb of that parking lot onto Elm street

about 100 feet ahead of a police cruiser which was returning from a visit to highway patrol headquarters. It seems the morning dispatcher at Highway Patrol headquarters in Tulsa was also the afternoon dispatcher for the Broken Arrow Police Department so when the officer gave me lights and siren I pulled into the parking lot of a gas station where I was followed by a bunch of other cars full of students who wanted to see what would happen. Under normal circumstances this wouldn't have been a big problem. You just get out of the car and give the officer your driver's license without saying a word. But these weren't normal circumstances, because the dispatcher he was transporting was an attractive young woman and the policeman was extremely short and had obviously been mad about it all his life. So when I offered him my driver's license he slapped it out of my hand and did his best to touch his nose to my nose as he yelled like a marine drill sergeant, "Where did you get that, T G & Y?" which everyone knows is a dime store if you grew up in Oklahoma. Then he opened the back door of the police car and yelled, "Pick that up and get into that car!" So I quietly told him that although I was happy to pick up the license, I would prefer not to go anywhere with him until he calmed down a little bit. I bent down to pick up the driver's license and when I stood up he grabbed me by the hair and put his knee in my back. Looking back on it, I think he was trying to bend me over backwards or do some fancy cop move he saw on a TV show. But when I spun around he fell on his backside and went absolutely cross-eyed crazy and started flailing around like a turtle that someone has turned over onto his back. I glanced at the lady dispatcher in the front seat of the patrol car who was bawling and screaming hysterically and then looked over at my friends who were standing 25 or 30 feet away pleading, "Let him cuff you or this nut's gonna shoot your ass!" So when Sergeant Carter got off the pavement I had my wrists together behind my back and he made a big deal out of cuffing me and bouncing me off the side of the patrol car like I was still resisting arrest or had said something about his mother. All the way to the station I listened to his tirade and then when the girl had gotten out of the car he said, "Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?" I waited until the girl was out of earshot because she was obviously the cause of his glandular problem and then I answered softly, "No sir, I don't know exactly what the penalty is for getting beat up by a cop in front of two dozen witnesses when all you were trying to do is quietly cooperate. Shall I give you the names of everyone who saw what happened, or should I save those for the judge?"

After thinking about it for a few seconds, he drove me back to my car.

###

But the absolute stupidest thing I ever did was agree to go to a party in the country with Rod and Todd and Kevin Hocutt. None of us had ever been drunk before so we all chipped in and Rod bought two quarts of Montezuma Aztec Gold tequila and we worried that it wouldn't be enough. When we arrived at the party we all jumped into Kevin's cargo van and sat in a circle on the floor and Rod opened one of the bottles of

tequila. Each of us took a sip and made a face and then Todd got out a pencil and marked a place on the label and said that he was going to chug the tequila down to that mark. The pencil and the bottle went from hand to hand for about 4 minutes which was enough time for us to nearly empty the bottle. Finally, Todd said "How much of this stuff do you have to drink before it starts to take effect?" I answered, "I don't know. But I do know that this is boring as hell and this stuff tastes like drain opener." Todd replied, "Let's go outside and see what's happening."

Since all of us had been sitting quietly in a circle and not moving very much during the 4 or 5 minutes that we had been chugging tequila, our blood hadn't quite pumped the devilment up to our brains. But all that changed when Todd turned around to open the sliding door on the cargo van. "Whew!" he said, as he began to reel and grab at the air. "I think it's beginning to take effect." Finally Todd got the door open and when he stepped out of the van he stumbled and fell in the gravel driveway. "That's just sad," I thought, as I sat quietly in the van, "Todd wants everyone to think that he's drunk." Todd then saw a big Saint Bernard that was barking at him from across the yard so he began to chase it but the dog stayed about ten feet ahead of Todd and the dog would occasionally turn his big Saint Bernard head and 'woof' at him. All of this happened in only 30 seconds or less, so after I had put the top back on the bottle I started moving toward the door of the van. I remember steadying myself a little against the doorframe before stepping out of the van but when I put my foot outside it didn't ever touch the ground but curled up under the van so the first thing to touch the gravel parking lot was my face. I remember being vaguely aware that I had gravel stuck to my face. But then I saw Todd dive for the Saint Bernard and miss him and thought, "Todd needs help if he's ever going to catch that Saint Bernard." I have no memory after that.

At first I was afraid I was going to die and then I was afraid I wouldn't. I came back to life in my bed in my clothes which were covered in vomit and my car was not in the driveway. Who knew that a human being could actually be this sick and live?

I never drank hard liquor again.

# # # #

All through high school Pennie Collier was like my sister. Every evening I showed up at her house about suppertime and had dinner with her family and when neither of us had a date we'd go running around together, usually about 5 nights a week. Then one day during our senior year, I realized that I was in love with her and I couldn't possibly imagine a life without her in it so we began to talk about getting married. We were 17 years old.





One Sunday at lunchtime my mom called the Collier's house to tell me that Pearl was acting funny. "She just seems a little bit weak and tired. Maybe you should come home." All the way home I was thinking, "I've been inconsiderate of her age. After all, she's about a million and one years old in dog years," so I stopped and bought her several cans of expensive dog food and dog vitamins and a box of other stuff that I saw that thought she might like and when I walked in and she saw me she wearily padded over to me. I tracked down a veterinarian at his home and he agreed to examine Pearl immediately so I met him at his office a few minutes later. After a

series of tests, Dr. Gabriel told me that Pearl's kidneys had quit functioning and her bloodstream was slowly being poisoned with her body's impurities as a result.

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"No... I'm sorry."

I wasn't able to speak for several minutes and I couldn't see very well either so Pearl did what she always did when she knew I was feeling sad.

"But at least she's feeling no pain," said Dr. Gabriel, "she's just feeling a little tired, that's all"

"How long does she have?" I asked.

"Only about 24 hours."

###

On April 28, 1994, a politically liberal radio host named William O'Shaughnessy commented on the passing away of Richard Nixon. O'Shaughnessy's audience expected him to use the occasion to lecture them about the evils of conservative Republicans, but the last of the liberals surprised them by saying, "Richard M. Nixon, the senior statesman of our American nation, died last Friday evening. The hospital bulletin, which

went out to all the world, noted that the former president left this life with his family 'at his bedside.' But as dying is something you have to do all by yourself, Mr. Nixon's departure was quite in keeping with the way he lived... *He was always alone.* You see, I am an 'expert' on all this because Nixon and I went to the same dentist. He got drilled and X-rayed just as I did, in the same chair. So, I can get on the radio and tell you all about his place in history. In this endeavor, I am being monitored and closely watched by faithful listeners who have been asking, 'Just what will you say about Nixon on the local radio? I mean, given your history and all?' Well, here it is: *I liked the son of a bitch.* I think we have lost a great man. And I don't feel compelled to apologize for feeling the way I do about the flawed, imperfect, awkward, struggling man who was buried yesterday."

Now maybe you're going to think that this is sacrilege or blasphemy or something but I truly believe that Jesus feels the same way toward you and me that William O'Shaughnessy felt toward Richard Nixon. Nixon didn't ever do anything to earn O'Shaughnessy's approval, but when Nixon was dead and gone, O'Shaughnessy stood up to defend him and say, "Yeah, he may have been a screwed-up mess, *but I liked him anyway.*"

Now maybe you think I'm crazy or that it was all just a simple coincidence, but I believe that Jesus hears the prayers of flawed, imperfect, awkward, struggling 8 year-old boys and remembers them long after they, themselves have forgotten.

# # # #

As I reflect on the things that I told you about and a number of others I didn't, it occurs to me that perhaps I was a borderline juvenile delinquent but that's the whole point of the story: *you can't judge the future by the present.* And there's always more going on inside a person than you can tell by looking. Who would have predicted that the kid who graduated in the bottom third of his class would receive a knighthood and an honorary Ph.D. and write a series of best-selling books? So why... please tell me why... thirty-eight years later in the middle of the night I'm thinking about my best friend Pearl and Benny and Dexter and Zack and Barry and all the Tommys and Dales and Ophelia Pinkerton and Dink the pony and Sundown in Muskogee?

Which brings me back to where I am.

In bed with my wife, Pennie, who is fast asleep... at ten after four in the morning.

END

(Edit)

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- Mike Dooley

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