

Issue Number Twenty-Eight | Fall/Winter 2023

# Southern Reader

AN ONLINE MAGAZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH

## Donna Fargo

*Still the happiest girl  
in the whole U.S.A.*

## Helen of Sparta

*Fiction from Jacob Appel*

## The Bedroom Visitor

*An early Halloween story*

## The Bully

*A short story*

## Abandoned Legacy

*A memoir from 1963*

## Lisa Love's Life

*She's ba-a-a-a-ack!*

# The 'Tale' Wags the Dog

By David Ray Skinner

I

've always like to draw. Cartoons, airplanes, cars, dogs..you name it. My "Fred Flintstone" drawings brought me notoriety back in the third grade and detention in the fifth grade and it's all been up and downhill since then.

In the last few decades I have discovered the joy of drawing on my Mac, using a mouse. Some guys like to fish or golf; I like to draw pictures. Plus, over the years, I've been commissioned to do various illustrations, including architectural drawings and portraits.

A few months ago, my friend Michael Meyer sent me a picture of his father from the late 1950s. Michael is a writer; we ran an excerpt from his book, "The Ancestor" in the Spring/Summer 2022 issue of *SouthernReader* (<https://southernreader.com/SR26/mobile/index.html#p=14>).

Michael's dad was a test pilot and a contemporary of Chuck Yeager and the other band of "Right Stuff" guys, and he thought it would be cool to have an illustration drawn from that iconic picture that he had on his mantle, and, as I mentioned, I like to draw. The picture on the facing page is how it turned out.

I thought it would be appropriate to use the portrait as the cover for this issue of *SouthernReader*, only adding a "watermelon touch" to the jet.

I've done this before...back in 2014, I did an illustration of an old Ford Tri-Motor that was visiting our local airfield, and I thought it would make an interesting cover if I added a young girl throwing up her arms at the plane as it took off (<https://southernreader.com/SouthRead17.1.html>). My sister, Jann Marthaler (who helps me with *SouthernReader*) loved the cover and said she could hardly wait to read the story behind the cover picture.

"What story?" I replied, "There's no story...it's just a picture..."

"There *has* to be a story," she said, "The cover doesn't make sense without a story inside.

So, I wrote a short story for the inside, called "Mountain Front," to "pay off" the cover (we re-ran it in the last issue: <https://southernreader.com/SR27/mobile/index.html#p=38>). For the background of the story, it incorporated the World War II Prisoner-of-War camp just outside Crossville, Tennessee and ended at the 1983 World's Fair in Knoxville. As far as I know, however, there were no Ford Tri-Planes featured at either the P.O.W. camp nor the World's Fair, but that's why they call it fiction.

To avoid the unpleasantness of a repeat of the "cover controversy," again, I have written a short story to "pay off" this issue's cover. It's called "The Bully,"





*David Skinner*

and like the previous “Tale Wags the Dog” cover, it has nothing to do with Michael’s father.

However, it is far from being the coolest article in the issue. We have an in-depth interview with the legendary Donna Fargo (“The Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A”) written by long-time contributor Niles Reddick. We also have fiction from “honorary Southerner” Jacob Appel about an unusual and colorful woman revisiting her past in long-ago Florida. And, in honor of Halloween 2024, we have a memoir from Paul Kersey as he remembers a harmless—but still unsettling—visitor to his bedroom. As for notable events in history, Tennessee writer Jerry Geho has contributed a memoir about one of his adventures which featured the tour of a historic artifact from many, many years ago. Plus, we kick it all off with a new article from Georgia humorist and all-around good gal, Lisa Love. She shares one of her recent true stories that she experienced with her 14-year-old canine “partner in grime,” Pip the Morkie.

We think you’re going to like this issue, and we hope you’ll like it enough to share the link with your friends and neighbors.

Enjoy!

*David*

David Ray Skinner  
ePublisher



Something old,  
Something new,  
Something fictitious,  
Something true.

An illustration set against a red background. On the left, an older man with a white beard and mustache, wearing a red and grey argyle sweater and khaki pants, sits on a blue stool holding a black vinyl record. In the center, a young boy wearing a red baseball cap, a white t-shirt with a watermelon slice graphic, and blue jeans stands with his hands in his pockets. To the right, a large, silver gramophone horn is visible. In the foreground, a smartphone with a red screen and a white wireless signal icon is connected to the boy's white earbuds. The overall scene suggests a connection between old and new music.

**SouthernReader**



# Table of Contents

Issue Number Twenty-Eight | Fall/Winter 2023

## SouthernReader



### ePublisher

DAVID RAY SKINNER

### Associate Editor

JANN MARTHALER

### Contributors

JACOB APPEL

JERRY GEHO

PAUL KERSEY

LISA LOVE

NILES REDDICK

### The 'Tale' Wags the Dog

Welcome to the Fall/Winter 2023 issue of *SouthernReader*. . . . . page 2

### Brush With Death

The latest from Lisa Love's Life. A seemingly harmless errand turns pseudo deadly. . . . . page 6

### Still the Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A.

An in-depth interview with country star Donna Fargo and what she's up to these days by Niles Reddick. . . . . page 10

### The Abandoned Legacy

Jerry Geho's memoir of a long-ago outing that proved to have historic undertones. . . . . page 26

### The Bedroom Visitor

Paul Kersey's Halloween story featuring a long-ago bedroom visitor . . . . . page 30

### Helen of Sparta

Jacob Appel's short story about a colorful and eccentric woman's visit back to her old school . . . . . page 34

### The Bully

Fiction by David Ray Skinner. . . page 46



2



6



10



26



30



34



46

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# Brush With Death

by Lisa Love

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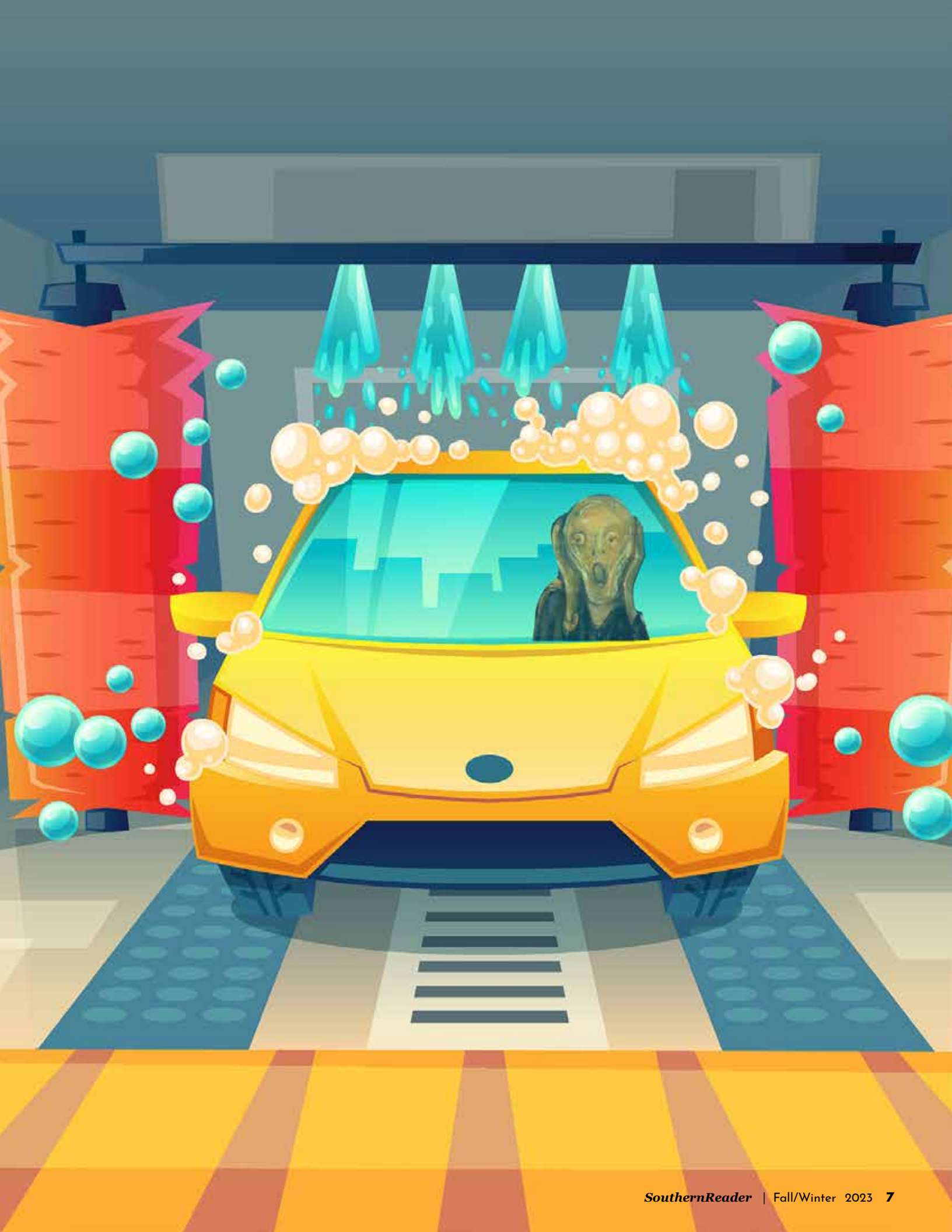
hey say that an obsession can lead to disaster. Actually, I've never known who "they" were, and I just made that up 'cause it sounded smart. However, it is true that I have a litany of obsessions, one of which is my hatred of a dirty car.

Specifically, when Scotty is dirty. As you may know (but then again, *why should you?*) Scotty is my 2008 Toyota Highlander, and when Scotty is filthy, well, it ruins it for everyone, not just me. After all, you *are* what you *drive*. So, with that in mind, I took Scotty down to my friendly neighborhood car wash, with my sweet lil' 14-year-old Morkie, Pip, in tow. Pip always loves to go on our car wash trips, because, apparently, he thinks of Scotty as just another one of my pets (well, Scotty *does* have an adorable tartan hood cover that was knitted for me by an online Amish sewing bee), and since Pip hates baths, he loves seeing another one of my pets suffering the indignities of the cleaning process.

So, we land at the neighborhood car wash—I'll call it Sudsy's—and immediately, I knew something was different; apparently, they were training a new worker. I know everyone deserves a chance, and everyone has to start somewhere, but we don't like "new." By "*we*" I mean me, Pip and Scotty. Sure enough, the new guy was having some difficulties because, unlike every time before, there was a line, and we found ourselves six cars back.

Pip always loves to go on our car wash trips, because, apparently, he thinks of Scotty as just another one of my pets.





But, I was in no hurry and I'm working on my intolerance of "new" things. Plus, it gave me plenty of time to text back and forth with my friend Sue—you know, just catching up. There was, however an occasional whimper coming from the vicinity of the back-seat where Pip was miserably tethered in his car seat. As much as he loves seeing Scotty suffer the humiliation of a bath, He loathes his car seat as much as he hates "new;" Pip has not yet made the commitment to work on that particular intolerance. If Pip had his druthers, he would have instead been glued to my shoulder, like that molted parrot that perched atop Johnny Depp's shoulder in "Pirates of the Caribbean."

"Ping, ping, ping"—the new guy interrupts my texting by tapping the car hood to get my attention and motioning me to put my

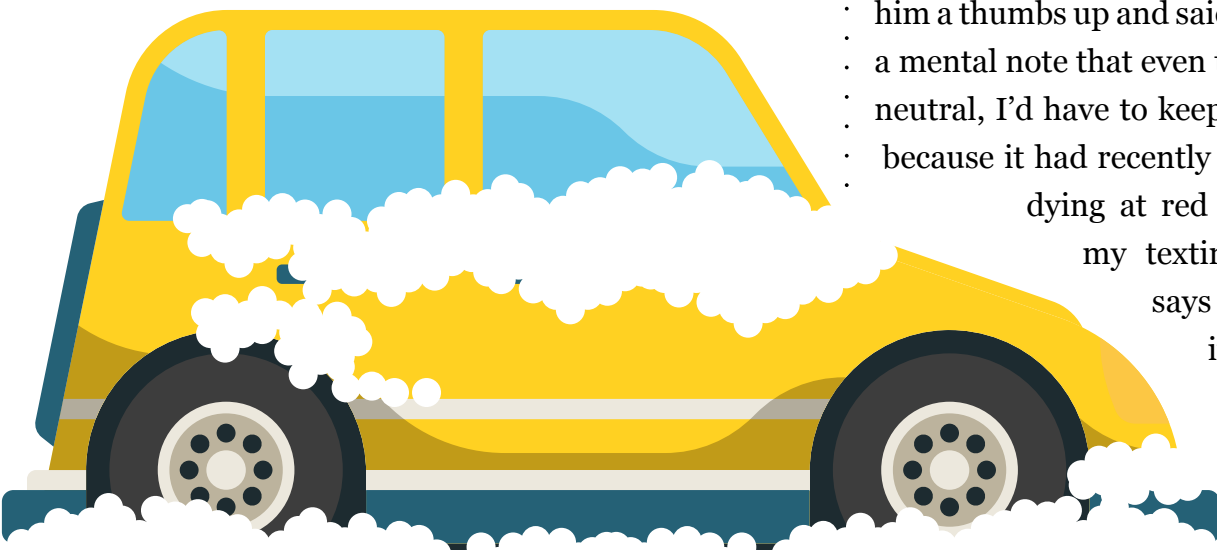
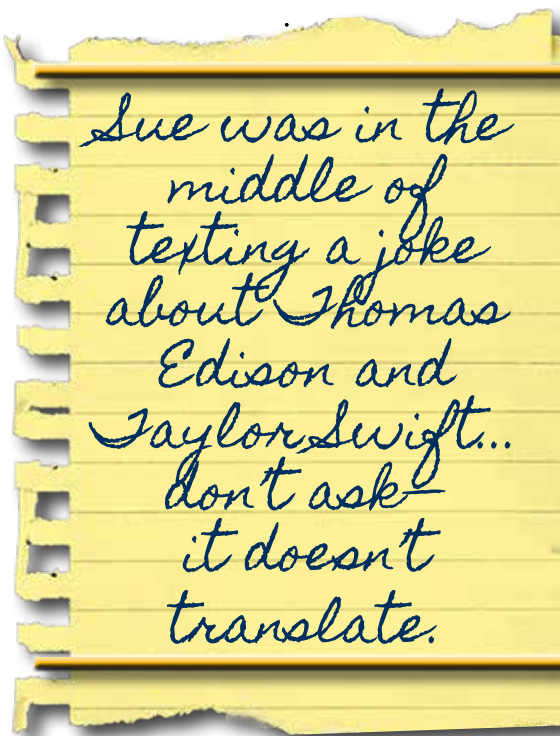
cellphone down. Obviously, being the new guy, he doesn't realize that I am a master multi-tasker. And Sue was in the middle of texting a joke about Thomas Edison and Taylor Swift...*don't ask—it doesn't translate.* Just know that it occupied my attention long enough for the five cars in front of me in line to be cleaned and polished. The new guy directed me to drive onto the car wash rails (that part always makes me a little nervous!). No problem. I gave the new

guy a thumbs up. As I rolled down the window he said, "I see by your decal that you're a regular here, so you know the spiel—just put your car in neutral, take your foot off the brake and keep your hands off the steering wheel."

I smiled encouragingly at him (because, as you know, dear reader—that is my gift), gave him a thumbs up and said, "Great job!" I made a mental note that even though the car was in neutral, I'd have to keep giving it a little gas, because it had recently been idling slow and

dying at red lights. I returned to my texting... "So the penguin says to Einstein, 'Shake it Off,' and Einstein says..."

I could feel the car being hooked up to the car wash





drive train...and then—I kid you not—we are careening through that car wash at what felt like 60 MPH! And Pip (still tethered) is somehow magically and painfully clawing at my shoulder and neck for dear life while yelping at 100 decibels in my ear like a hairy shrieking 747 revving up for take-off.

What is happening here?!!! It was like a Disney ride designed by the criminally insane—The Little Mermaid meets Haunted Mansion. My heart was beating out of my chest. Thankfully, there was no car in front of me or there would have

been blood. For a second there, I thought we might die...I had visions of me in my crib underneath a garden hose as my life began passing before my eyes (yes hyperbole is yet another gift and I'm overly dramatic like that!)

But here's the deal—just as in a maniacal theme park ride, I had no control over my car. I was Sandra Bullock in the movie "Speed," only the part of the bus was played by Scotty and it was hot wax instead of a bomb. Blink—darkness—blink—suds—blink—hot wax—blink—sunlight and frightened bystanders. Scotty, Pip and I had literally been spit out onto the parking lot—did my car even get wet? I was furious. In my mind, I was hastily composing a letter to Sudsy's owner. He had better hope there was no damage to my car. I might have even added a reference to my imaginary lawyer in this imaginary fierce

letter I was firing off in my head. I went to throw the car into park, but to my amazed embarrassment, the "N" on my gearshift instead read "D." The car had never been in neutral! There was no neutral ground here!

I slinked back around to the entrance of the car wash to pay. So much for being a master multitasker. Maybe nobody noticed, I thought. However, I could tell by the attendants doubled over laughing that yes, they had surmised I was indeed an idiot. The leader of the laugh chorus was, of course, the new

guy. At least I provided him with a great first-day-at-the-job story for the dinner table. As I backed the car out to drive off, he motioned for me to roll down my window as he gave me a thumbs up and shouted, "Great job to you, too, Lady!"

But, here's the kicker. Never, ever say, "What could be worse?" Because, at some point during the sudsy chaos, I had accidentally Facetimed Sue and she caught the entire episode and posted it. To date, it has garnered 2,897,129 views and gotten me (and Scotty and Pip) 47 online invitations to next year's DragonCon. Turtlewax, anyone?



**Lisa Love** is a talented and insightful writer with a skewed sense of humor; she looks for—and often finds—the absurd masquerading as the mundane.

*It was like a Disney ride designed by the criminally insane—The Little Mermaid meets Haunted Mansion.*

Donna Fargo

## Still the Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A.

by Niles Reddick

I

n November of 1972, I was eight years old, and my grandparents lived about a mile away from our house in Valdosta, Georgia.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Parade in New York City was coming on television, and between our licking beaters of cake or pudding, I remember my grandmother's alto voice yelling, "Y'all get in here. Donna Fargo's gonna sing 'The Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A.' from one of the parade floats."

It was certainly a song we all knew because our mom had bought the 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> speed album and played it over and over on our record player. We knew all the words. We also knew all the words to "Funny Face," and through the years, I think we memorized the words to all the songs on that album. I imagined the record player's needle wore grooves in the vinyl disc. Today, I still have that Donna Fargo album I play on my record player, and I listen to her CDs in my SUV and on my office computer.

Recently, I wondered if Donna Fargo was still "The Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A.," and after interviewing her, I learned she most definitely is. Donna tells us in one of her books, "If you're not happy, you're cheating yourself."

Now, fifty years after several major #1 hits, several awards, and much more, Donna has written over two thousand greeting cards and over eight books for Blue Mountain while continuing to write and record music. Her most recent CD is "All Because of You," and it has some incredible songs, such as "One of the Good Guys." Released by PrimaDonna Entertainment, it was produced by Donna's long-time husband/producer Stan Silver, who unfortunately passed away from COVID complications during the pandemic. Donna also suffered with







COVID, previously had two strokes, and has fought a long battle with M.S., but despite having those huge mountains to climb, she has remained positive and has continued to work.

Only four years after her first number one record, Donna had symptoms of M.S., but had an actual attack in 1978 when she was paralyzed and hospitalized. She was scared, and there wasn't a great deal doctors could do at that time. Nonetheless, Donna

had a great attitude. She said, "Okay, so *I* have M.S., but I am not going to let it 'have *me*.'"

As a result, she worked on her health, and she began to study more about spirit, mind, and body. She said,

"I wrote in at least one of my books that if you don't develop yourself spiritually, you're working with only 2/3 of your potential." M.S. didn't

keep Donna Fargo down. With an incredible work ethic, she got back to work after a few months. She encourages us, "It's so important to do what you love to do and to keep on keeping on." She changed her diet (avoided junk food, ate more fruits and veggies, eliminated red meat, and ate more chicken, fish, and turkey for protein). She also studied The New Testament more and tried to "walk in God's perfect will for my life while physically, I was miserable."

Donna had previously stopped smoking before the success of "The Happiest Girl in The Whole U.S.A." Logic and common sense kept telling her to quit smoking. She finally quit; she describes it as one of the hardest things she's ever done. She thinks sacrifice in her case was required to make her dream come true, for soon thereafter, she wrote "Happiest Girl," the song that turned her dream into reality.

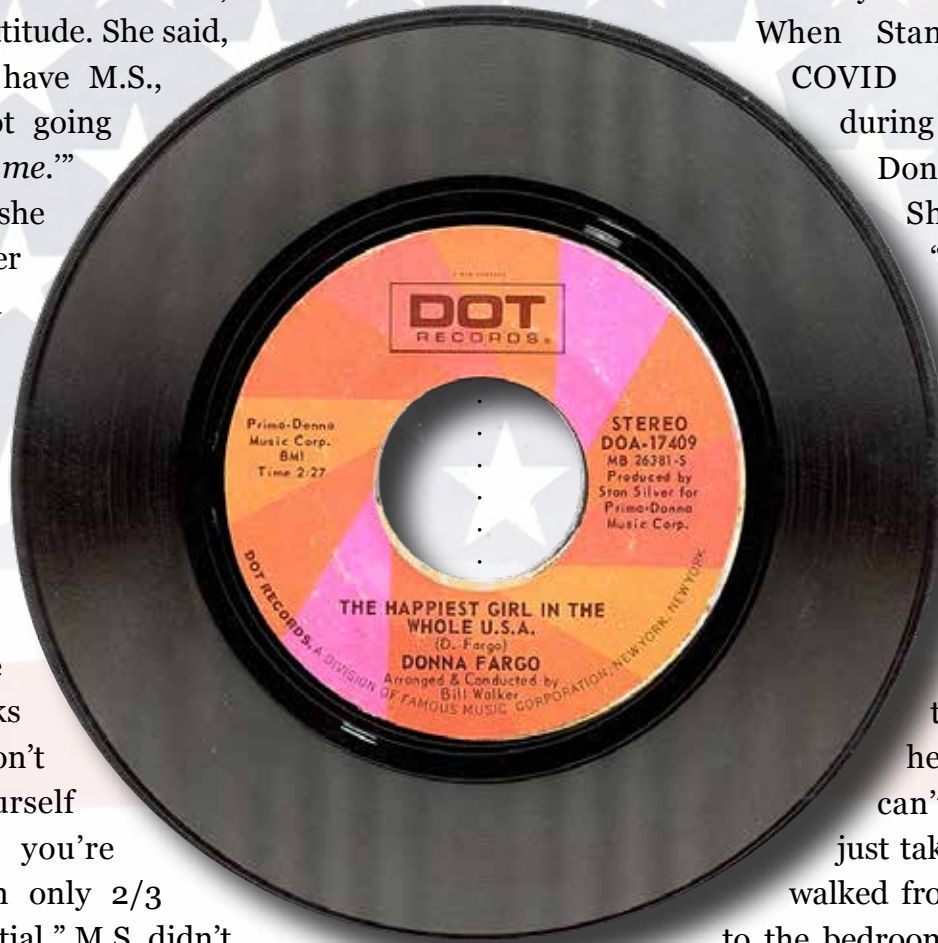
When Stan died from COVID complications during the pandemic, Donna struggled.

She recalled, "One day I spoke to God and said, 'I can't go on like this, God. Just give me some kind of sign that Stan is okay, that he's in heaven. If you can't help me,

just take me on.' As I walked from the kitchen

to the bedroom, the light on his side of the bed was on. Hadn't been turned on in months. I said, 'God, I didn't turn that light on,' and He said, 'Well, you *did* ask me for a sign.'"

The second incident that happened was when Donna found herself walking down the hall, opening a cabinet for no reason at all, and pulling out a bag of CDs. She wasn't looking for them and consciously somewhat unaware of what she was doing. She listened to the CDs, perfectly mixed and recorded at





different times, and realized she was being directed to release them. Donna said, “These two supernatural experiences really saved my life. God is so good. So good. We serve a mighty God. I cannot put into words how much these supernatural experiences helped me and drew me closer to God and I am so thankful.”

Donna grew up as Yvonne Vaughn outside Mount Airy, North Carolina. Someone in the music business recommended she change her name to Donna Fargo, and she did. When growing up in Mt. Airy, though, Donna worked in the tobacco fields and dress shops in town and was active in her high school. She played basketball, was head of the cheer-leading squad, served as the president of her class, and was even homecoming queen her junior year. She went on after her high school graduation to High Point University and majored in English and Psychology (minoring in Philosophy and Religion) and then moved to California to live with her older brother and work on securing a teaching credential.

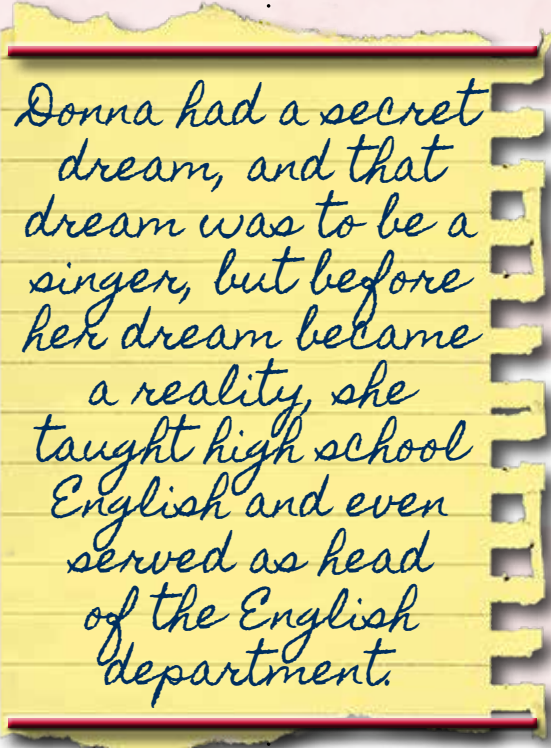
Donna had a secret dream, and that dream was to be a singer, but before her dream became a reality, she taught high school English and even served as head of the English department. Donna’s brother connected her to a music studio in California and there, she met Stan Silver. She sang on several demos for them, and Stan eventually taught her to play the guitar. The two fell in love (and equally important, they *liked* each other and

*complimented* each other), married, and had a long marriage.

“There wouldn’t be a Donna Fargo without Stan Silver,” she said and added, “We experienced true love—the greatest gift and the biggest reward. I am so blessed.”

Even though Donna had a short stint of singing in clubs around Southern California, Silver pitched “Happiest Girl” in Nashville, and Dot Records signed her to their label. Shortly after, they went on the road. Donna recalled, “I had actually gotten permission to give my exams early and opened in Vegas for Roy Clark. I graded the kids’ exams in Las Vegas and called in their grades.”

In addition to 47 singles, 16 studio albums, and eight greatest hit packages, Donna Fargo had six number one hits: “Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A.” (1972; which she wrote in three days and which achieved platinum album status and earned three Grammy nominations and a Grammy), “Funny Face” (which won Donna the title of the first woman in country music to have back-to-back, million-selling singles, both of which she wrote), “Superman” (1972), “You Were Always There” (1973, an autobiographical song about her mother who died young from a heart attack), “You Can’t Be a Beacon if Your Light Don’t Shine” (1974), and “That Was Yesterday” (1977). In addition, “Do I Love You” reached #1 on the *Cashbox* chart and #2 on the *Billboard* chart in 1978. In sum, Donna had seven *Academy of Country Music* awards,



Donna had a secret dream, and that dream was to be a singer, but before her dream became a reality, she taught high school English and even served as head of the English department.

five *Billboard* awards, four ASCAP awards, and two *National Association of Recording Merchandisers* awards for best-selling artist, among others.

In addition to performances like the show at Carnegie Hall and her own variety show produced by the Osmond family, Donna was a guest on many television programs including *The Roger Miller Special*, *The Dean Martin*

performances, but when I asked Donna what she would like to achieve that she hasn't, she said, "I would like for someone else to have major hits on some of my songs." One of her regrets is also not keeping a journal, since it would have made writing her autobiography easier, but for those interested in songwriting, she encourages others to trust their instincts: "The creative imagination is such a gift and we all have it."

She admits that for her it seems like "Songs almost have a mind of their own, like they insist on being written, and you have to do it *their* way. I love that. So, I just let those lead me." In some instances, songs were completed very quickly, like "Happiest Girl" in three days, and other times, it may take three years like her song "It Would Have Been Just Perfect."

Singers who recorded Donna's songs included Tanya Tucker, Kitty Wells, Tammy Wynette, Marty Robbins, Dotty West, and others, and she was honored by those recordings. Donna felt closest to Tammy Wynette and wrote a song for Tammy's daughter. She considered Jeannie C. Riley ("Harper Valley PTA) and

Margo Smith ("There I Said It", "Take My Breath Away" and "Don't Break the Heart That Loves You"), her best artist friends.

Donna is also friends with Marty and Vickie Cooper. Marty and Donna co-wrote "This is America," which is on her new CD, "All Because of You." Marty also wrote "You Can't Be A Beacon If Your Light Don't Shine," Donna's 5th #1 record and Vickie promoted Donna's music to the pop market and was instrumental in "Happiest Girl" reaching #7 and "Funny Face" #5 on the *Adult Contemporary* chart. Stan and Donna were also great friends with David Briggs who played on most of Donna's



*Show, Hee-Haw, Music Country USA, The Perry Como Show, The Mac Davis Show, Dinah Shore, The Merv Griffin Show, The Phil Donahue Show, The Mike Douglas Show, Hollywood Squares, Country Music Hit Parade, Roy Clark's Ranch Party, and The Bobby Vinton Show.*

Donna has also been recognized for her incredible song-writing abilities. As a writer, her most coveted awards, in addition to the *Robert J. Burton Award* she won for *Most Performed Song of the Year*, are her *Million-Air Awards*, presented to writers for attaining the blockbuster status of one million or more



records, and who had also played for Elvis, Joan Baez, Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash, and many others. Donna also had close relationships with musicians and singers on her show.

I wondered who a famous singer with an incredible career might have admired, felt inspired by, or simply listened to; I learned Donna's favorite female country singers were Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn, but she also likes Tim McGraw, Little Big Town, Keith Urban, Chris Stapleton, and Willie Nelson. Beyond country, she loves Celine Dion, she loves Harry Chapin's "Better Place to Be," and Adele. When I asked Donna who most influenced her, she said, "My earliest musical influences were Elvis and Brenda Lee. I think they were important to my dream."

Recently, Donna returned to Mt. Airy, where she was Grand Marshal in the July 4th parade, and where she spoke at the unveiling of a mural of her in the city. She had a luncheon with fans, did a book signing (for over seven hours) of her most recent book "Everything is Possible with God" and her latest CD, "All Because of You," visited with cousins, nieces, and nephews who still live in that area, and had a meaningful visit. You can view more about that experience on her Donna Fargo Facebook page, where there are musical updates and where she frequently posts pictures and writes her "Friday Follies" for fans and followers.

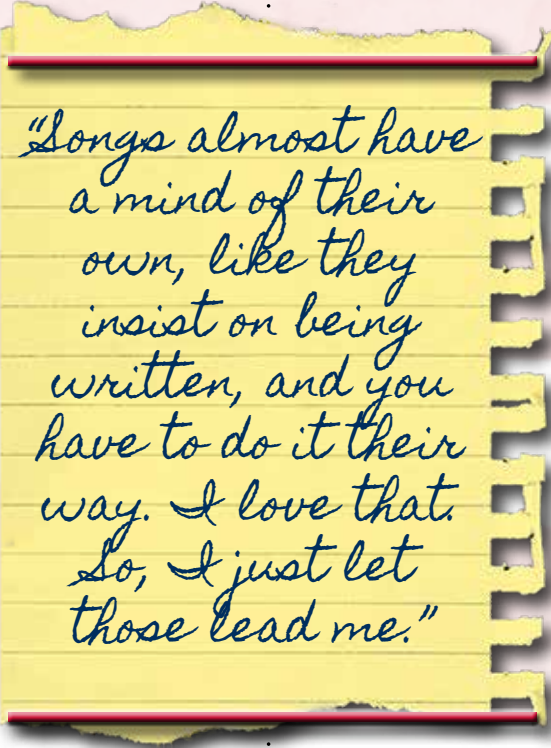
It's been over fifty years since my grandmother yelled for us to come into her den

that Thanksgiving and listen to Donna Fargo in the Macy's parade. I miss family and those holidays, and I would have never imagined I would get to interview Donna Fargo, particularly since she doesn't give very many interviews, but while I loved her number one songs, there were other songs she sang

that were also beautiful or meaningful to me. "Society's Got Us" is, to me, just as relevant today as it was when it was first recorded, and I can't count the times I've said I've got "champagne taste and a beer pocket-book." Another one I love that I didn't recall hearing (until more recently when Donna gave me a compilation of work) is "A Song I Can Sing." It was included on a CD Donna gave me entitled

"Funny Face: The Universal Recordings," a newly-released, 50-song CD from the United Kingdom. It's a simple tune that begins with guitar, but I love how she changes octaves and shows us again her incredible range. It's also a very creatively done piece. There are so many more I adore like "Daddy Dumplin'," "Manhattan, Kansas," and "I'll Try a Little Bit Harder."

Most of all, Donna Fargo isn't just an incredible singer and songwriter. She is a beautiful and spiritual human being who loves her country and fellow human beings and has taught us more about how to live and how important it is to develop ourselves, so we can be all we were meant to be.



*"Songs almost have a mind of their own, like they insist on being written, and you have to do it their way. I love that. So, I just let those lead me."*

Here's my recent interview with Donna Fargo.

**Niles Reddick:** When you were growing up in Mt. Airy, what was that like? Did you know Andy Griffith, since he was also from Mt. Airy? Did its Mayberry-like atmosphere influence your songwriting?

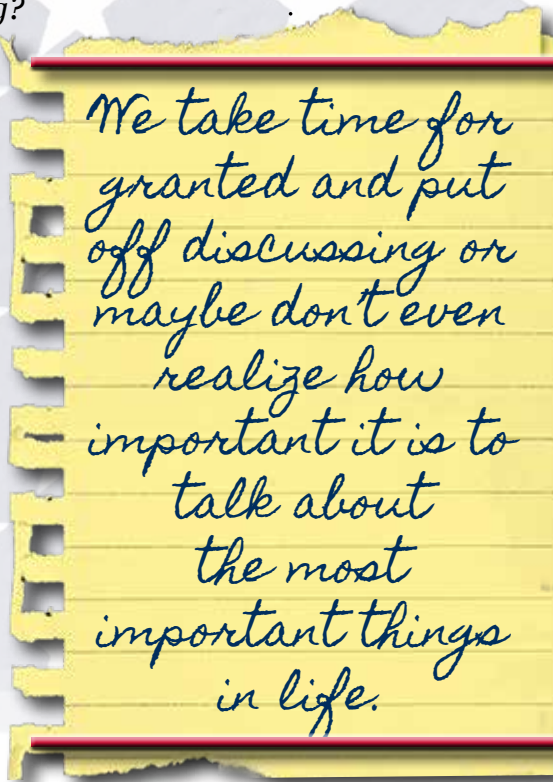
**Donna Fargo:** Well, we lived about seven miles out of Mt. Airy, so I went to a county school from grades 1-9. My older brother thought I should transfer to Mt. Airy High School my sophomore year and graduate from high school there, so I did. During the youngest years I worked in tobacco and the high school years I worked in clothing stores. Never took a paycheck home.

I did not know Andy Griffith personally—I knew the name, of course. My dad watched his TV show, but the TV was in his bedroom. I was busy with school and all the extracurricular activities, so I didn't watch much TV. But, I'm sure everybody in our town was proud of Andy—of all that he was accomplishing, and especially proud that he was from our Mt. Airy.

As far as the songwriting influences, there were two radio stations that played all kinds of music—from country to pop to rock and the Beatles to local gospel. I'm sure my hometown, my home life, and the music I heard on the two stations influenced my songwriting later on, even while I was growing up and not aware that this background would become so important to my foundation. People in

Mt. Airy are just nice there. They're friendly. I always felt safe there. Hometowns are very important.

**NR:** Did you sing when you were young? What was your first experience? Church? Were you nervous or were you a natural?



We take time for granted and put off discussing or maybe don't even realize how important it is to talk about the most important things in life.

**DF:** Besides just singing in the shower or for my father's fox hunting friends sometimes, my first memory of singing was in church. I'm guessing I was 10 or 12 years old. I was singing "Mansion Over the Hilltop" and in the middle of the song, the most spiritual lady in our community shouted—scared me to death—and I stopped

but then just picked back up and continued singing. When I got home, I said, "Daddy, Daddy, Voda Brim shouted when I sang, and she didn't shout for anybody else." My dad explained that she shouted because she was touched by my singing.

I remember always wanting to be a singer, but I kept it a secret—I was bashful. In grammar school, I would be in talent shows—since I took tap and ballet lessons, the teacher in charge would ask me to do something that would balance everything, like give the whole show some variety. I remember once doing a monologue. Later on, I was to represent my school and I was supposed to sing. My friend (who played piano) and I had talked about doing some song with the word "river" in the title. I thought she was talking about



one song, and she thought I was talking about another, so stupid me didn't even rehearse and we went to a movie instead. Well, she started playing one song and I started singing another. Duh. OMG. Needless to say, it was embarrassing. Now I'm thankful for that mistake. It gave me a conscience about being overly prepared—*forever I hope!*

**NR:** *You were the youngest child in the family, and you lost your mom fairly young while you were college-aged. Did that impact your becoming more introspective and influence your song-writing?*

**DF:** Actually I lost my mother after I had moved to California to teach high school English. Her death was very unexpected. She died in her 50s—too young—and I'm sure it caused me to become more introspective and to have a deeper understanding about the value of time with the people you love. We take time for granted and put off discussing or maybe don't even realize how important it is to talk about the most important things in life.

I wrote a song for her after she died called "You Were Always There," and it became my 4th consecutive #1 record. I wrote about some of those things in the song that I regretted not asking—like, *Was she happy?* And *Was she glad she gave life to me?* It's way too late after someone is gone. It's final. I think everything that one values influences song-writing...or any kind of writing, really.



**NR:** *How did you come to move from Mt. Airy (or from High Point University) to California? Why? I think I read your sister had once worked in California.*

**DF:** My brother lived in California but came back for my graduation from High Point. I had decided I wanted to teach there. I felt safe living with my brother. He was a wonderful brother and he really looked after me, and I got a great job teaching there.

**NR:** *I read a comment from someone who was a student who recalled your coming into class and singing "Happiest Girl in the Whole USA." She wrote that they all sat there like "whatever," and they had no idea they were getting a private performance of*

*one of the soon-to-be most popular singers in the world. Did you enjoy teaching English? Do you believe that informed your ability to write songs (and later books and cards for "Blue Mountain")?*

**DF:** That story is absolutely *not* true. That would have been totally against my principles. I was very serious about teaching. I was also head of the English department. I'm bashful, and I did not waste time in the classroom. I worked the students hard. I kept my dream to become a singer very secret. But after the song "Happiest Girl" came out and was getting played a lot, somehow, the students found out about it. One of them brought a radio to class one day and suddenly

turned up the volume and they were playing “Happiest Girl.” I ran and grabbed the radio and said, “You’re gonna get me fired! You can pick your radio up after class.”

Some of them said, “But we’re proud of you.”

I said, “Yeah, and you just wanna waste time.” If you wanna talk about this, you can come after school. We are not wasting time in this class talking about anything but English. And oh, yes, I loved teaching English. I thought it was the most important subject to teach. I still hear from some of my students.

Well, knowing how to take apart a sentence certainly helped me know whether I was saying something grammatically correct and all that, but sometimes I would intentionally write it incorrectly if the feel of the song called for it.

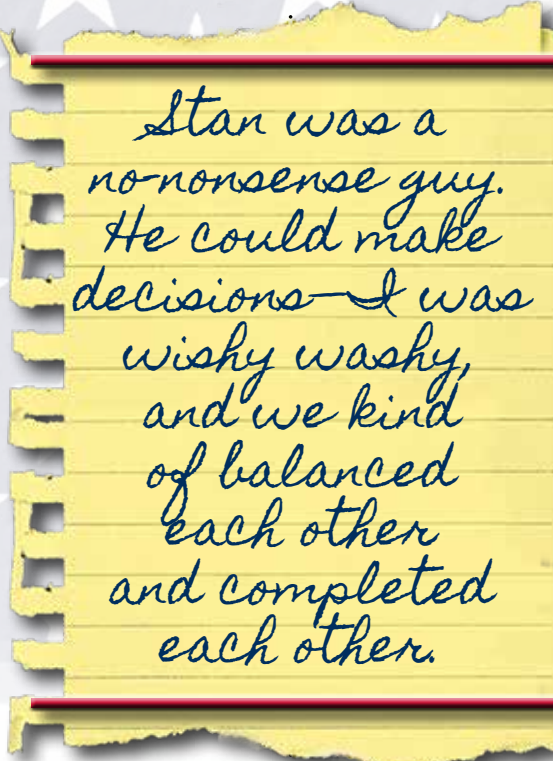
Sometimes there wasn’t room rhythm-wise to use two syllables instead of one for example. I mean it’s very common for writers to intentionally say something they know to be grammatically incorrect, like for example, you might say, “He don’t” instead of “He doesn’t.” I wouldn’t talk that way in everyday language because I know the rules. But I wouldn’t judge someone who does. I wrote a song called “It Do Feel Good.” It’s a light-hearted song and it just works better than “It Does Feel Good.” I always loved diagramming sentences. If it won’t fit on a diagram, there’s some kind of problem. It’s important to know your subject matter.

**NR:** Can you tell us a little more about meeting and dating Stan and how you knew he was the one for you?

**DF:** My brother knew I wanted to be a singer, so he found the phone number of a company looking for a girl singer to sing demos. I called the number and it was there that I met Stan. Before I left North Carolina I had made a demo of me singing two songs and I handed the record to Stan. He listened to both songs—which I think were “I’m in the Mood for Love” and some other pop song. After listening, he said, “You’re country.”

I said “Okay.” I don’t think at that time I distinguished much between genres. My thinking was I wanted to be a singer and a good song is a good song. So he recorded me on some of the songs he had in his publishing company. Some time later, I said to him, “If I’m not a pain and don’t take too much of your time, will you teach me to play guitar? I’d like to try writing my own songs.”

He said “Yes,” and he gave me a guitar and taught me to play it well enough to find the melodies I was hearing with my lyrics. Eventually we fell in love and got married. I not only loved him, I *liked* him. He was a no-nonsense guy. He could make decisions—I was wishy washy, and we kind of balanced each other and completed each other. He was more mature than I was, so he taught me so much. I’d always wanted to be happy. And



Stan was a no-nonsense guy. He could make decisions—I was wishy washy, and we kind of balanced each other and completed each other.



I knew I was finally happy. I guess it was 1972—it could have been '71, I didn't keep a journal—but during a break from school, we flew to Nashville and recorded three or four songs I'd written, one of which was "Happiest Girl." Stan pitched the session and Dot Records signed me to their label. In June of '72, "Happiest Girl" was already #1, I think, so I turned in my resignation (from the school), and we went on the road. I had actually gotten permission to give my exams early and open in Vegas with Roy Clark. I graded the kids' exams in Las Vegas and called in their grades. It was exciting and I was nervous. I had very little experience, and I had a lot to learn.



**DF:** I think I felt closer to Tammy. She asked me to write a song for her daughter, and I did. But most of us were on the road most of the time. I did the Kitty Wells tribute show and was honored that her team asked me to be on it and contribute to it. I was on the

Marty Robbins show—I remember I did my recitation called "That Was Yesterday." It's a very serious song, and Marty made funny faces at me while I was doing it. It's harder to concentrate when you're doing a recitation than a song. He was cool, always joking around. I loved Dottie West, too. She recorded a song I wrote called "Does It Matter?" I had planned to record one of her songs, but it

didn't work out. It's always an honor when someone records a song you wrote.

**NR:** *Your love for each other went beyond relationship into your work, but that worked for you two, right, for over fifty years?*

**NR:** *Other than Stan, did you have a "best friend" among singers or songwriters?*

**DF:** Yeah, we were really a team. There wouldn't be a Donna Fargo without Stan Silver. We had some ups and downs at first, and I guess we learned from each other, but I'm positive I learned more from him than he learned from me. We were so fortunate to be truly in love and we valued our relationship. To me, he was absolutely perfect.

**DF:** I would say my best artist friends are Jeannie C. Riley and Margo Smith. I'm also friends with songwriter Marty Cooper and his wife Vickie. Vickie actually promoted "Happiest Girl" to pop stations, and it went to #5 or #6 on the pop charts. Marty and I have co-written a couple of songs together, one of which is on my new album, "All Because of You." The song is called "This Is America." The other one that we co-wrote will probably be on the next CD. But Stan and my best friend in the music business was/is David Briggs, who played on all my records except the sec-

**NR:** *I know you wrote songs that were recorded by other great artists like Tanya Tucker, Kitty Wells, Tammy Wynette, Marty Robbins, Dottie West, and others. Did you have a relationship with them all?*

ond one, I think. He also played for Elvis and many others. I was friends with my musicians and singers on my show, of course. Robert Thames wrote the “Cricket Song,” which I recorded on my “Fargo Country” album. He played lead guitar on our live shows.

**NR:** *Did you have a favorite singer yourself who you really loved and admired? Or maybe favorite songs by others?*

**DF:** Tammy was probably my favorite female country singer. I loved Loretta and really all that she accomplished. Loved Celine Dion. I loved Harry Chapin’s songwriting, and I have sometimes said that one of the greatest songs ever written, was Harry Chapin’s “Better Place to Be.” It’s about eight minutes long. I just love the artistry of it. He was such a great interpreter. I think Tim McGraw has the best taste in song selection. Also, Little Big Town has great taste in their song choices. I love Keith Urban, and Chris Stapleton. Great musicians and artists. I **love** Adele, of course. Love Willie so much. He’s just so nice and such a stylist. My earliest musical influences were Elvis and Brenda Lee. I think they were important to my dream.

**NR:** *For me, some of your lyrics seem a bit more philosophical or maybe educated than a lot of “country songs.” For example, in your newer song, “One of the Good Guys,” you use words like “realist and optimist,” which don’t seem typical. Has anyone ever*

*commented on that? To me, it works well and I love it. In fact, I love that your voice seems to be the same as it did on my mom’s 1970’s album we listened to over and over on our record player.*



**DF:** Well, I majored in English and psychology and minored in philosophy and religion. Those were what my interests were, so I guess it would be natural for my writing to reflect that. Some people have said to me that my songs got them through hard times growing up, and I was honored by their comments. Others have said that they like my songwriting because it’s dif-

ferent. Thank you for your compliment. I appreciate that. And thank you and your mom for listening to my music, Niles. I am so honored.

**NR:** *Were many of your songs autobiographical? Can you give an example or two?*

**DF:** Well, “Happiest Girl” was. I always wanted to be happy, and that dream came true. I even wrote in one of my books, “If you’re not happy, you’re cheating yourself.” I definitely felt like the lyrics I wrote in “Happiest Girl.” So yeah, that was very autobiographical. “Funny Face” was a name Stan would call me sometime, so my second #1 record was autobiographical. “Superman” was the 3rd #1, and I called Stan that when I teased him. “Little Girl Gone” was autobiographical to a point. “You Were Always There” was



a song I wrote for my mother after she died. Very autobiographical. Hmm. That's interesting. I just checked the titles, and a lot of the #1s were autobiographical. Of course, a writer always wants her songs to be very relatable and to have a universal application. I could mention album cuts that are some of my best songs that are not autobiographical, so it just depends, I guess. I like, for example, sometimes to have an idea and to create a totally "made-up" scenario but make it sound real and relatable. I did that with one of my favorite songs I've written—that was not a single—called "Song With No Music." I wanted to express the idea of emptiness, how some people get caught in doing whatever and not considering the consequences. The creative imagination is such a gift and we all have it.

**NR:** *What was your writing process like? Did they come out suddenly or did you craft them over time?*

**DF:** Both. Sometimes I'll have an idea just stew around in my head for a day or two or three, and if I'm smart, I'll take notes of my thoughts, so I don't lose the context. Other times, I'll just start playing and something will come out and I'll go with it. Songs almost have a mind of their own, like they insist on being written, and you have to do it their way. I love that. So I just let those kind lead me. I'm almost always working on several songs at the same time or several pieces if I'm writing

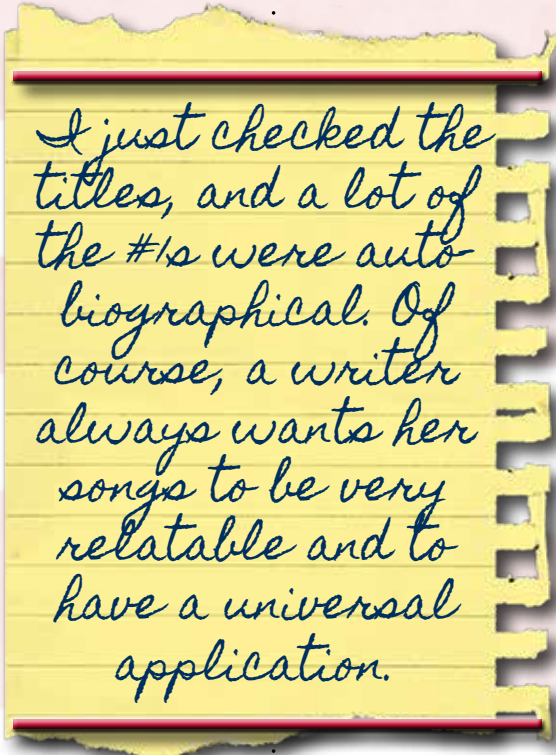
greeting cards or a book and, it's kinda' like where does this fit in the puzzle at times.

I think I put the finishing touches on "Happiest Girl" in about three days. Because I was a brand new writer and was learning how to teach myself, I wrote 16 verses to "Funny Face." I know that sounds crazy, but

I kept trying to complicate it, and it wouldn't cooperate. It's like it was saying, "Leave me alone. I'm simple, and there's nothing wrong with 'simple'." I worked on "It Would Have Been Just Perfect" on and off for three years. With a title like that, I guess I wanted it to be perfect. I trust my instincts most of the time and work on something until I'm happy with it. And, I would always

want Stan's approval and comments. If we both liked something, I would have more confidence in it.

It depended often on deadlines too, especially if we were in the middle of completing an album. I like variety, and I tried to write something for everybody. The inspired songs that come when you're working on something else—if you take advantage of that creative urge and write until you feel like stopping—that's the best usually. I sometimes have a vision or an outline of how I think the songs should progress—then it's just a matter of finding the right words to meet my goal. But it's not "formulized." I remember writing "Hot Diggity Dog" on a plane trip to West Virginia, and the air was off on the plane. That's called turning a



*I just checked the titles, and a lot of the #1s were autobiographical. Of course, a writer always wants her songs to be very relatable and to have a universal application.*

challenge into an opportunity maybe. It was hot. But it was like the heat inspired the title, and the circumstances somehow inspired the song and maybe my positive attitude took over.

**NR:** *Can you tell me about being diagnosed with MS and what you went through? Is that why your singing/performing changed course a bit since for many years you didn't record?*

**DF:** I had had symptoms of MS since 1976, but I had my first major attack in 1978, when I was diagnosed after the numbness went into paralysis from my neck down on both sides of my body. I could not feed myself, write clearly, or walk without assistance.

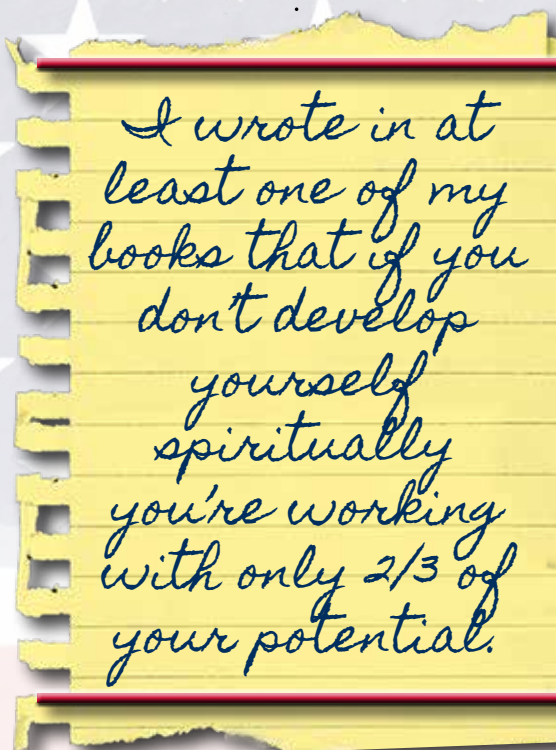
It was scary. Body misery and loss of normalcy are fierce opponents, and they are a fight against one's faith. The whole experience taught me so much...how much we take our health and life for granted. I started to self-educate by reading everything I could about health and about recovery. I instinctively started studying about the spirit, mind, and body. I was surprised that I helped myself the most with my spiritual development.

I wrote in at least one of my books that if you don't develop yourself spiritually you're working with only 2/3 of your potential. I knew I was in for a fight for my life and normalcy. There was no medicine then except one, and the hospital doctors did not recommend this at that time, and I thanked

them for being honest about it. So I knew my getting better, if it was possible, depended on my own choices. I learned all I could in the four months I was "down," but then, I started back to work. Performing on the road and making records were very important to me. It's so important to do what you love to do and to keep on keeping on.

Early on, I decided that my attitude would be...Okay, so I have MS, but I am not going to let it "have me." I studied about diet and made some changes, like getting off so much junk food, being more diligent about doing basic things like drinking more water, eating about 70% fresh fruits and veggies, and eliminating red meat for the most part and eating chicken, fish, and turkey for protein. (I go into more detail in my book, "Ten Golden Rules for Living in This Crazy, Mixed-Up World.")

I had majored in psychology, as well as English, since California required five years of college to get a general secondary credential to teach high school. So, I knew to avoid stress as much as possible and to process properly serious issues in life. I analyzed where I thought I was in life. I had accomplished my goal to become a teacher. I loved teaching. I was even head of the English department at a progressive school in Southern California. Because Stan had taught me to play the guitar, I became a writer to become a singer. My dream had come true after I quit smoking. I was truly happy with the love of my life, who was also my



*I wrote in at least one of my books that if you don't develop yourself spiritually you're working with only 2/3 of your potential.*



husband and producer. So why did I have this stuff? My father and brother died of strokes and my mother died of a heart attack. Did I inherit a weak central nervous system from my father? I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help myself since they had said there is no cure. I studied the New Testament and tried to walk in God's perfect will for my life, while physically, I was miserable. One of the most important things I learned was to not give up. I think that every positive thing you do for yourself helps your immune system to fight for your survival. As far as the music goes, my first Warner Bros. album, "On the Move," was released in 1976; then the

"Fargo Country" and "Shame on Me" albums, released in 1977, had two #1s—"That Was Yesterday" and "Do I Love You."

My TV show, called "The Donna Fargo Show," premiered on September 15, 1978. When I was released from the hospital, one of the doctors said, "Do all you can in the next five years 'cause you don't know what will happen."

So, I did a few things after that—the "Dark-Eyed Lady" album we did in 1978. "Just for You" was released in 1979. "Fargo" was out in 1980. We recorded the "Brotherly Love" album for Songbird in 1981. I recorded the RCA album called "Donna" in 1983, and the "Encore" album in 1984. In 1986, I recorded the "Winners" album for Mercury Polygram. And now, I have a new CD called "All Because of You" —all songs I wrote myself. So I didn't

exactly roll over and play dead. My work consumes me. A creative spirit is so healthy and inspiring.

**NR:** *Can you talk a bit about your writing with Blue Mountain?*



**DF:** At some time in the past, I said to Stan, "I think I could write greeting cards, and I like a company called Blue Mountain Arts."

He did the rest. So I started writing for them in the mid-'90s (I think it was 1995). I've written eight books, and I'm working on another now. I've co-written six books with the owner of the company, Susan Polis Schultz,

my favorite poet from way back when I used to buy her greeting cards and books (and I still do).

Writing is really good for me, because I like to share what I've learned to help others. I like to imagine what people would like to say to others, and that's what I write about in the greeting cards. My books are all about what I think is most important to make dreams come true and to inspire people not to give up when they're challenged on different problems in life. Several of my books lean toward the spiritual since I think the spirit is the real "us." It's so important to educate ourselves spiritually by reading the New Testament.

**NR:** *When you and Stan got COVID, and then you lost Stan, I know that was an*

*incredibly difficult time for you. What helped you get by?*

**DF:** I couldn't have gotten by without God. As I look back now, it was almost like I've been guided from dealing with MS to develop my faith and all. That helped me, but I was beyond devastated. And, things happened that really saved me.

**NR:** *I read an article where you talked about asking God for a sign and then seeing Stan's lamp on his side of the bed on that hadn't been on in months. How reassuring are signs like that for you?*

**DF:** Yes, I said to God one day, "I can't go on like this, God. Just give me some kind of sign that Stan is okay, that he's in Heaven. If you can't help me, just take me on."

As I walked from the kitchen to the bedroom, the light on his side of the bed was on. Hadn't been turned on in months. I said "God, I didn't turn that light on."

He said, "Well, you did ask me for a sign."

The other thing was after the light was turned on supernaturally, I was walking through the hall, and my hand opened a cabinet door for no reason. It wasn't related to my mind or for any reason. My hand reached in the cabinet and pulled out a bag with CDs in it. Also, no relationship mentally. I didn't direct it. Wasn't looking for anything. I had no music in me at that time. Wasn't even aware really of what I was doing. I lis-

tened to the CDs—they were perfectly mixed.

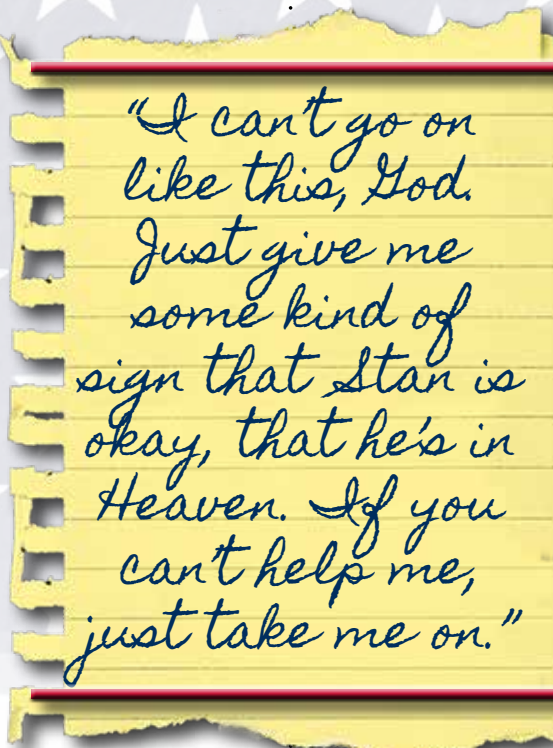
I had written them a few years back and at different times. After I heard them, I knew I was supposed to put them out. It seemed like the decision was made for me. Everything about this. It seemed like Stan and God had gotten together to direct me. And they did.

Those two supernatural experiences really saved my life. God is so good. So good. We serve a mighty God. I cannot put into words how much these supernatural experiences helped me and drew me closer to God and I'm so thankful.

**NR:** *I know you're going back to Mt. Airy for the mural unveiling and a luncheon this summer, and I know you have a permanent*

*exhibit in the museum there. Do you think you'll have a flood of memories. Do you still have family there?*

**DF:** That will be exciting. I do have nieces and nephews there and cousins, and many fans are coming from lots of places around the U.S. It will be fun. I'm sure there will be some tears with all the memories. I'll be excited to meet the muralist. I've seen the six pictures of me that he will be painting on a big wall, so that will be fun to see. I love my hometown. I'll also get to take flowers to my mother and dad's and brother and sister's graves. And I'll also be doing a book signing of my latest book, "Everything Is Possible With God," and my latest CD, "All Because of You."





**NR:** *I admire that you've released this new CD, "All Because of You," and I love it. What's next for Donna Fargo?*

**DF:** Thank you, Niles; we plan to put out another CD of previously unreleased material that will take more effort than the one that's out now did. I also plan to continue writing cards and books for Blue Mountain Arts, and I'm working on a new book and songs of course.

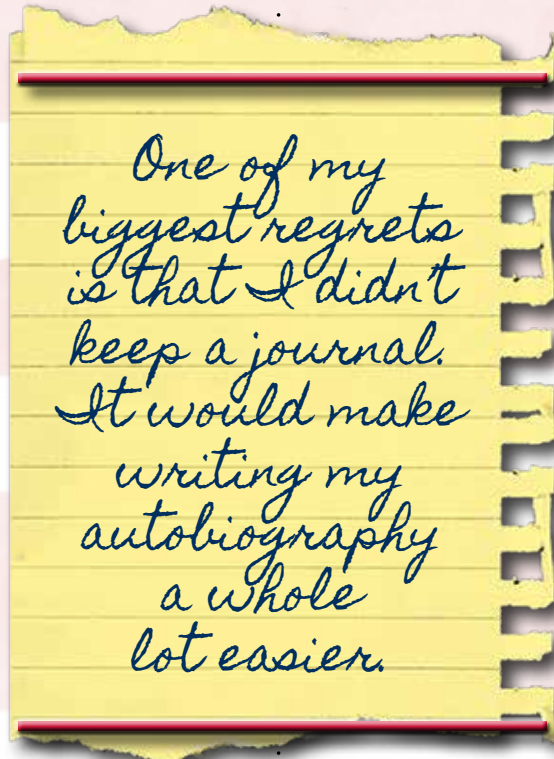
**NR:** *You have had a remarkable career and have been the recipient of so many awards and honors (Academy of Country Music, BMI Award, Grammy Award, etc.). Was there anything that you would have liked to have achieved that you haven't? Do you have regrets or something you would have done differently.*

**DF:** I would like for someone else to have major hits on some of my songs. I would also like for two of my favorite songs that I've ever written (which will be in the next CD) to be hits. One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't keep a journal. It would make writing my autobiography a whole lot easier. If I had to do it over again, I would structure my live show with a songwriting section in it. My philosophy then—I think—was for a more entertaining type show. I focused on the "good time," up-tempo, Tom Jones-type show, but I could have included a section to focus on songwriting. I think a lot

of the songs on the albums should have been singles that got lost just from time restraints. Like, if two songs had been singles, it felt like it was time for a new album. But all in all, I appreciate what Stan and I accomplished together. There wouldn't be a Donna Fargo without Stan Silver. Most of all, we experienced true love—the greatest gift and the biggest reward. I am so blessed.

**NR:** *Thanks for taking the time to be interviewed for the magazine, and is there anything else you'd like to share with readers?*

**DF:** Thank you, Niles, for your time to interview me. I don't do many interviews. I'm a hermit, basically. I would like to share that I believe the greatest lesson I learned after being diagnosed with MS and after having two strokes was that developing my spirit was the greatest benefit, and the most important lesson in my life has been to have a relationship with God.



**Niles Reddick** lives in Jackson, Tennessee with his wife and two children. His books are available on Amazon.com and in iBooks. For more information on the author, visit his website at [www.nilesreddick.com](http://www.nilesreddick.com).

# The Abandoned Legacy

by Jerry Geho

T

he summer of 1963 would be one I would always remember. I was a member of Air Explorer Post 150 in Wellsburg, WV. US Air Force Master Sergeant Al Branch, a World War II veteran, was our post leader.

Sgt. Branch had a very active group of youth who seemed to spend most of their time crossing the line. We sold candy, calendars, and whatever else Sarge could find to finance what has become the greatest memories of my life.

One activity which did not seem significant at the time was when we were assigned to explore a huge field at a nearby base. We were provided sack lunches and driven to the field, which was filled with old aircraft. We were then instructed where to meet at the end of the day when we were finished exploring.

The assignment was to see first hand and up close some of the various aircraft which had played such an important part in our country's military effort. There were fighters, transports, and all sizes and models of aircraft—absent their engines. There was a challenge, though—there were wasps infesting the aircraft, and they inflicted an abundance of stings on our exploration group.

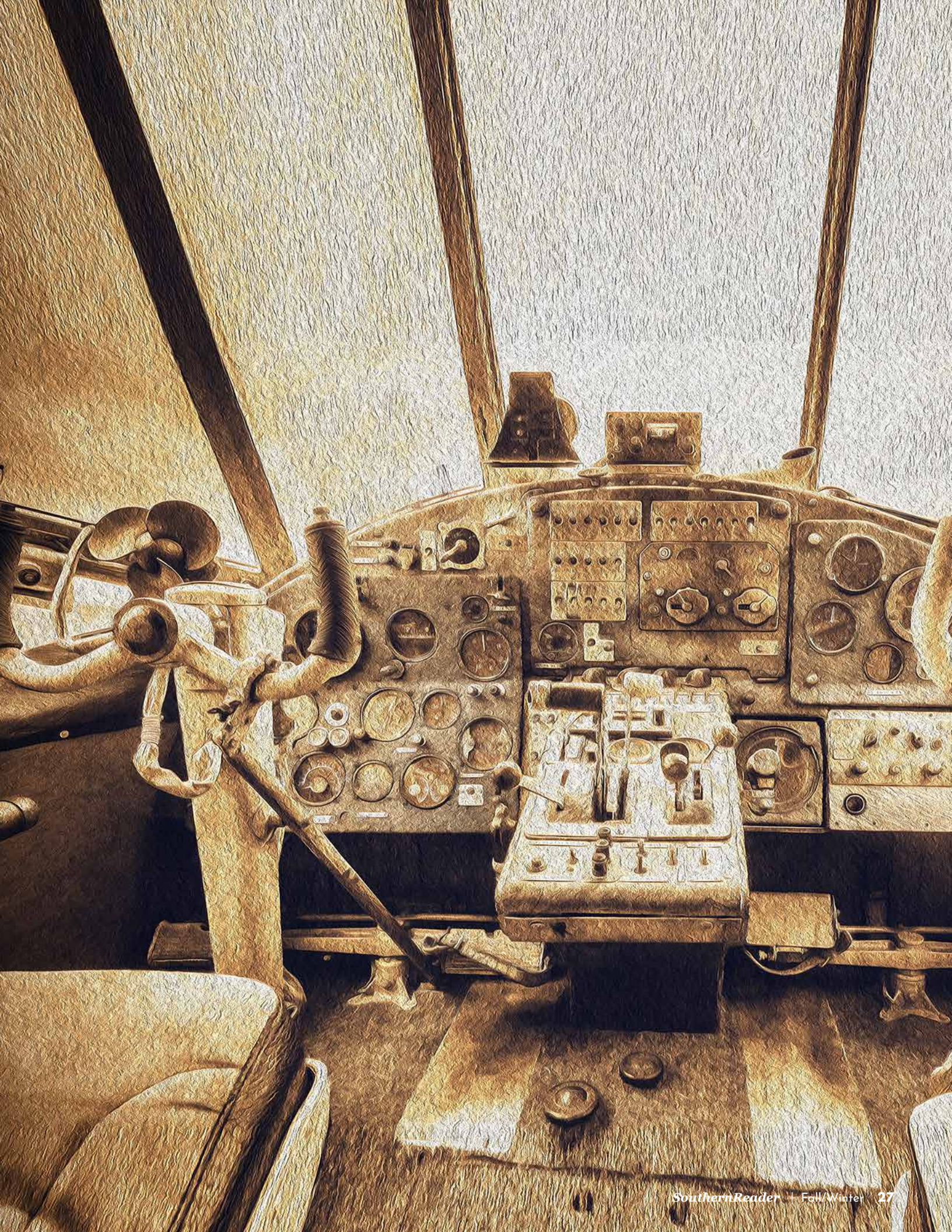
The planes, however, were not secured and were easily accessed. We allowed our imaginations to wander and imagined the source of the numerous holes and battle marks on the planes. Most interesting were the names. Our small group of wannabee pilots found itself to be consumed in an amazing adventure.

Some of the planes were big, but some were huge. One of the big planes was named "Strawberry Bitch." It

*Our small group of wannabee pilots found itself to be consumed in an amazing adventure.*









was an old B-24 that had flown combat missions from North Africa in 1943-1944 with the 512th Bomb Squadron. However, it was one of the “huge” planes that had been catching our eye since we arrived. The day was nearing an end, and we came upon the rear of this huge aircraft. The door was open, but quite high off the ground. We located a portable stairs midway between two planes, and moved the maintenance ladders about twenty feet so we could access the plane. However, even with the ladders, we had to be boosted into the plane.

There wasn't much light, except for the door towards the rear and the visible light from the front of the plane, which turned out to be the cockpit. We walked towards the front, passing by steel structures that looked like garage lifts. It wasn't greasy or dirty, just really dusty. And again, there were “enemy” wasps everywhere.

I remember entering the cockpit area and saying, “There's a lot of room in here.” We sat in the pilot's and radio operator's seats and “played war.” There were papers and notepads covered in dust, and the one I moved crumbled in my hands. I was reminded that we were not to take anything from any craft during our visit.

There was something foreboding about that plane—even moreso than the wasps. We all felt it—it was a very strange aura inside the fuselage, and it gave us all a very uncomfortable feeling, so we quickly decided to get out of there.

Once we exited down the portable stairs, a couple of explorers from our group who (didn't accompany us inside the plane) walked up and said, “You need to read the plaque at the nose of the plane.”

We walked to the front of the plane, and there was a rather permanent-looking plaque chronicling the plane's most famous bombing missions.

We read the plaque several times and tried to absorb what it said. Whether it was our imaginations or not, I am sure of the dynamics of the experience. When our ride picked us up at the plane he asked about our day.

“Fun,” I said, “But the last plane we were in was different than all the others.”

“What plane was that?” he asked.

“The Enola Gay,” we answered. He didn't say anything at first, but he then asked if we were actually *inside* the plane.

When we affirmed we had been, he simply said, “Best keep that to yourself.”

On the ride back to the base, I reflected on the afternoon's adventure. It slowly began to set in that I had sat in the pilot seat and put my hand on the bomb bay doors that were used to end World War II.

Figures estimate over 75,000 died in that event, but it will most be remembered for ending World War II, saving hundreds of thousands of American and Allied lives, and providing them the opportunity to come home to their families and the homeland they fought to save.

That memory is 60 years old, and to this day I remember touching a part of history not many have had the opportunity to experience.



**Jerry Geho** is a Tennessee writer and entrepreneur. A West Virginia native, he re-located to Nashville in the 1970s and became involved in new recording artist development as President of Music City Workshop.



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# The Bedroom Visitor

by Paul Kersey

I

n November of 1962, we were given a week off school for Thanksgiving break. Like most boys my age, I was fascinated by the stories and battles of World War II.

I was sitting at my desk late one afternoon working on a model of a P-51 Mustang when my mother stuck her head in my room.

“Whatcha doin’ sugar?”

“Tryin’ to put this model together,” I said. “I had no idea there were so many pieces. I think it would be easier to assemble the real thing.”

“You’re always so impatient. Hey, your dad and I have to go out with one of his customers tonight. Do you think you might be able to stay by yourself for a couple of hours?”

My mind raced. Left alone for the first time...what kind of trouble could I get into without getting caught...beer?...cigarettes?...Dad’s *Playboys*? The temptations were endless!

“Sure Mom, no problem.”

“Alright, young man, now behave yourself. We should be back before midnight. I’m going to ask Mrs. Burris next door to check in on you. I’ll leave you her number in case of emergency.”

“Okay, Mom, don’t worry. You guys have a good time and bring me back a doggie bag.”

At around 7:00, the Pate and the Mate (as I called them) left for their night out. I decided to finish up the last segment of my P-51 model before filching one of Dad’s cigarettes. As I cleaned the glue from my fingers, I happened to notice a movement in the hall out of the corner of my eye. My peripheral vision allowed me an unobstructed view of the hallway outside my bedroom door. In that moment, I observed the unmistakable figure of an older woman with reddish-gray hair done up in a bun. She was wearing wire-rimmed spectacles and a long black evening dress that ran down to her ankles. There was a shawl draped over

In that moment, I observed the unmistakable figure of an older woman with reddish-gray hair done up in a bun.





her shoulders. Her hands were stuck deep in a furry muff to warm them from the cold. She stopped for about two seconds at the threshold of my door, the continued down the hall. My first impression was that this lady was our neighbor, Mrs. Burris, whom I had not as yet met. I figured she probably came over to check on me and to see my parents before they left. I did think it was rude of her to come in the house without knocking and neglecting to speak as she passed my room. I rose from my desk and went into the hallway to introduce myself.

"Mrs. Burris, can I help you...?" I called out, but there was no one in the hall. I went from room to room on the second floor, calling her name. I checked the guest room, the master bedroom, the bathrooms...nothing. Then I thought to myself, *did I just imagine I saw her?* I wasn't scared, but her figure seemed so vivid. I'm told that from time to time, we all think we see things that aren't really there.

I went downstairs and turned on the TV. Bestoink Dooley, our local scary movie host, was just coming on, featuring "The Bride of Frankenstein." I fell asleep on the sofa. The Pate and Mate got home just before the end of the movie. The figure of the old lady had left no lasting impression upon me. I went to bed without mentioning the incident to anyone.

A few weeks later, the family we purchased the house from came back to the neighborhood. They were moving to Alabama and came back to visit friends one last time before

leaving. The couple and their two young children stopped by and knocked on our front door.

"We're sorry to bother you, but we were visiting friends in the neighborhood, and the kids wanted to stop and visit the old house for a minute on our way out."

Mom and Dad thought the request a bit odd and intrusive but offered a warm smile and invited the family inside their former home. We all settled down in the den. Always the good

hostess, Mom went to the kitchen to pull together a tray of snacks and drinks for our guests. I was playing a game of *Chutes and Ladders* on the floor with the children. I overheard the grownups discussing the qualities of the house.

"I know it's only a three bedroom, but there was always more than enough room for the five of us," the man said.

Of course, Dad noticed there were only four people in the family: a man, his wife and two children.

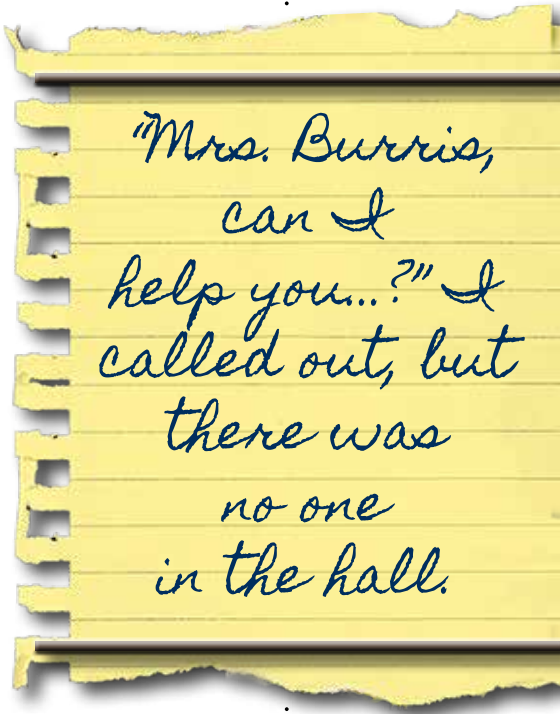
"Do you folks have another child?"

"No, my mother lived with us, but she died a few weeks ago," the man said.

Eventually, as grownups will do, the wallet photos came out to establish bragging rights.

"This is our son on his first birthday." I looked over Dad's shoulder...a cute kid covered in cake. "This is our daughter on her first day at school." The girl was a plain Jane in glasses. "And this is my mother."

As I stared at the snapshot, I stood there





open-mouthed in frozen disbelief as I looked at a picture of the same old lady who had stopped at my bedroom door a few weeks earlier. Every detail of her appearance was exactly the same...reddish-gray hair done up in a bun, wire-rimmed spectacles, a long black evening dress that ran down to her ankles, a shawl draped over her shoulders, and her hands stuck deep in a furry muff. As the color drained from my face, I was transfixed with shock and confusion.

My mother happened to look my way. "What in the world is wrong with you? You're white as a sheet! Are you alright?"

I could neither move nor speak. Mother hustled me into the bathroom and asked me what was wrong. I told her about the old woman who had visited me the night they had gone out to dinner. She warned me not to say anything while our guests were still here as it might disturb them.

After we returned to the den, I worked up the courage to ask the question I already knew the answer to, "Did your mother have her own room?" "Why yes," our guest replied. "And did she have the smaller bedroom?" "Yep, the first room at the top of the stairs on the left."

Of course, **THIS WAS MY BEDROOM!**"

When our guests left, my mother explained, "Sweetheart, some people believe that when we die, our spirit sometimes wants to stay here on earth instead of going to heaven right away. They think the spirit sometimes

wants to stay and visit the place where it feels more comfortable and at home. The old lady you saw might have wanted to see her son or grandchildren one more time before she

went to heaven, so her spirit came back to the place where she felt the happiest and at peace... her home, her bedroom... which is now our home and your bedroom. Do you understand?"

I paused for a moment, "I don't know, Mom...but I do know one thing... there is *no* way I can sleep in that room anymore. *Please...can I go to the bedroom across the hall from you and Dad?* Let's let the lady have

her old room back."

Thankfully, my room was moved opposite the master bedroom. My old room became the guest room and later, my sister's bedroom.

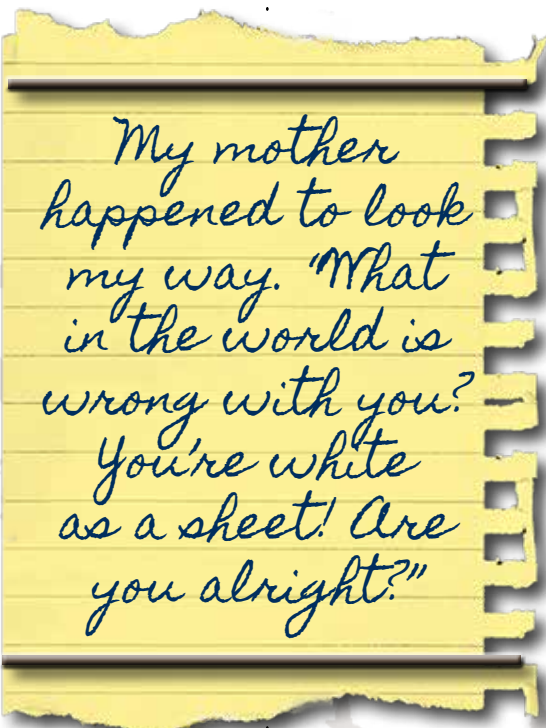
After my sister's third birthday, she started waking up in the middle of the night and coming into my room from time to time. "What's the matter, Sis?" I asked the question I already knew the answer to..."

"The old lady won't go away..." she said.

"That's okay, Sis, she's only visiting..."



**Paul Kersey** is a retired history teacher from Dunwoody, Georgia. He and his wife, Lisa (who is CEO of the Ellis Marsalis Music Center) currently reside in New Orleans. Lisa is. Paul is a part-time writer and full-time house husband.



# Helen of Sparta

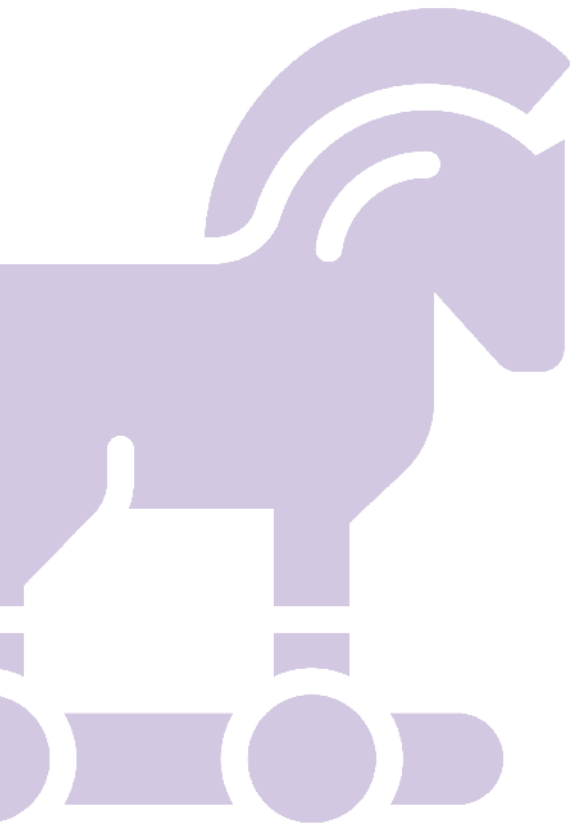
by Jacob Appel

L

aney Beck came to stay with us the autumn that my older brother, Darren, turned sixteen and insufferable. It had been a torrid summer—the second hottest on record along Florida’s Gulf Coast—so dry that the freshwater pond behind our motel withered into caked, cracking earth.

Carcasses of alligators and armadillos lined the parched drainage ditches along the roadbeds. Sea grapes shriveled in black clusters. But Darren’s fixation that August was the shape of his ears, how one curved up gently like the sheath of a fig shell, while the other rose to an elfin point. He studied his reflection at every opportunity: in shop windows, swimming pools, the Plexiglas faces of vending machines. He tried to “cure” the deviant ear with a convex brace fashioned from pipe cleaners. My brother’s other obsession was driving, and he was all-too-willing to chauffeur me to junior tango practice and oboe lessons as a pretext to borrow Mama’s Taurus. Or, if it meant extra time behind the wheel, to pick up Laney Beck from the airport in Fort Myers.

So that’s how it happened. Darren volunteered and I went with him. Not by choice, of course. But the day after Columbus Day was Superintendent’s Conference Day in the Lee County schools, which meant that big brothers all over Cormorant Island were saddled babysitting their twelve-year-old sisters. Mama had wanted to drive out to





`pivot = arr[len(arr) // 2]`

`left = []` `right = []` `if x < p`

`left.append(arr[i])` `if x == p`

`right.append(arr[i])` `if x > p`

`quick_sort(left)` `quick_sort(right)`

`return left + [p] + right`



`example_arr = [`

`5, 6, 8, 10, 1, 2, 1,`

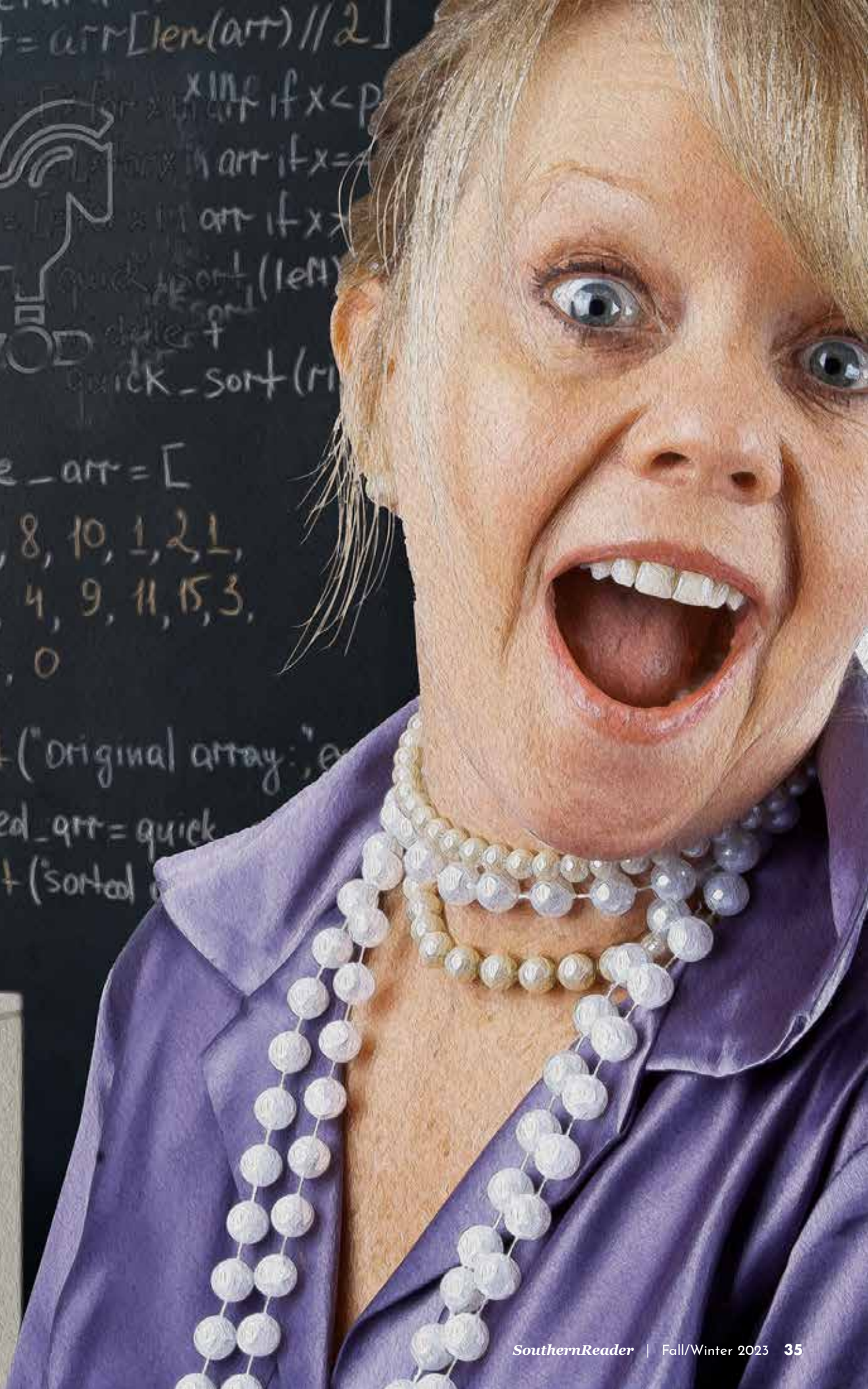
`7, 5, 4, 9, 11, 15, 3,`

`2, 6, 0`

`print("original array:", example_arr)`

`sorted_arr = quick_sort(example_arr)`

`print("sorted array:", sorted_arr)`





the airport herself—Laney Beck was her oldest friend, after all, her only real friend—yet with Papa still up in St. Petersburg, tending to Aunt Pricilla, she didn't trust my brother to man the motel office solo. Especially not on a Tuesday, when the linens went out.

Darren drove for speed, not accuracy. At the traffic lights, he flipped down the ceiling mirror and scoured his face for blemishes. At the longer lights on Nautilus Boulevard, he filed his fingernails. I've always felt a twinge of terror crossing bridges, and cruising over the causeway to the mainland at twice the posted limit, I dug my fingernails deep into the vinyl upholstery. But I knew not to beg Darren to be careful. That was a guaranteed way to make him hit the gas.

As we approached the airport, following the complex sequence of lane shifts that wound past the permanently-shuttered Air Force Museum and the dusty civil aviation field, heavier traffic forced my brother to slow down. "I've got a million-dollar proposition for you, Wunderkind," he said.

"Give me the million dollars first," I answered.

"Cute, real cute. Seriously, parking is going to be crazy. How would you feel about running inside and finding her?"

"Didn't Mom give you money for the lot?"

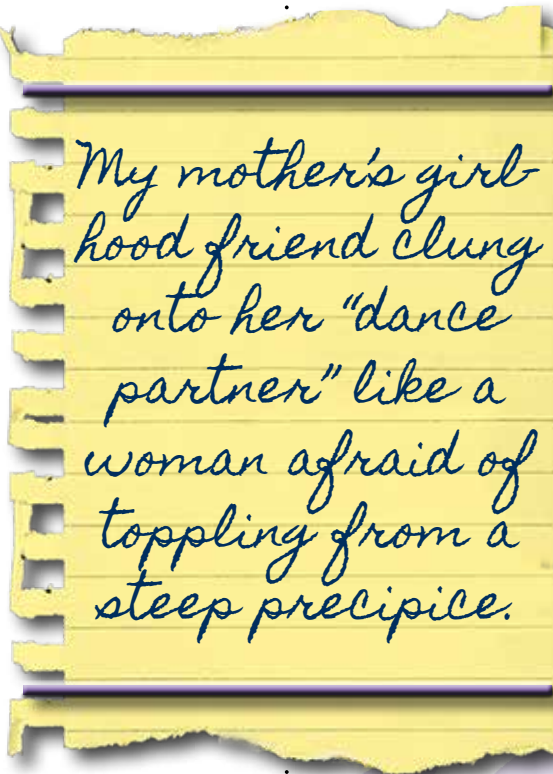
Darren made a nasty face at me. "C'mon, Wunderkind. We're past the turnoff for the

garage. I'll have to drive all the way through the loop again."

He swerved around a stand of orange construction barrels, honked at a Hertz shuttle bus, and came to a screeching halt inches from the curb. We were in front of the arrivals terminal, a steel-and-concrete structure whose dramatic curves might have seemed futuristic in the sixties—but, by the Reagan era, had acquired the gloom of unrealized ambitions. Ailanthus shoots poked through the cracks in the asphalt. Darren and I hadn't yet reached an agreement. I folded my arms across my flat chest and stared out the passenger-side window.

A crowd had gathered around the terminal's automatic doors, between the smokers' benches and the curbside check-in. Music streamed from an overhead speaker: Billie Holiday crooning "Summertime." On the sidewalk below, a strawberry blonde in sandals was slow-dancing with a skycap. She appeared to be leading. Only when a second skycap grabbed the woman's waist, and attempted to pry her from the first, did I recognize the woman from the photographs: It was Laney Beck! And she wasn't exactly dancing. More like staggering. My mother's girlhood friend clung onto her "dance partner" like a woman afraid of toppling from a steep precipice.

The skycap's cap fell off and rolled under



*My mother's girlhood friend clung onto her "dance partner" like a woman afraid of toppling from a steep precipice.*



a taxicab. The automatic doors swung open and shut, open and shut, in an apocalyptic rhythm. “Somebody get security!” shouted the second skycap.

And then my brother was out of the Taurus and pressing his way through the crowd. “It’s okay,” he called out. “She’s with us.” He said something to Laney Beck and she released her hold on the skycap. The bag agent turned out to be a lanky black man in his sixties with a gray brush mustache. Darren took the parking money—it must have been twenty dollars—and “stuffed it into the man’s hand. The next thing I knew, I was in the backseat between Laney Beck’s golf clubs and her hatbox, and the three of us were racing toward the airport exit at top speed.

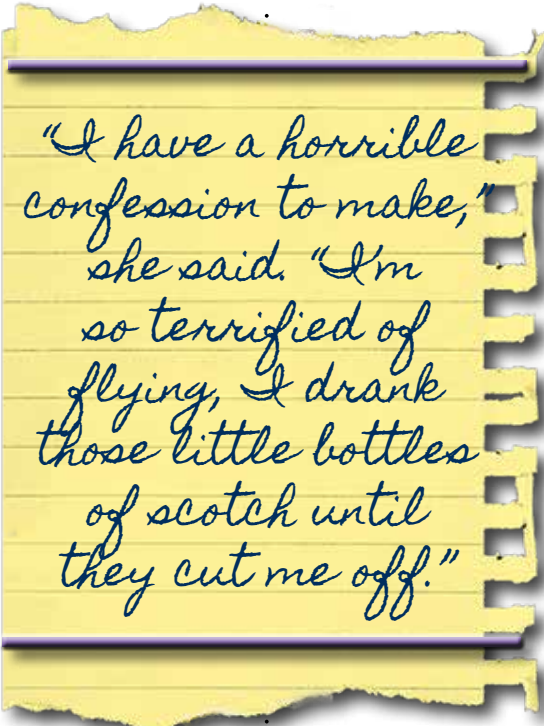
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“Such excitement!” exclaimed Laney Beck. “And I haven’t even been on the ground for half an hour.”

Laney Beck spoke as though she were accustomed to this sort of excitement, as if, whenever she traveled, it was her habit to jump airport personnel. She reached for her sunglasses, perched atop her frenzied hair, but one of the mirrored lenses had chipped. “I do believe that man broke my glasses,” she said—more surprised than upset. “Luckily for me, I have a spare set somewhere. Take that

as a word of wisdom from your Cousin Laney: Always carry a second pair of glasses. And dentures, too. Though I don’t suppose any of us need to worry about that just yet.” Laney Beck, who was *not* our biological cousin, rum-

maged through her oversized handbag, which jingled with coins, and drew out an identical pair of glasses. She placed them over her enormous eyes, and laughed—an innocent, girlish laugh. Then she lowered her voice, like a young child about to reveal a secret. “I have a horrible confession to make,” she said. “I’m so terrified of flying, I drank those little bottles of scotch until they cut me off.”



“I have a horrible confession to make,” she said. “I’m so terrified of flying, I drank those little bottles of scotch until they cut me off.”

“Not a big deal,” said Darren. “We’ll have you home in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?” Laney responded. “Oh, I can’t let your mother see me like this. It’s already bad enough that I’m imposing on such short notice.”

It *had* been rather sudden. Laney Beck’s second marriage had collapsed and she’d phoned Mama—out of the blue—to see if she could “borrow a room” at the Jolly Roger for a couple of weeks. Just to “sort through her thoughts.” Before that, they’d spoken on the phone every few months, and they’d exchanged holiday gifts religiously, but they hadn’t actually seen each other since many years earlier, when Laney starred as Ophelia at the Performing Arts Center in Tampa. Now, Mama’s friend was old enough to play

Hamlet's mother. But from what I understood, nobody in New York was asking her to play much of anything.

Darren kept driving. We pulled onto the state highway, where a brush fire had charred out several hundred acres of pine scrub. The wind had picked up—a cold front blowing in off the Gulf—and angry clouds cloaked the horizon.

"Everything looks so different," said Laney. "All these shopping plazas. When your mother and I were girls, this entire area was just swamp and avocado farms. Nobody in their right mind traveled south of Sarasota—unless it was to fool around on the beach. Or—did your mother ever tell you about the time this guy Chuck Grambly took us to a cock fight? A real live cock fight with *roosters*."

"No, she didn't," said Darren.

"Well, he did. With friends of his from the tackle shop—straight out of *Deliverance*... he had a crush on me, Chuck Grambly," said Laney, smiling. "Meanwhile, I can't get over how big you two have gotten. I hardly recognized you. How old were you last time I saw you, Amanda, dear? Four? Five? You probably don't even remember."

I wasn't sure how to answer. I was certain—*mathematically* certain—that I'd never before met Laney Beck.

"You look just like your mother, dear," she said. "Spitting image. I could pick Melanie

Shunt's girl out of crowd with my eyes closed."

It took me a moment to register that Melanie Shunt was my mother. Melanie Rothmeyer. I don't think I'd ever heard anyone use her maiden name before. Or say that I looked like her, though we shared the same broad forehead.

"*Everything* has changed. That's what happens when you're past thirty," said Laney. "Do you two go to high school at Thomas Edison?"

"I go to Francis Scott Key," answered Darren. "I'm almost done. She goes to the middle school on Cormorant Island."

"Well, *I* went to Thomas Edison. Up in Sarasota. I studied dramatic writing with Mrs. Gonchette. I wonder if she's still teaching," said Laney Beck. "She'd be passed retirement age, of course—but lots of teachers stay on into their seventies."

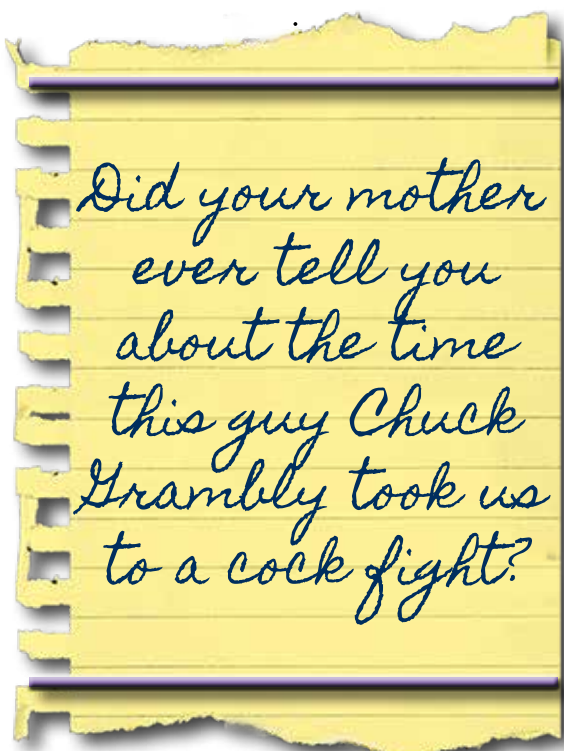
"I'm thinking of becoming a doctor," said Darren. "Maybe a plastic surgeon."

"Wherever life takes you, darling," Laney Beck answered noncommittally. "I have an idea. Let's go there. To Thomas Edison. It's not that far."

I could not have been more shocked if Laney Beck had proposed a road trip to California—or Continental Europe. In our family, this was the sort of outing planned weeks in advance.

"What do you say, Wunderkind?" asked Darren.

"You told Mama we'd come straight home," I said. "She'll want the car."

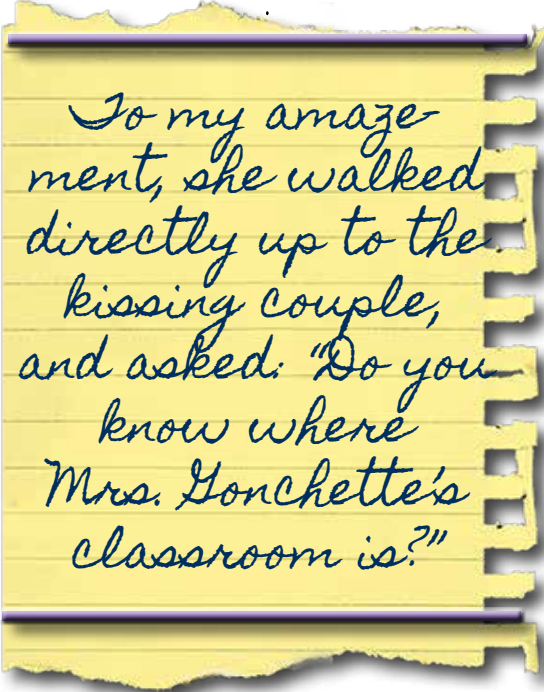




“I’m sure she’ll understand, Amanda. We’ve always been share-and-share-alike, your mother and I,” answered Laney Beck. She turned to my brother. “Please, Darren. For me...it’ll give me a chance to dry out. And I promise we’ll have fun.”

Darren didn’t say another word. But he pulled off the state highway at the next exit, and followed the signs for I-75 North to Sarasota.

Thomas Edison Consolidated High School was a low-slung, red brick building surrounded by a high mesh fence. Two wings—one cinderblock, the other stucco—marked successive expansions in the fifties and seventies. There was also a phalanx of white box trailers on a nearby field that housed either make-shift offices or overflow classrooms. The complex reminded me of an internment camp. But since we’d crossed the county line, school was in session. Two bare-chested guys were tossing around a fluorescent pink Frisbee on the traffic island out front. More kids were sitting at nearby picnic tables, eating bag lunches. I felt suddenly important, being a visitor and not a student. I suspect Darren experienced something similar, because he drove straight past the elderly parking officer and pulled into the lot marked “STAFF ONLY.” At his own school, Francis Scott Key, that got you



*To my amazement, she walked directly up to the kissing couple, and asked: "Do you know where Mrs. Gonchette's classroom is?"*

suspended. But the last laugh was on us, because the remaining empty spaces were at the far end of the macadam—nearly a football field’s length away. As we hiked back toward the school, a cold, lashing rain started falling. It peppered the adjacent manmade lake like an artillery barrage. When we finally entered the building’s main entrance, our clothing was thoroughly soaked.

Two trophy cases lined the vestibule. A large black-and-gold banner, hanging directly in front of us, read: “Edison Panthers, State Champions, 1977.” It didn’t say what they had won. Group photographs of long-forgotten athletic teams formed a wainscoting along the corridor. Varsity Baseball, 1957. Women’s Track and Field, 1958. One end of the short hall led to a staircase, the other into a modern office suite. A teenage couple leaned against a nearby stand of lockers, kissing. The guy was hot.

“It all looks so different,” said Laney Beck. “It even *smells* different.”

I took a deep sniff of air. It smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and chlorine.

“Where to?” asked Darren.

“It’s a little bit overwhelming,” answered Laney Beck. “This area used to be the Student Commons. I don’t remember all these offices.” To my amazement, she walked directly up to the kissing couple, and asked: “Do you know where Mrs. Gonchette’s classroom is?” I could have died from shame.

The hot guy looked up. Surprised, maybe.

But too suave to be embarrassed. “Does she teach chemistry?”

“Dramatic writing,” said Laney Beck.

“Hmmm. Maybe in the annex,” he answered. The girl shifted her weight from one slender leg to the other, and said nothing.

“Thank you, darling,” said Laney Beck. She walked back to us, and the teenage couple disappeared up the stairs.

“I remember now,” she said decisively, pointing like a marshal on a battlefield. “It’s that way.”

Laney Beck started down a nearby passageway, and we followed. We’d hardly gotten twenty yards, when an authoritative voice called after us. It belonged to a hulking, red-faced security officer. He rested one hand atop the flashlight on his belt, as though, in an emergency, he could draw it as a gun.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” answered Laney. “We’re just visiting.” She paused for a moment, maybe deciding whether more explanation was called for. “I went to school here,” she added. “I’ve come to see an old teacher.”

Laney Beck and the guard faced off like gunslingers at high noon.

Suddenly, the guard sneezed. He removed a cloth handkerchief from his rear trouser pocket to shield his face, and he sneezed again. Maybe the man was allergic to Laney Beck’s confidence. The two of them made me anxious.

“Okay,” said the guard. “But all visitors

have to check in at the main office.”

“Oh, we’ve done that. All taken care of,” lied Laney.

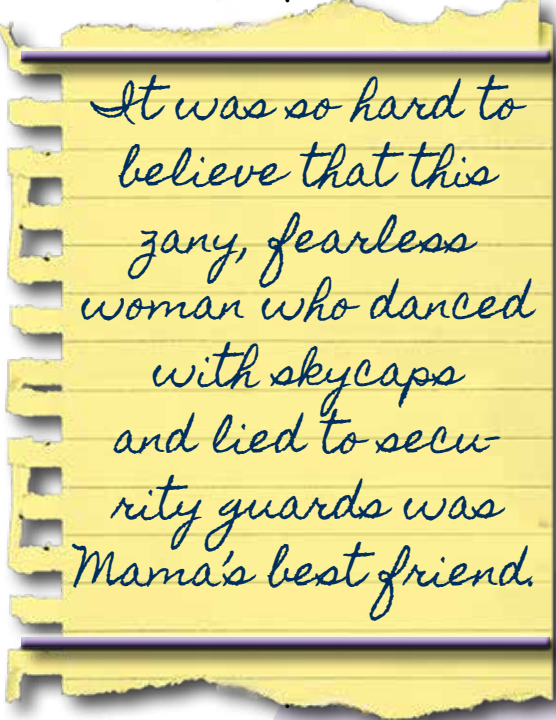
Then she smiled—the same benign, wholly disarming smile that had convinced Darren to drive her to Sarasota—and she strode off down the passageway.

“Ma’am, I need to see your passes,” the

guard called after her. Laney ignored him. She kept walking, more determined now. I looked at Darren for guidance, and he shrugged. So we scrambled to catch up with Laney, and let her lead us down another short staircase, and between two science laboratories, chock-full of bottled specimens, to a concourse of older classrooms.

It was so hard to believe

that this zany, fearless woman who danced with skycaps and lied to security guards was Mama’s best friend. I loved my mother dearly, but she was about as far from zany or fearless as they came. She’d studied accounting for two years at the State University, then married a business degree student twelve years her senior. They’d purchased a beachfront motel with Papa’s savings from his work as a bank manager and the bulk of her own father’s life insurance. Nothing glamorous about it. My parents had also considered a restaurant, and even a bed-and-breakfast, but Papa thought a motel less risky. So sometimes when Mama spoke of Laney Beck—her popularity at Pembroke, her Peace Corps stint



*It was so hard to believe that this zany, fearless woman who danced with skycaps and lied to security guards was Mama's best friend.*



in the Cameroon, her theatrical triumphs in Boston and then New York City—I couldn't help holding it against Mama that she hadn't had similar victories. That she'd never even *tried*. Or course, if Mama had gone off to New England, and married a professional ice skater, I would never have existed.

"That's her classroom," said Laney. "On the right."

The door to the classroom on the right stood wide open. Rows of students sat perpendicular to the entryway, listening to a lesson in Greek mythology. Beyond them, the driving rain pounded against the floor-to-ceiling windows. We approached the door and several of the students glanced in our direction. The teacher continued speaking in a high-pitched, nasal voice.

She was sharing a story from her own youth—about how she'd sobbed the first time she read the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The woman was small, waifish, in her twenties. She was clearly not the celebrated Mrs. Gonchette.

A coffee mug on the cluttered desk was labeled Carol's Brew. One of the students asked a question about Hades; he addressed the teacher as Miss McBride.

"Maybe Mrs. Gonchette switched classrooms," I whispered.

Laney Beck waved her fingers at a long-haired boy who was watching us, and the kid looked away quickly. "Let's go listen in," Laney suggested. And without any further warning,

our guide stepped into the classroom and took up a position along the rear wall. Darren and I followed, as though entranced. I stared at the carpet, afraid to make eye contact with the young teacher. Eventually, I let my gaze wander sideways: over the legs of the students in the back row and onto the stainless steel sink in the corner. I could not have been more

nervous if we'd climbed through Miss McBride's bedroom window.

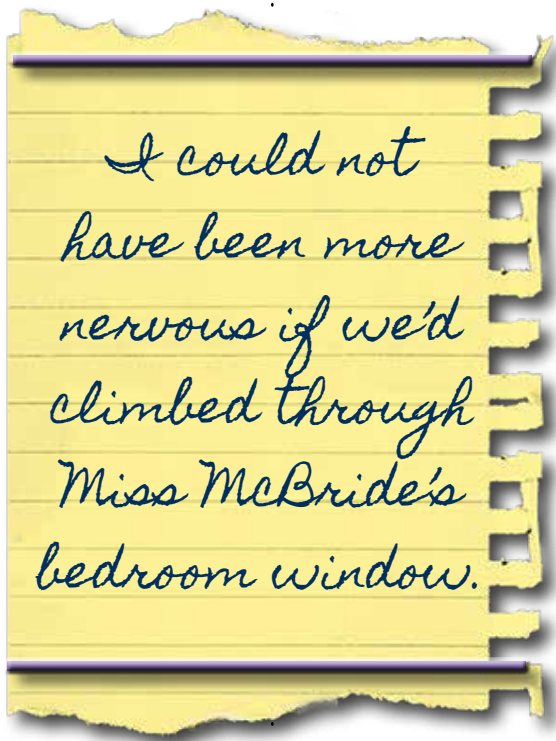
But the woman kept on teaching. She'd advanced through Persephone and Demeter to Daphne and Apollo. Her lesson drifted from history to legend to personal anecdote, including a digression about how she'd once had a crush on a laurel sapling. When I dared to look up, my face red and scorching, she was read-

ing from Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable*.

"Since you cannot be my wife," she declaimed, role playing Apollo, "You shall assuredly be my tree. I will wear you for my crown; I will decorate with you my harp and my quiver. And, as eternal youth is mine, you also shall be always green, and your leaf shall know no decay..." Every few passages, the tiny woman peeked up and offered us a puzzled glance. She appeared fresh to her job, and somewhat uncertain of herself.

I looked over at Darren. He was focused on the tanned skin of the girl in front of him, whose cutoff T-shirt was riding up her back.

"Louise Gonchette had a wondrous reading voice," Laney Beck said under her breath.



“Like melted sugar to the ears.”

Carol McBride closed her battered copy of *Bulfinch* and wrapped a rubber band around it. She took two steps toward us—and then, apparently, thought the better of it. Instead, she ventured into a new anecdote. “I’ll tell you all a secret,” she said to her class. “When I was your age, I used to fantasize that I was Helen of Troy. So tell me—those of you who have done the homework reading—who was Helen of Troy?”

A round-faced girl in a faded lavender sweater raised her hand. “The most beautiful woman in the world.”

Several students snickered. Either at the round-faced girl or at the prospect of Carol McBride being attractive.

“That’s correct,” Miss McBride said didactically. “Helen of Troy *was* the most beautiful woman in the world. She had a face to launch a thousand ships.”

A bearded guy up front made a remark that I couldn’t hear. Laughter rippled back toward us. Carol McBride blushed—and I felt genuinely bad for her. I sensed that our presence was adding to the restlessness of her students.

“*Many* teenage girls dream about being Helen of Troy,” she said, matter-of-factly. “It’s a rather common fantasy.”

“Don’t you mean Helen of Sparta?” interjected Laney Beck.

The room went silent. Carol McBride looked like she’d seen Medusa.

Laney stepped forward as though the classroom were her own.

“Her name was Helen *of Sparta*. The wife of King Menelaus. It’s bad enough that she was carried off to Troy *against her will*. Changing her name in the historical record compounds her victimization.” Laney Beck laughed—not her playful laugh, but more bitterly. “All of you should think about the implications of name changing. Especially you girls. I’ve been married twice, but I’ve always held on to my name.”

The students looked at Laney Beck. Then they

looked at Carol McBride.

“Who are you?” asked Miss McBride. “This is my classroom.”

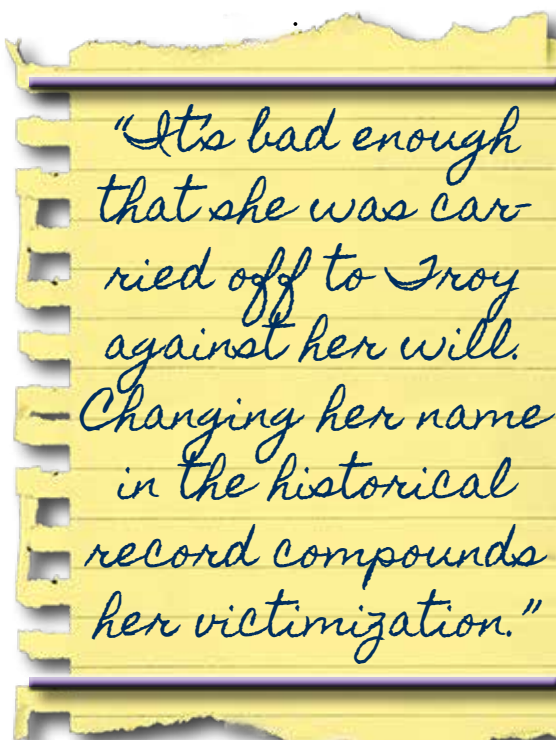
“Sorry I interrupted,” said Laney. “Please don’t mind us.” She turned toward me and added, loudly, “I guess your Cousin Laney’s become too political for her own good.”

“Are you supposed to be here?” asked Miss McBride.

Laney braced her arm against the back of a chair. “We’re just visiting. I came to see Louise Gonchette, but I guess she’s no longer teaching.”

This last statement had an unexpected effect on Carol McBride. She bit her thin lip and tapped her left hand nervously against her boyish hip. “You should check at the main office about Louise Gonchette,” she said.

I peered up at Laney Beck and I could tell





from her expression that she'd heard something in Carol McBride's mousy voice that I wasn't yet trained to hear. But I understood Laney's face: Louise Gonchette was dead.

At that moment, three uniformed men appeared in the entryway. One was the hulking, red-faced guard. The other two were full-fledged Sarasota police officers. They had real guns and Billy clubs, not flashlights, hanging from their belts. The bearded slacker in the front row exclaimed: "It's the cops!"

"That's her," said the red-faced guard.

"Please hold your hands where I can see them and step out of the classroom, ma'am," said the taller cop. This was the pre-Columbine era, and Laney Beck truly looked as harmless as a dove, but I guess these guys weren't taking any chances.

"I think we're in trouble," said Laney Beck. She did not raise her hands or walk toward the classroom door. In fact, she giggled. "I'm sorry you had to come all the way down here, officers. We were just on our way out."

The second cop stepped into the classroom, guarding us from the side. Or preparing to shield Miss McBride from gunshots.

The first cop said, "I'm not going to repeat myself again, ma'am. Place your hands where I can see them and step out of the classroom."

Darren raised his hands. I did the same, leaning flat against the chalkboard to avoid a potential crossfire.

"This is all a misunderstanding," said

Laney Beck. "It's not like I'm not some kind of criminal."

The second cop approached Laney. He held a pair of handcuffs. The fluorescent lights made his bald pate look purple.

"Jack Finn!"

The bald cop stopped abruptly. He made an instinctive move for his gun.

"Jack Finn. It's me, Laney Beck. From

That pierced the second cop like a bullet. He clutched the handcuffs, as though afraid he might drop them, and rested his other hand on his holster.

"I don't know how I caused all this fuss," continued Laney, sounding

remarkably innocent. "I'm visiting from New York...and I just came to see if Mrs. Gonchette was still teaching...I suppose I must have gone the wrong way or something..."

"Geez," said the cop. "You *are* Laney Beck."

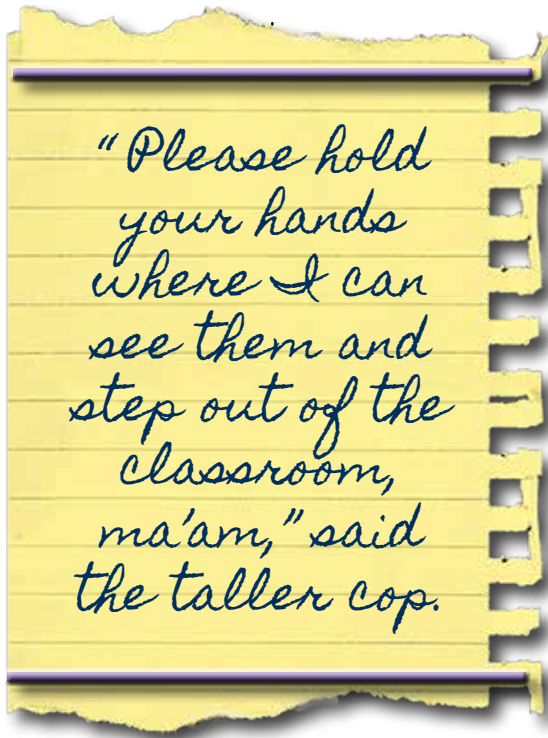
"That's what they keep telling me."

Jack Finn's eyes raked Laney from head to toe, practically absorbing her, like Humphrey Bogart might do with an old flame in a detective movie. He waved off the taller cop. "It's fine, Pete. She's all right."

"You sure?" asked the red-faced guard.

Jack Finn ignored this. He took Laney by the arm and led her gently from the classroom. "I'm married now," he said. "Four boys."

"That's wonderful," said Laney—but she looked disappointed. "Boys are easier."



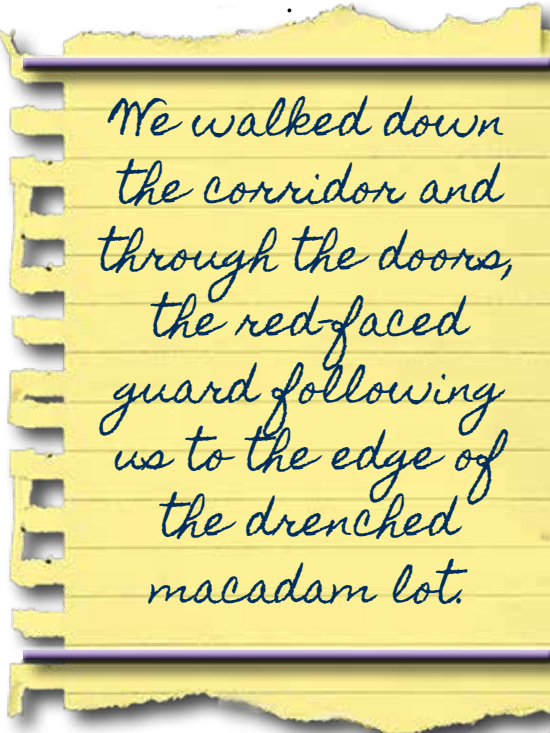
“I don’t know about that,” said Jack Finn. “But I love them.”

Laney Beck winked at him. “So good to run into you,” she said.

“Yeah. Good to see you, Laney.” He still held onto her arm. “Say, you’re not thinking of coming back here, are you?”

“Of course, not,” she said. “Don’t be silly.”

And that was that. We walked down the corridor and through the high quadruple doors of the school’s main entrance, the red-faced guard following us to the edge of the drenched macadam lot.



I had my hands full in high school...but I’m glad things have worked out so well for Jack.”

“Sometimes it takes a while to figure out if someone is your type,” said Darren. I sensed he was thinking wishfully about some popular girl who’d rejected him—not Laney Beck and Jack Finn. “Don’t you think?”

“Not me. I’ve always known in ten minutes,” answered Laney. “But for a long time, I thought Jack and your mother might have gotten on. I bet you don’t know that we all went on a double date once...”

So we crossed over the causeway and onto Cormorant Island with

Laney Beck recalling a twenty-year-old expedition to a bowling alley in Clearwater. One of the few places around that had dancing and served kids under eighteen. She acted as though nothing remarkable had happened in Sarasota—as though her encounter with Jack Finn had been purely social. Darren drove more carefully now. Maybe the cops had scared him. But I did catch him stealing peeks at his reflection in the mirrors. We hit rush hour traffic heading out of Fort Myers. I clenched my teeth together to keep them from chattering.

I cannot express how relieved I was to pull onto the caked shell driveway of the Jolly Roger.

“Jack Finn used to write me love letters,” said Laney Beck. “They were full of misspellings, but they were adorably sweet. He even tried to write me poems...”

“Did you go out with him?” asked Darren.

“Jack Finn. Good grief, no,” said Laney. “He wasn’t my type. And way too earnest. Besides,

We threaded our way between the tennis courts and the bougainvillea hedge. A large ring-billed gull hopped across the road in front of us.

“I do hope I look presentable. I’m nervous as a schoolgirl,” said Laney. “I trust you dar-

as a schoolgirl,” said Laney. “I trust you dar-



lings won't tell your mother about those little scotch bottles..."

"Your secret is safe," said Darren.

He circled through the dunes beyond the shellfish washing hut, and the motel came into view over the beach grass. The maid's carts were all gone. It was after six o'clock. Mama waved to us from the upper landing. The car had hardly come to a stop when Laney charged up the wooden steps. Mama raced down to greet her. They met on the first floor balcony and embraced.

Darren and I watched from below. The breeze was still fierce down by the shoreline and the breakers crashed against the jetty. Skimmers circled overhead; a woodpecker drilled methodically in a nearby electric post. Whatever Laney Beck was explaining to Mama was lost to the roar of air and surf.

I leaned my elbows on the trunk of the Taurus.

"You were really great at the airport," I said. "I mean: really adult-like."

"I'm working on it," answered Darren—but I could tell he was pleased. And I was rather pleased too. Complimenting him made me feel like an adult.

My brother circled the car and patted my shoulder affectionately. We stood side-by-side in silence. Then Darren, in an intimate voice, asked, "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Who's beautiful?"

"Who do you think, Wunderkind?" The

bite returned suddenly to my brother's voice.

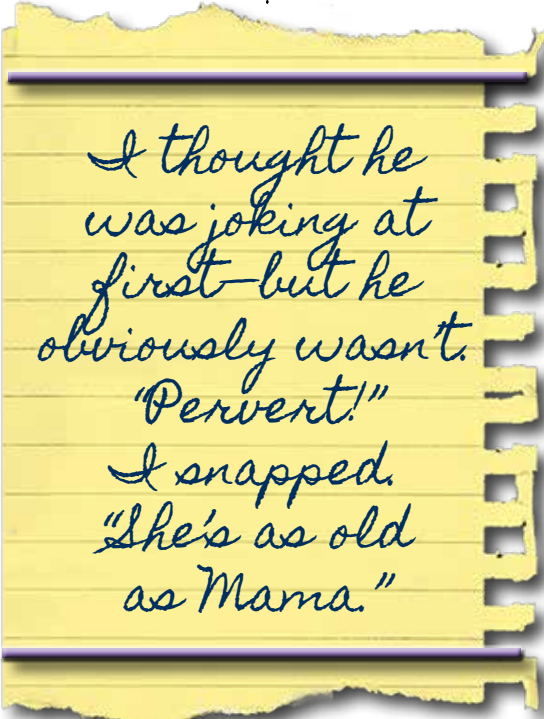
"Laney Beck."

I thought he was joking at first—but he obviously wasn't.

"Pervert!" I snapped. "She's as old as Mama."

"Sure, but Mama isn't—"

He let the unfinished sentence hang in the damp air. But it was true. She wasn't. And for the first time in my life, I saw how something that small could explain everything, what had happened before and what would come after.



I thought he was joking at first—but he obviously wasn't.  
"Pervert!"  
I snapped.  
"She's as old as Mama."



**Jacob Appel** is an author, poet, bioethicist, physician, lawyer and social critic. He is best known for his short stories, his work as a playwright, and his writing in the fields of reproductive ethics, organ donation, neuroethics, and euthanasia. Appel's novel "The Man Who Wouldn't Stand Up" won the "Dundee International Book Prize." He is the director of Ethics Education in Psychiatry and an associate professor of psychiatry and medical education at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and he practices emergency psychiatry at the adjoining Mount Sinai Health System. Appel is the subject of the 2019 documentary film "Jacob" by director Jon Stahl (available on Amazon Prime). This short story was excerpted from his collection of short stories, "Scouting for the Reaper" and was used by permission from Jacob Appel. His books can be found on Kindle and other online bookstores.

# The Bully

by David Ray Skinner

**S**o, there I was, once again. Same new kid, same circumstances, but a different elementary school. By “same new kid,” I meant *me*. My dad was military and my family and I were always being shipped around and planted all over the country...and then snatched up again before any roots could grow.

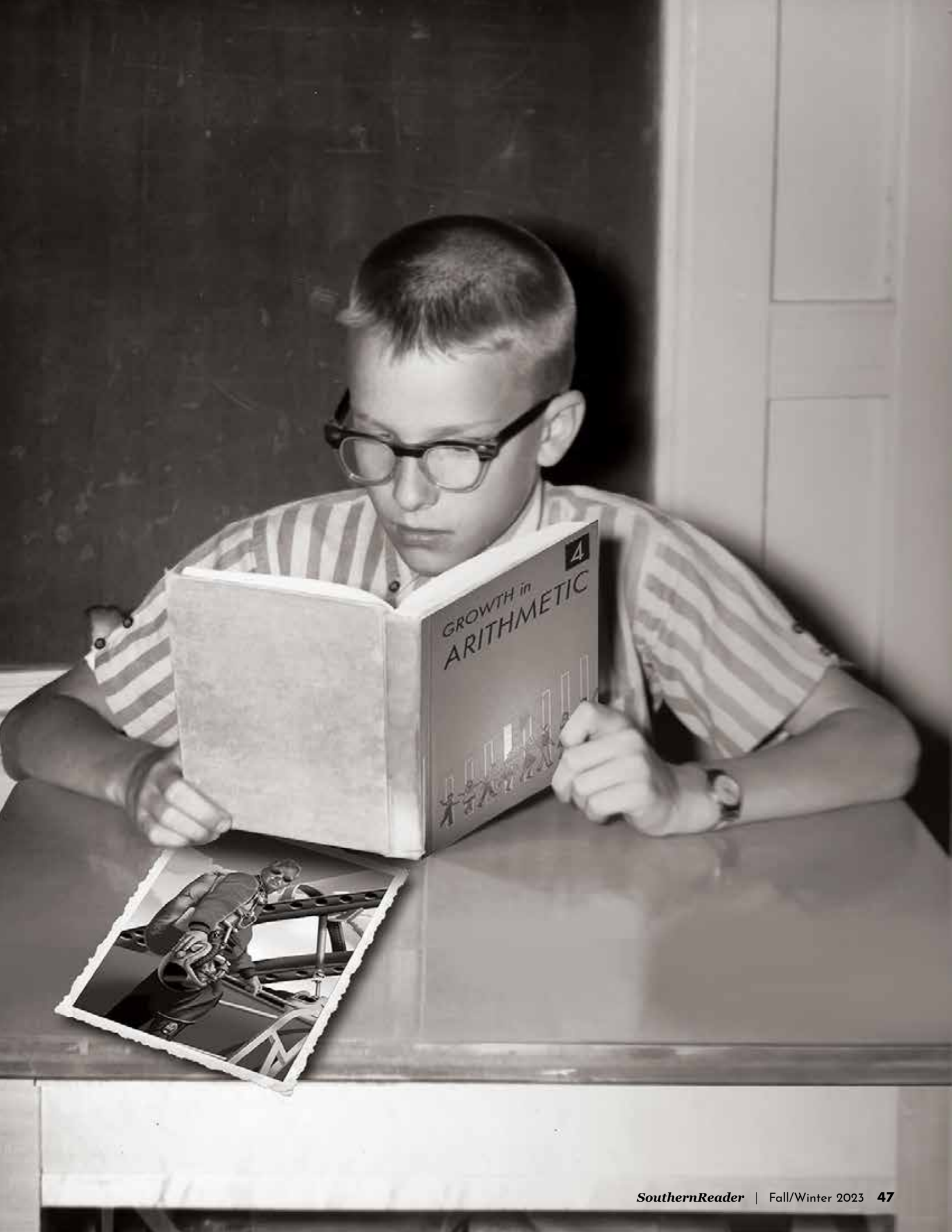
I couldn't even tell you how many schools I attended. All over the country...east, west, north and south. I just remember with each new school, it was like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool of sharks.

I was a skinny kid, and I may as well have had a “kick me” sign tattooed on my forehead. And don't be fooled by all the well-meaning softies saying that “children are born innocent.” No, children are born mean. Fortunately, most of us grow out of the meanness when we're toddlers. Not bullies, though. Somehow, they either didn't get the memo or were too stupid or too far gone down the mean path to change course.

And every elementary school had them, in some shape or form. It was as if central casting supplied them for every school playground. And in every case, they were waiting for a new kid like me to wander onto their killing field, be it by the monkey bars or on the kickball field. Some bullies had their own posse and some were big enough to function as a solo player, but the game and the rules were always the same.

*I just remember with each new school, it was like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool of sharks.*





My dad was a test pilot. Some would have called him a hero. He had seen action flying P51s in WWII, and flying jets in Korea. I was in awe of him, even though he seemed to always be gone from the house, either test flying jets or hanging with his flyboy buddies

suburb or even a town or two away. And that was the situation the late Fall of '57 when I was plopped down in Rubrick Elementary as a fourth grader.

The scenario was always the same—the school year had usually already started (so the little cliques had already been formed), and the teacher would call me to the front and introduce me to the class. “Boys and girls, this is Carroll Sizemore. Please make him welcome!” Always, and I mean, always, there were giggles when the class delightedly discovered that the new skinny boy had a girl’s name. Not the whole class, mind you; there was also always a cute, freckle-faced (usually bespeckled) girl on the front or second row who smiled up at me compassionately and, in some schools, would even try to shush the hecklers. There were also usually a few boys who looked like they may want to be my friend, but they would also usually nervously look around at the gigglers, taking the temp of the classroom to determine the danger factor of befriending me.

The ultimate irony of me being bullied for having the name Carroll was that I was named for my dad’s kid brother, Carroll, who didn’t make it home from WWII and was an even bigger hero than my dad. Only his medals made it home—his *posthumous* medals for taking out a nasty German machine gun nest somewhere in France, and although severely wounded himself, getting two of his buddies to safety. Both of them did return and both also have boys named Carroll. I always wondered if the other two Carroll boys had the same sort of bully problems I always seemed to face.



in some rough-and-rowdy bar. I didn’t really know about the bar part until much later—my teen years, in fact, when some of the arguments between him and Mom leaked through the paper-thin walls of whatever house we were renting for the season.

Although my mother was always supportive of my dad and was a proud “military wife,” she always insisted on living off-base. That usually meant a nice, little rented 2- or 3-bedroom house close to the base in a nearby



The introduction to my new elementary school class was always the easy part, as was lunch in the cafeteria. However, it was always unfortunately followed by the gauntlet—the playground—and that late Fall afternoon on the Rubrick playground was no exception. It was never a matter of *if*, but rather *when* the affront would come. It was usually the first or second day, depending on the weather. I had long since discovered that bullies don't like rain.

Now, as I mentioned, I was a skinny kid. Not really a runt, but it would be years before I would fill out. After the *first* time I experienced this, when I came home from my first day in the latter part of my first-grade year (and I can't even remember the name of *that* school) with

a black eye, it happened to be one of those rare afternoons that my father was home. If I was expecting sympathy, I was sadly mistaken. My father laughed when I came into the living room.

"Wow," he said. "What does the other guy look like?"

Note, even though I was in the first grade, this wasn't my first elementary school; it was my second or third. I eventually realized that bullies don't really get organized until later on in the first grade; they always have to size up the situation before they actually go for the power grab. However, maybe I had been sheltered, because this was my first experience with a bully. His name was Billy O'Meare, and he was a bruiser. Looking back, I'm thinking

he probably had failed first grade at least once and was thus older than the rest of us first-graders.

"He's bigger than me," I told my dad, "His name is Billy O'Meare. He was making fun of my name."

"I'm calling the school," my mom said, angrily, "Right now!"

"No, you're not," my dad replied. "I'll handle it." And Dad's word was final in our house.

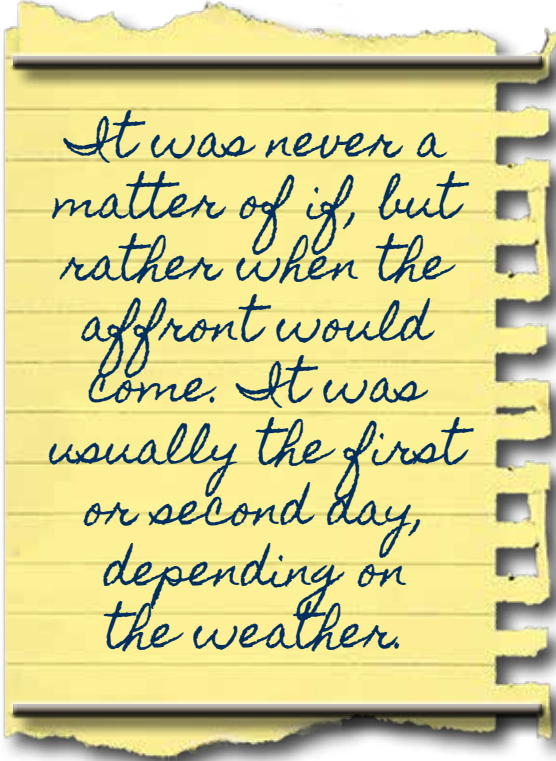
He took me into the rental house's old musty garage, and with a black magic marker, he drew a "cartoon nose" on his right palm. Then stooping in front of me, he said, "See this nose? That's Billy O'Meare's nose. See how hard you can hit it."

After my first punch, he shook his head. "Your little sister can do better than that, Sport. Try again." So I did. And again. And again.

After a half hour or so, he said, "Son, there are always going to be bullies. There are bullies on the base with me. Good grief, there are bullies in your mother's sewing circle; they just use different tactics. And here's the thing...all bullies feed off of their victims' fear. So...you have to take that fear out of the equation...and then, they simply run out of gas. You say this kid's bigger than you?"

I nodded yes.

"Well then, we just need a strategy. You know, Hitler was a bully and he started out pretty big, too. But we Americans cleaned his clock. That's why we're having this lit-



*It was never a matter of if, but rather when the affront would come. It was usually the first or second day, depending on the weather.*

tle discussion in English.” He smiled at his observation and then reached into his pocket and took out a quarter and pressed it into my hand.

“This is what you’re going to do. Tomorrow. When ol’ Billy comes up to you on the playground...and he will, because bullies are stupid and predictable...pull out this quarter. Keep it in your left pants pocket and pull it out with your left hand. Say his name...‘Billy,’ and hold the quarter up in your left hand between your thumb and your index finger—like this...and kind of shake it like you’re nervous, or like it’s a salt shaker—like this. See how it catches the light and kind of flashes? Well, when he looks at it—and he will, because again, he’s stupid and predictable—haul back and hit him in the nose as hard as you can with your right fist. Like you hit my palm. Only pretend that his nose is farther back in his head. That will make the punch harder. And then, when you are looking at him as he lays on the ground with blood going everywhere, you can either give him the quarter and walk away...or just walk away and keep the quarter. Whichever you want to do. That’s the great thing about beating a bully. It puts the power back in your hands.”

I just stared at Dad and blinked. It sounded like it could work. Plus, I got the blessing from my dad—the hero.

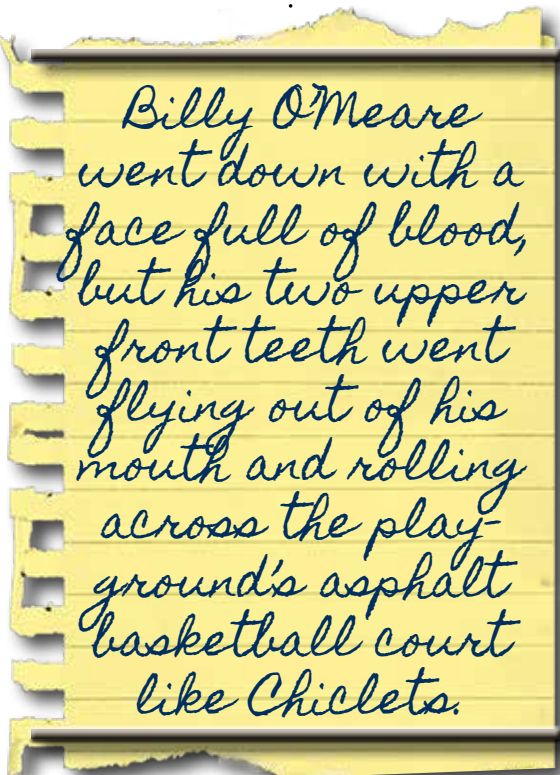
“One more thing,” Dad said, “It’s always good if his followers see him go down.

It always makes a good impression, and usually will keep the bullies away until the next school. I like to think of it as preventive maintenance.”

However, the next day didn’t exactly go as planned. The quarter trick worked to perfection, but my punch was off. I guess a kid’s face is a little different than a father’s open palm. Yes, Billy O’Meare went down with a face full of blood, but his two upper front teeth went flying out of his mouth and rolling across the playground’s asphalt basketball court like Chiclets. We both ended up in the school clinic—Billy O’Meare screaming like a banshee as he was hauled off to the dentist (they were permanent teeth) and my mom dragging me to the base doctor who stitched up my knuckles and gave me a painful tetanus shot.

“Human teeth have more bacteria than those of a dog,” the doctor told my mom. I’m sure I would have found that it was funny comparing Billy O’Meare’s teeth to Rover’s if my hand wasn’t bleeding all over the place and the doctor hadn’t been gesturing wildly with his horse-shot-sized syringe and needle.

And even though Billy O’Meare went the rest of the year with a gap in his smile that you could fly a P51 through, the shot and the stitches were the most serious consequences for me. Back then, you could get away with that kind of stuff, especially if your elementary school principal was a decorated WWII





vet and your teacher was married to a military officer at the same base as your dad.

Unfortunately, this was not the case with my fourth-grade teacher at Rubrick Elementary, Miss Farmingale. She had nothing but disdain for the military, and Rubrick Elementary was not nestled in a military town—it was a few towns over from the base.

The day started out for me as the new kid, as it always had—the introduction: “*Class, this is Carroll*” in the morning; lunch at noon: meat-loaf in the cafeteria; and recess: the pomp and circumstance of the procession to the playground. My quarter was in my pocket. However, that’s when the curve ball was thrown. Once the semi-orderly line of kids hit the double-door exit leading to the playground, they scattered in all directions. I was just following the kid in front of me. But, before I even cleared the bottom step, a leg appeared from out of nowhere, tripping me as I ran. I could feel the gravel digging into my knees and elbows as I ended up face down beside the sidewalk. “*Forget the quarter,*” I thought to myself, “*today my vengeance will be fueled by simple righteous indignation.*”

“Hello, *Car-roll!*” a sing-song voice lilted across the playground.

As I turned to face my attacker, I was shocked to the core—it was a tall and skinny red-headed, freckle-faced girl with big teeth and glasses. “My name is Carole, too,” she brayed, “Carole Penchant, although I’m sure

that has no meaning for you.”

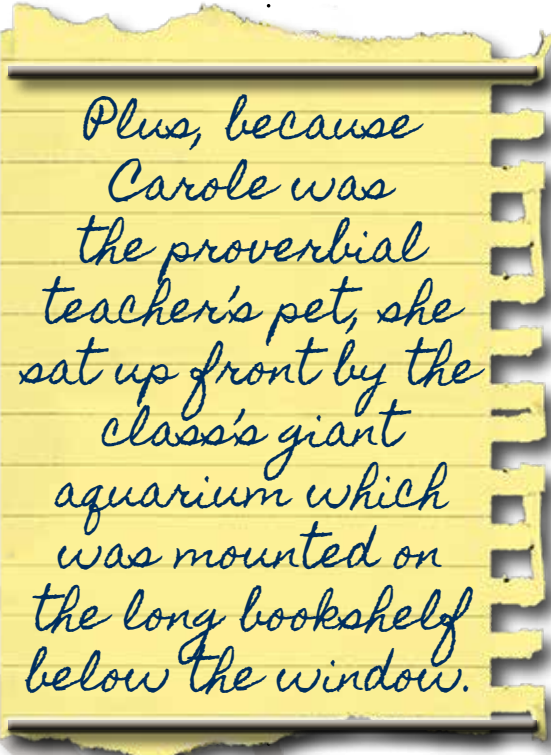
I just stood there as Carole and her entourage tittered, scanning the crowd for a boy that I could punish in retaliation as collateral damage. To my further embarrassment (and disappointment), it was an all-girl posse. That was the day and moment that I suddenly came to the sad realization that my father had been right—bullies come in all shapes, sizes and genders.

And, the bullying at Rubrick Elementary at the hands of Carole (with an “e”) didn’t let up. It was always something—gum in my chair,

torn-out pages of my books, and even homework pages that somehow didn’t get passed all the way up to the front to Miss Farmingale. Carole sat in the front desk in my row, which was by the big wall of windows. This was before the days of air-conditioned schools, so in the early Fall—and occasionally late Fall—and, of course, Spring, the windows would all be propped open, and usually held in place by

a sturdy wooden ruler (when it wasn’t being used to rap a misbehaving fourth-grader on the knuckles).

Plus, because Carole was the proverbial teacher’s pet, Miss Farmingale let her sit up front by the class’s giant aquarium which was mounted on the long bookshelf below the window like a fish-filled trophy case. Carole even got to feed the fish. I have often wondered if that was because of Carole’s high grades, or rather because both she and Miss



Plus, because Carole was the proverbial teacher's pet, she sat up front by the class's giant aquarium which was mounted on the long bookshelf below the window.

Farmingale were redheads and both wore glasses. (Miss Farmingale's glasses were blue cat-eye glasses, which always gave her face the appearance of a permanent smirk.) Or, just maybe they both loved fish. I never knew and it was not up to us mere mortals to question the all-powerful Miss Farmingale. All I know is that it was extremely annoying and



frustrating that there was no one to listen to my protests of being constantly bullied.

Plus, this was a new kind of bully; and as a girl, she seemed to be bulletproof. My father never would have approved of me retaliating in any way. When I complained to him about the situation, he leaned back in his chair, took a deep drag of his cigarette and roared with laughter.

"Guess the quarter won't work with this one, eh, son?" he laughed, coughing and blowing smoke.

Just as it seemed that I would have to suffer the continuing humiliation of being bullied by a girl for the rest of the school year, one morning, the sunlight of hope dawned on the horizon.

"Class," Miss Farmingale chirped, "Next Tuesday is going to be one of our 'Career Days.' How many of you know what 'Career Day' is?"

Carole's hand, along with a smattering of others went up into the air.

"For those of you who don't know," she continued, "Career Day' is when your fathers

come and share with the class what sort of job they have."

"What about our mothers?" Ricky Rensley asked.

"Oh, shut up," Carole hissed back at him.

Miss Farmingale ignored the question. "For our first 'Career Day,'" she said, "We want all of the students

in the row by the windows to bring your fathers in."

"Oh, my dad loves 'Career Day,'" Carole said to the class, "He's an English professor at the university."

"Yes, we know," Miss Farmingale chimed in. "And, an excellent one, at that. He was one of my favorite professors there, when I was in school," she said, blushing. "So, I expect each one of you to bring your father in. Next Tuesday, remember. Carroll, what exactly does your father do?"

"I told you, he's an English professor," Carole replied, confused.

"No...Carroll in the back. Carroll Sizemore!" Miss Farmingale said, flustered. The class roared with laughter.



“Uh, he’s a test pilot,” I stammered, although I was pretty sure that she already knew the answer to the question. I figured it would just give her another opportunity to scowl.

“Maybe he can help you with some of your tests,” Carole brayed, “Seeing how you have trouble passing them!”

Again, the class roared. “Class! Class! Class! Settle!” Miss Farmingale said, clapping her hands for attention. “I’m sure Mr. Sizemore has something he can possibly share with us.”

“Major,” I said.

“Something *major* to share with us,” Miss Farmingale asked, confused.

“*Major Sizemore*,” I said, “Something Major Sizemore can share with us.”

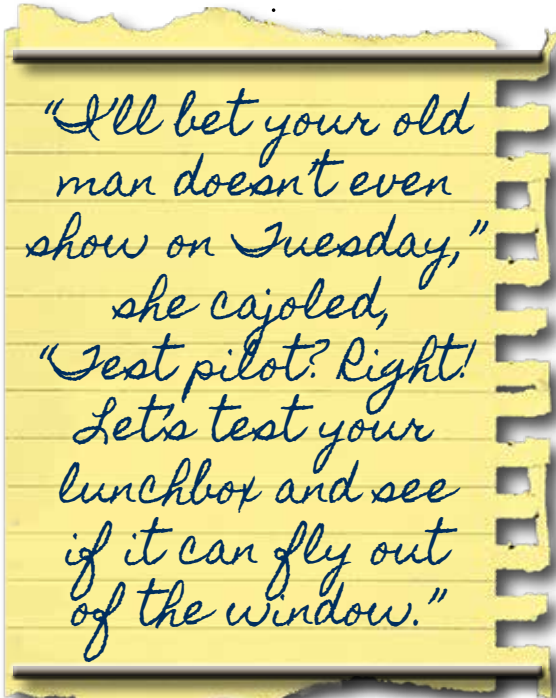
But Miss Farmingale had moved on to the next kid. “And Teddy’s dad is a truck driver!” she chirped. “I’m sure he has lots of interesting stories from the road. And *maybe* he can share some information about this new four-lane highway system that President Eisenhower has been talking about. Now, *that’s* exciting!”

My own excitement, however, was dashed and the sunlight of hope on the horizon quickly set when I approached my dad that night at the dinner table with the invitation. “Sorry, son. I have a new jet to test out on Tuesday. All the heavy brass will be there, so it’s a pretty big deal. In fact, I’m going to have to stay over at the base all week. Mom and you kids will be on your own.”

As proud as I was of my dad, I was

extremely disappointed that he had other plans. Dad showing up at my school in his uniform—or maybe even his flight suit—would have made a grand impression on Carole and the rest of the class, and hopefully would have shut them up.

But, that was not to be and to make matters worse, Carole must have sensed it the next day at school.



“I’ll bet your old man doesn’t even show on Tuesday,” she cajoled, “Test pilot? Right! Let’s test your lunchbox and see if it can fly out of the window.”

“I’ll bet your old man doesn’t even show on Tuesday,” she cajoled as I arrived that morning. “Test pilot? Right! Let’s test your lunchbox and see if it can fly out of the window.” And with that she shoved my “Roy Rogers and Trigger” lunchbox over the large aquarium and out the window. Of course, Miss Farmingale was on the other side of the room, helping Amy Ottwarks

with a math problem, so she didn’t see Carole in action, and it would have been my word against hers...and a few of her friends.

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I spent the rest of the week and weekend trying to come up with a solution for my “Career Day” dilemma. *If I only had an uncle who could pretend to be my dad*, I thought. I even feigned a fever that Tuesday morning—just to avoid the humiliation—but my mom saw right through it and hustled me to the bus stop.

When I got to my classroom, it was bustling with activity. I had already explained to Miss

Farmingale that my father would not be able to make it because of his military responsibility. She just rolled her eyes (behind those cat-eye glasses) and put a mark beside my name in one of her notebooks.

First up was Betty Gilhurst's father, who was a grocer in town. He was wearing his apron and he went on and on about frozen foods, as he held a package of peas up for the class to see. Betty proudly stood beside her father during the presentation holding up various frozen vegetables. "That's my dad," Betty said, as Miss Farmingale and class applauded.

Next was Teddy Throgmorton's father, the truck driver. He brought a toy semi to show, explaining the various parts of the truck and trailer.

"Can you tell us about President Eisenhower's new idea for four-lane highways?" Miss Farmingale asked as he finished his presentation. "I understand it will be wonderful and will change the whole concept of trucking and travel."

Mr. Throgmorton stared back at her and blinked. After a few uncomfortable seconds, he finally said, "Of course, this is just a toy truck. The real thing has a lot more to it. These plastic smokestacks come right off. That would be a mess if that happened in real life."

Then silence. Miss Farmingale, realizing that Mr. Throgmorton was not going to elaborate on President Eisenhower's new four-lane highway system, thanked him and brought

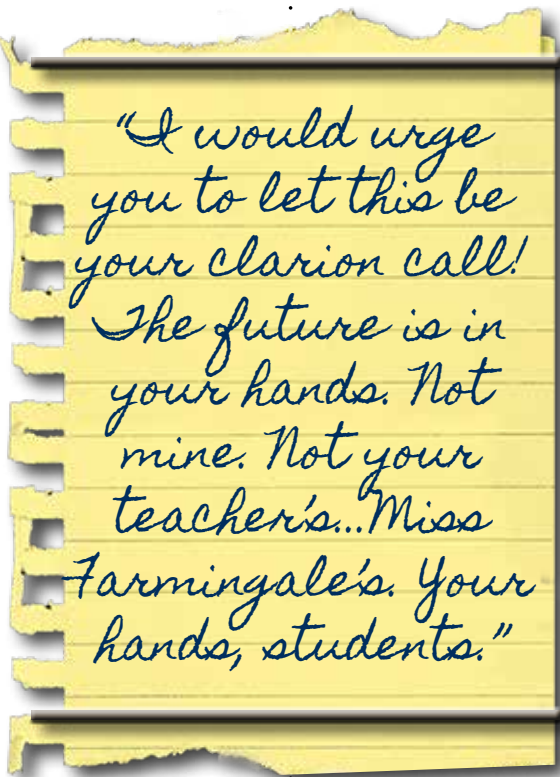
up the next father. Finally, the last father/speaker, Carole's father, Professor Penchant, stood before the class with authority and his daughter at his side.

"Students," he boomed, "You have before you a tremendous untapped possibility of greatness. Some of you will seize this moment

with the firm grip of talent, knowledge and forced opportunity, while sadly, others of you will let it slip by like a black bird on the late autumn winds of time. Some of you will rise to the occasion to untold heights of greatness..." He glanced over at his daughter, who was sitting next to Miss Farmingale, who looked to be on the verge of swooning.

"Tragically, others of you..." and the professor caught my eye, "will either sink under the weight of your own lack of accomplishments or will simply be stuck, dog paddling in the dead middle of the raging river of mediocrity and/or failure, neither moving forward nor backward, but all the while struggling to just stay afloat while your contemporaries—your peers, your classmates, your friends—swim swiftly, confidently and successfully right by you. I would urge you to let this be your clarion call! The future is in *your hands*. Not *mine*. Not your *teacher's*...Miss Farmingale's. *Your hands, students.*"

With that, he nodded at Miss Farmingale, who quickly stood up. She was blushing red enough that I could see it from the back of the classroom. "Your hands, class!" she said,





“You heard the professor! Now, let’s put *those hands together* to thank Professor Penchant. It is so, so good to see you again!”

“That’s my *dad*,” Carole said, smugly, first to the class, then glancing over at me as I slid down in my seat.

“Thank you, Professor,” Miss Farmingale said. “And thank you, Carole, for sharing your father! You may take your seat. And, thank you to all of the other fathers who graciously took time out of their busy day to come and share with you, class. Unfortunately, Carroll, uh, *Sizemore’s* father... won’t be with us today.” She paused and looked at me with a blank expression, as if she was thinking what to say next.

“As for Carroll and his father, next time we...”

Miss Farmingale began, but suddenly, a low rumble began in the classroom. There was a thin vase with a single rose on the edge of Miss Farmingale’s desk and it began to violently shake and tumble over the side. This was followed by an all-consuming boom, which triggered the sound of breaking glass across the classroom. The windows shook, and framed pictures of President Lincoln and President Eisenhower fell off the wall.

However, the most dramatic aftermath—the one that garnered the most attention and panic—was the large aquarium, which literally exploded, sending 54 gallons of water, pebbles, and numerous fish onto Carole’s desk, sweeping her across the classroom floor to the teacher’s desk where her father and Miss

Farmingale stood. Meanwhile, the rest of the class “ducked and covered” under their own desks (as we had been taught during our Cold War Civil Defense training), while the other Career Day guest fathers threw themselves on the floor in the shallow aquarium river, which was swiftly flowing across the linoleum and out into the hall.

*The three of them stood in shock, not unlike startled groundhogs, all with cracked glasses and open mouths.*

Most of the girls—and some of the boys—were screaming hysterically. Miss Farmingale had jumped up into Professor Penchant’s arms, and as Carole gained her bearings, she popped up beside her father and the teacher. The three of them stood in shock, not unlike startled groundhogs, all with cracked glasses and open mouths.

I realized that, other than the three of them, I was the only one standing. My classmates peered out from under their desks and followed the gazes of Miss Farmingale, Carole and her father. As they and the entire classroom stared at me, there was a silence that fell over the classroom. It revealed the musical tinkling of broken glass still falling from the windows, the continued splashing of aquarium water, and most significantly, the fading, yet unmistakable sound of the powerful engine of a USAF F-104 Starfighter as it screamed toward the distant horizon.

“That’s *my* dad,” I said.

