Issue Number Thirty

Spring/Summer 2025

# Southern Reader

AN O ZINE ABOUT LIFE IN THE SOUTH


## Our 30th Issue

## The Future in the Rear View

*A reflection from long ago*

## Phoebe With Impending Frost

*Fiction by Jacob Appel*

## The Bait Debate

*Opening a can of worms*

## (A Burning) Brush With the Law

*Hot dog humor*

## New Wave Hits Carolina

*'80s music in Appalachia*

## The Burning of Henderson

*Memories from a January night in 1974*

david shinner

# A Word About Turning Thirty

By David Ray Skinner

So, here we are at the end of the Madness of March (hence the cover art) with the 30th issue of *Southern Reader*. Fortunately, putting this issue together has been a lot less stressful than my own 30th birthday, sitting on the floor of an Indonesian restaurant on a back street somewhere down in Manhattan's East Village back in the early '80s.

But, that's another story for another time. This issue has its own angst and humor, starting with an event that happened one cold night in January of 1974—the burning down of Henderson Hall, the main building on the campus of Carson-Newman in Jefferson City, Tennessee. Anyone attending the college that semester will never forget the impact of that night. This issue is packed with articles written by those who were there that night—various CN alumni. Here's a look at what's inside:

## The Night They Burned Old Henderson Down

This is my own account of that night that has stayed with me all these 51 years. It was my last semester at Carson-Newman, and the burning down of the old building seemed to be an ominous harbinger of "life beyond college."

## The Torching of Memories

This is a reprint of the article about the Henderson Hall fire that appeared in the January 25, 1974 issue of *The Orange & Blue*, the Carson-Newman campus newspaper. I was editor-in-chief at the time, but one of the staff writers, Bucky Rosenbaum, wrote the article. Bucky was a fraternity brother of mine, and he went on to accomplish great things in life, including helping get Rick Warren's "Purpose Driven Life" published.

## The Future in the Rear View

Written by yet another CN alumni, Knoxville attorney/writer Lee Ownby, this article is about the bittersweetness of children reaching (and passing) milestones in life. This piece originally ran in the Sunday Edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*, September 4, 1994.

## Phoebe With Impending Frost

This is a short story written by New Yorker Jacob Appel, but one that is set in the south. Not only is Jacob an author, poet, bioethicist, physician, lawyer and social critic, he's an incredible short story writer who can take the reader on a literary joy ride.

He is also known for his work as a playwright, and his writing in the fields of reproductive ethics, organ donation, neuroethics, and euthanasia.

## (A Burning) Brush With the Law

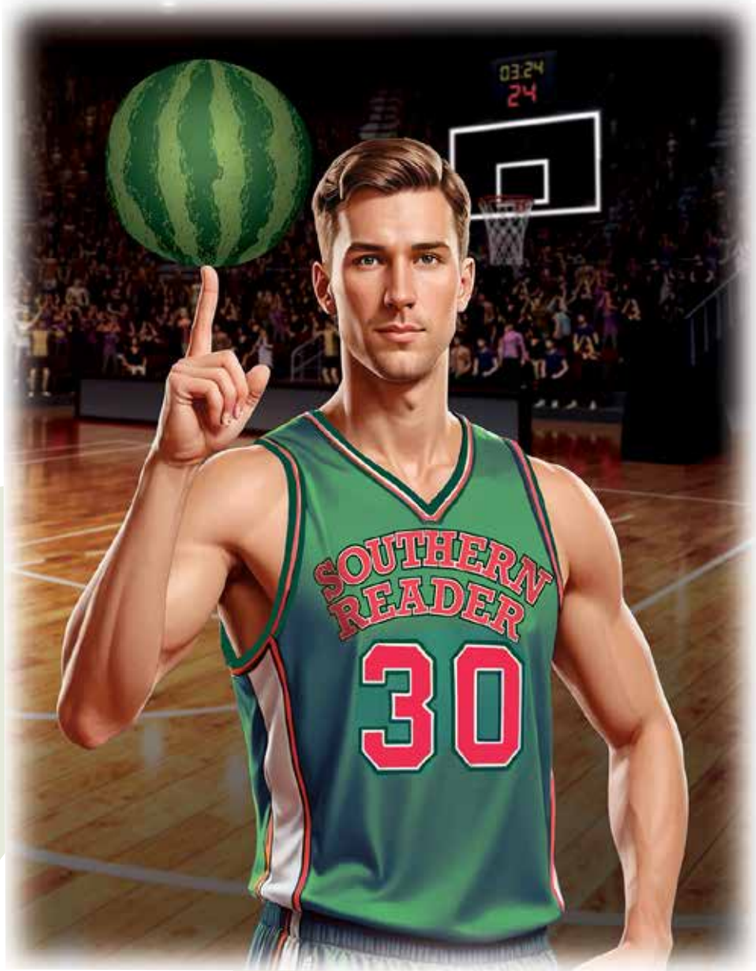
Here's yet another article written by a CN alum, Dusty Bettis, which is also about the dangers (and rewards) of playing with fire. And, although Dusty was also there when Henderson burned, this article is much "lighter" (if you'll pardon the pun).

## When New Wave Music Got to Carolina

Speaking of the early '80s, John Marshall Lancaster writes about the Summer of 1983 in North Carolina, when New Wave music came along and rocked his world.

## The Bait Debate

Anthony Holt remembers a time in his life when most of his stress came from not being able to find the right bait to catch the right fish. Ah...the good ol' days!




Hopefully, there's something for everyone inside the digital pages of this issue. So...sit back, fire up your computer, tablet and/or iPhone, and enjoy!

*David*

David Ray Skinner
**ePublisher**

# TableofContents

Issue Number Thirty | Spring/Summer 2024


**ePublisher**
David Ray Skinner

**Associate Editor**
Jann Marthaler

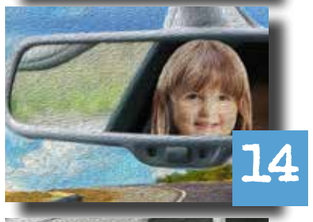
**Contributors**
Jacob Appel
Dusty Bettis
Anthony Holt
John Marshall Lancaster
Lee Ownby
Bucky Rosenbaum



SouthernReader











# The Night They Burned Old Henderson Down

by David Ray Skinner

It's been over a half-century now since that cold night back in January 1974. I only had a semester to go before I graduated from Carson-Newman, the East Tennessee Baptist college I attended.

And yet, I had no idea what I was going to do in my post-college life; in fact, the idea of a career had still not totally formed in my brain. Sure, I knew that I'd be graduating with a Fine Arts degree (with an emphasis in watercolor painting), but I wasn't sure how that would translate in the real world. It was the last semester of my two-year tenure as editor of the campus newsletter, *The Orange & Blue*, but I didn't really consider myself to be a "real" journalist—if I had, I would have instinctively grabbed a pen and pad and my camera and would have started chronicling what happened that night...instead of gazing slack-jawed in shock.

*...I didn't really consider myself to be a "real" journalist—if I had, I would have instinctively grabbed a pen and pad and my camera and would have started chronicling what happened that night...*

It had been a normal winter Tuesday night. Most everyone on campus had settled in for the evening. My roommate, Ken Tippins, who also wrote for *The Orange & Blue,* and I lived in "on-campus, off-campus housing." Our apartment was upstairs in a former residential house built on the corner, across the street from Alumni Dorm, which was on the east side of Branner Avenue, and across North College Street from Henderson Hall, the main building on campus. So, even though we were in "off campus" housing, we were surrounded by college buildings.

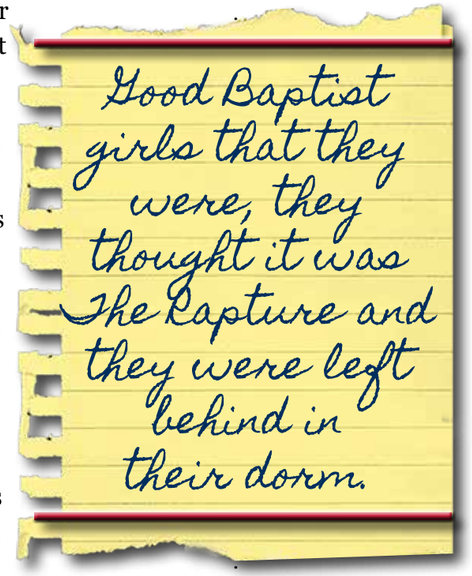
We called the place "The Home," a term we got from an old movie about a patient in an insane asylum who was constantly being comforted by his nurse, *"We like it here at 'The Home,' don't we?"* Our landlord had bought the old house the previous year and restored it, turning it into apartments. It was inhabited by members of our fraternity, Phi Mu Delta—*crazy Philos*.

Ken and I had the upstairs apartment, on the back side of the

house. That's why it was so disturbing to be awakened a little after one o'clock by an eerie orange glow in our room, accompanied by cries of alarm from our frat brothers downstairs. Our first thought was that The Home was going up in flames, but once we reached the bottom of the stairs, someone had flung open the side door of our house, and we saw that old Henderson was fully engulfed. And though the old building was up the hill a hundred yards or so away, we felt the heat as soon as we stepped onto our side porch.

It was a sight that none of us had ever seen before. We followed the crowd of people rushing toward the fire—by then, the building was surrounded by students, teachers, and members of the administration. The president of the college was there on the lawn in a coat and tie, shivering in the January cold.

Henderson Hall had been built in 1919, and its interior was primarily wood, so the old building went up pretty quickly. The two main social fraternities (including ours) and two sororities had their halls on the second story of the four corners of the building, and as I got to the quickly-disappearing Philo Hall, I saw a dozen or more of my fraternity brothers retrieving as much as they could from the flames. That included chairs that had been donated over the years by classes going back to the 1950s, trophies and a hundred-year-old grand piano, all bravely carried down the steps away from the flames and onto the safety of the lawn.




It was a cloudy night, and the flames from the dying Henderson bounced off the sky and lit the entire campus. It faced Swann Residence Hall, one of the women's dorms, and as it did with our house, the fire had lit up all of the rooms facing Henderson. The women on one of the halls were hysterical. Good Baptist girls that they were, they thought it was *The Rapture* and they were left behind in their dorm.

The aftermath of the fire was filled with sadness and questions. The fire had been the work of an arsonist—*who would want to burn down Henderson Hall?*

The college's drama theater had recently been finished and, like the rest of the building, was totally destroyed. Some of the professors who had their offices in Henderson lost life-long projects that they had been working on. Also, there were a number of classrooms located in the three-story building—the administration had to scramble to find substitutes.

Most of the students—myself included—took it as a personal loss...almost like losing a family member.

Ironically, my mother had passed away in the Summer between my sophomore and junior years, and the first clue that she was sick occurred when my parents and I visited the school the Summer before my Freshman year. We were on a tour of the campus and when we climbed the steps to Henderson Hall, my mother grabbed her back in pain. Upon returning to Nashville, she had some tests done and discovered that she had leukemia. The doctors gave her two years to live, and their prediction was spot on.

My first Freshman art classes and English classes were held in Henderson. I literally learned how to use watercolors on the steps and "front porch" of Henderson in the warm Spring of 1971.

Most of all, Philo Hall was where I met many of the close friends I still have today.

But, the building and all of those memories, good and bad, happy and poignant, crashed that night into a debris field of bricks, beams, charred papers and books.

Although the building was rebuilt, it left a life-long scar in the minds of those who witnessed its demise first-hand. One Friday night a few weeks before graduation, I found my way to the ruins, and I laid down in the rubble below what once was Philo Hall. Staring up into the stars, there appeared to be a hole in the sky directly above me. I stayed there for several hours until a flash of light bouncing off a shard of glass caught my eye. It was a reflection of the sun just coming up over a distant hill to the east. I realized that it was the dawning of a new chapter in my life, and I found my way back to my apartment and scribbled down words and music to a new song *(click here to hear)*.

They never discovered who set the fire or why. It's a mystery to this day. Years later, I wrote another song about Henderson Hall, using a college coffeehouse/café as the metaphor for the old building. At an impromptu reunion held at the Atlanta home of one of my closest fraternity brothers (who had also been an art major with me) I played the song, and we shared stories from that ancient hall (most everyone there had been a student when Henderson burned). Someone mentioned the old piano (that had been rescued from the fire) and how we used to gather around it and sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

So, twenty years later, we gathered around my old fraternity brother's upright and re-created the song and the moment. It seemed only fitting to tag it onto the ending of the song *(click here to listen)*.

# The Torching of Memories

by Bucky Rosenbaum

*The following is the reprint of the article about the Henderson Hall fire that appeared on page one of the January 25, 1974 issue of Carson-Newman's student newspaper, The Orange & Blue. For whatever unknown reason, the author's byline didn't appear, so we have corrected that, albeit 51 years later.*

On Wednesday morning, January 16th, 1974, at approximately 1: 35 A. M., Carson-Newman campus police spotted two small fires at Henderson Hall—one at the door to Philo Hall and the other at the side entrance to Gentry Auditorium on the opposite side of the building. Both were immediately extinguished.

However, a third fire erupted and spread to Gentry Auditorium. Firemen, hampered by the strong west-to-east winds, were unable to contain the blaze, which spread rapidly throughout the predominantly wooden structure. Henderson Hall was built in 1919, and was the second-oldest building on campus, Sarah Swan Dormitory being the oldest (built in 1905).

According to Guy Sexton, physical plant director, there was no evidence of an explosion, although there was a definite indication of arson by one or more persons.

On the day following the fire, accounts circulated around campus concerning the growing list of books, papers, doctorates, projects, libraries, and life works that were lost by the various faculty members, whose offices were destroyed by this tragedy. The estimated loss of the building alone, which housed Gentry Auditorium and the departments of Religion, Foreign Language, Speech, Drama, and English, reached above

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the orange and blue

volume number lix, number eight — friday, january 25, 1974

# Henderson Burns

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On the day following the fire, rumors, circulated around campus concerning the growing list of books, papers, doctorates, projects, libraries, and life works that were lost by the various faculty members, who offices were destroyed by this tragedy. The estimated loss of the building alone, which housed Gentry Auditorium and the departments of Religion, Foreign Language, Speech, Drama, English, reached above 2 million dollars.

However, this figure is expected to rise when the departmental losses are taken into account.

Due to the late hour and the speed at which the fire spread, the only articles that were saved from Henderon Hall were some chairs, trophies, and an antique piano from Philo Hall.

When asked about the possibility of retrieving the marble plaques of the four literary societies, Dean Bryan said, "The stones are down there; but they're in a million pieces. However, every effort will be made to retrieve them and any other articles of value without sacrificing safety."

Prior to the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees on January 18, there was much speculation from the faculty, student body, and alumni as to what course of action would now be taken, especially concerning the subject of insurance, a future building, and the location of the halls for the literary societies. These, and other related subjects, were discussed at length at this meeting.

On the subject of insurance coverage on the building and on faculty losses, Mr. Sloan said "Even though the loss was covered by insurance, additional funds will be required for the reconstruction of the building. The property of each faculty member having an office in the building was partially covered in the insurance package and can be used only to the extent above insurace under a faculty member's home-owners policy."

Mr. Sloan stated "An architectural firm has already been engaged to proceed with plans for the rebuilding of the lost structure. Insofar as is possible, the exterior design will conform to the original architectural design. The interior will no doubt be arranged differently...more modern in appearance and of course; it must conform to present day building codes.

"A reputable building contractor has been employed to estimate the cost of rebuilding the structure as it was immediately prior to the fire," Sloan said, "As soon as we have his estimate and the approval of the Fire Marshall, construction will begin almost immediately and we should be back in the building no later than Spring, 1976."

When interviewed recently for the Orange and Blue, Dr. I.N. Carr, a 1916 graduate, former Academic Dean, and author of the History of Carson-Newman College, said "Since its erection following the last major fire at C-N (which totally destroyed the old administration building on December 15, 1916, Henderson Hall has housed the two men's literary societies-Philomathean and Columbian,-and later on with the addition of the women's literary societies-Calliopean and Hypatian."

Whether or not they return to the new building has not yet been decided but both alumni and students agree that this may be the biggest issue which will, as C-N President John Fincher added, "have to be decided by the Board of Trustees". (See the next issue of the Orange and Blue for further details.)

President Fincher went on further to "express deep appreciation for the magnificent way in which the students rose to meet a need and to thank those who assisted the fireman at the fire by bringing them coffee and hot chocolate. I also would like to commend the splendid spirit of cooperation and cohesiveness exhibited by the faculty and student body in moving immediately to other classroom and office locations."

At press time, there was no official statement from either the administration or the police as to any leads or suspects involved in the criminal investigation which is being handled by both the State Fire Marshall and the State Arson Investigator in conjunction with the Jefferson City Police. However, Mr. Albert Sloan, treasurer for the college, said that a $3,000 reward has now been offered by the school "for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons involved in causing the fire.

Anyone having any such information, no matter how unimportant or insignificant it may seem, is urged to contact Mr. Sloan in the treasurer's office or Clark Bryan, Dean of Students.

Fire

Henderson in The Snow

Remains

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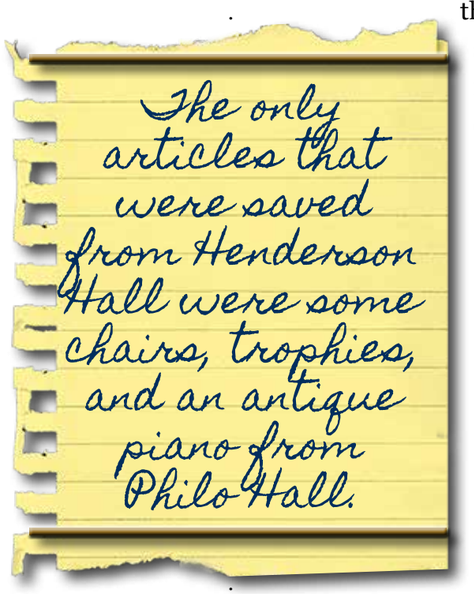


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***The 1973-74 Orange & Blue newspaper staff yearbook picture*** *(in front of the ruins of Henderson Hall. From front to back):* ***Steve Hyder, Ken Tippins, David Ray Skinner, Nelda Hill, Charlie Kirby, Ben (Buzzy) Greene, Mark Jendrek, and Bucky Rosenbaum***

President Fincher went on further to "express deep appreciation for the magnificent way in which the students rose to meet a need and to thank those who assisted the firemen at the fire by bringing them coffee and hot chocolate." He went on to say, "I also would like to commend the splendid spirit of cooperation and cohesiveness exhibited by the faculty and student body and moving immediately to other classrooms and office locations."

At press time (January 25, 1974), there was no official statement from either the administration or the police as to any leads or suspects involved. The criminal investigation is being handled by both the State Fire Marshall and the State Arson Investigator in conjunction with the Jefferson City Police. However, Mr. Albert Sloan, Treasurer for the college, said that a $3000 reward has now been offered by the school "for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons involved in causing the fire."

***Bucky Rosenbaum*** *graduated from Carson-Newman in 1976 and worked with LifeWay Publishing as an Editorial Director and VP of Trade and Academic Books. He later served as President of Purpose Driven Publishing and was responsible for securing the deal with Zondervan for the publication of "The Purpose Driven Life," which is estimated to have sold 50 million copies.*

# The Future in the Rear View

by Lee Ownby

It was a Saturday morning in December, and I stretched out on a couch by the fire while my daughter turned cartwheels on the floor beside me. It was Emily's 4th birthday and she was trying to catch my attention.

I knew what she wanted; but for the moment, I pretended to be asleep. When I could fake it no longer, I opened one eye as she pulled on my shirt. "Can we go now?" Emily asked with an anxious pout. "Sure," I muttered, struggling to my feet, as if I had any real choice in the matter. She could get me to do things that my sons could only dream of.

*Now, she was old enough to ride without her car seat, and she was eager to make that first trip.*

My in-laws had invited the family over to celebrate her special day. Like her brothers, Emily was always ready to travel, but today was memorable. Now, she was old enough to ride without her car seat, and she was eager to make that first trip. She raced past her brothers to the garage.

Once buckled into the seat belts of the family van, Emily quickly vanished behind the middle seat between Drew and Craig. On our way out of the subdivision, I looked up into the rear view mirror. What did I see? Just two boyish grins separated by an empty space. The gap was as apparent as a pulled tooth.

The royal throne had disappeared, and so had she. My little girl would have to fend for herself against her brothers' urges to stuff her under the seat. At least when she was in the car seat, their attack required stealth. Big daddy was the all-seeing eye, and I could make the appropriate defense.

"What are you staring at?" asked my wife, Carol, as I slowed for a red light.

"Nothing," I replied falsely. I was remembering when Emily was a presence in the middle. Like a tiny queen, reigning over our mobile fiefdom, she loved to issue orders from her perch on high."Give me my blankie," or "I want my bear."

The reluctant servants were not always quick to answer the call of royalty, but we never failed to get the message.

'Three blocks later, I navigated the entrance ramp to the interstate. Uninterrupted vision. At last, I could see the chrome fenders of an 18-wheeler anxious to kiss my bumper.

"What do you see back there?" asked Carol with a smug grin. She'd caught me gazing at the rearview mirror. Again.

Only the past, I thought. Where was the face in the mirror, my sleeping beauty, my princess? I wished that she was still 3. Sometimes, on long trips late at night, I'd check out the traffic and steal a glance. I'd see her strapped in her portable throne. Was she sleeping? Was she crying? It seemed like I'd find any excuse to look in the mirror. Was she hurting? I had to know.

> *In the museum of family collectibles, hidden in a dark corner, was her tiny throne, her car seat.*

Before long, we left the inter state, the end of our short journey at hand. The middle was still empty. Where was that old car seat?

Only this morning, I'd climbed the stairs to the attic to place it beside the high chair and baby walker. Home to growing dust bunnies, it sat with the others patiently awaiting a future garage sale.

How could I miss that unsightly obstruction, that impediment to quick starts, on the road to somewhere or to back home? I thought of all the time we'd save not fumbling with the straps, the buckles, the oversized coats. I imagined the convenience, the extra minute, a time to reflect on suburban grace.

But it was our last car seat. Finally, we drove down the street to my in-laws. One last peek. No more little people in this family. No more twisted straps and buckles for Emily.

I sighed. Daddy's little girl had followed her older brothers. "Are we there, yet?' she asked.

*Yes, Emily,* I thought. *Almost.*

A recent climb to the attic in search of some misplaced relic revealed the answer to a question posed by my daughter long ago, "Are we there yet?" In the museum of family collectibles, hidden in a dark corner, was her tiny throne, her car seat. As an escapee from numerous yard sales, it is joined by a host of memories linking the distant past to the now.

My attempt to hang on to the wonders of "Neverland" failed, but that effort has been enriched by the silent attic shrines celebrating birthdays, family trips and other special occasions.

The future has arrived. Why do I think that it has arrived so fast. When I'm fortunate enough to chauffeur my grandchildren to certain events, the rearview mirror still serves me well. Unlike Peter Pan, Papa hasn't retained his boyish looks, but now enjoys the magical view of his own little people.

After a generational hiatus, a succession of heirs to her royal throne regularly replaced her smiling face with their impish grins. My "Wendy" has grown up with a daughter of her own. Emily's daughter Ellie is equal to the commands of her mother. "I want ice cream," she orders.

Quick to obey, I chart the shortest path to satisfy her request. The car seat tradition continues.

We are now there.

***Lee Ownby*** *is a Knoxville, TN author and retired real estate attorney. His latest novel is "Seizin." This article originally ran in the Sunday Edition of the Atlanta Constitution September 4, 1994 and has been updated and reprinted by permission from the author.*

# Phoebe With Impending Frost

By Jacob Appel

Likely she's distracted by the snow flurries in May—the last frost usually nips mid-April in this part of Virginia—because she looks at me as though I'm made of uranium.

Or maybe it's that I've climbed into the playground through my office window, afraid to lose sight of Phoebe Marboe for however long it might take to exit Whitlock Hall by the main doors. In any case, when I've finally squeezed between the splintered casings and the steel sash, I'm gasping for oxygen and I've managed to shred the sleeve of my cardigan. A sign behind Phoebe, plastered to the wrought-iron perimeter fence, warns: *"Adults may not enter unless accompanied by a child."* I do not have a child—not with me, nor anywhere else—and I sense the other adults clustered around the sandbox eyeing me warily.

"I saw you through the window," I explain. "I was sitting at my desk and I looked up...*and there you were*..." And there she *still* is—I can hardly believe it—snow crystals glimmering in her long auburn hair. "Wow, Phoebe. You're as stunning as ever."

"You'll have to forgive me," she answers. "I know this sounds terrible, but I'm afraid I don't know who you are."

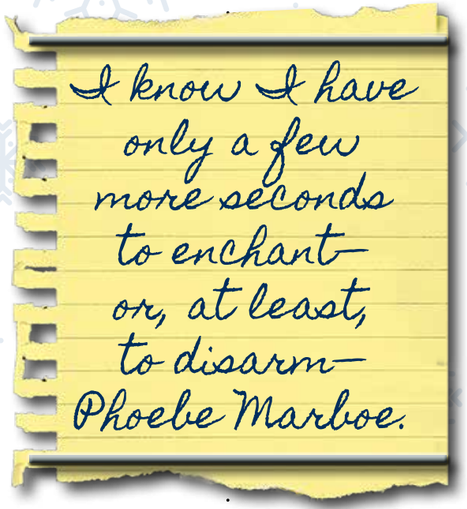
"Billy Deutsch. *William*, now," I say, refusing to be discouraged. "You wouldn't date me in high school. Remember?"

She nods noncommittally, hugging her purse to her chest. "Oh, Billy," she says. "Well."

An unruly wind pirouettes through the flurries, churning up eddies of frosted confetti. Overhead, downy clouds play cat-and-mouse with the sun. The women around us—a melting pot

*I can hardly believe it— snow crystals glimmering in her long auburn hair. "Wow, Phoebe. You're as stunning as ever."*

of stylish young faculty wives and middle-aged nannies—begin to collect their charges, calling out names and coaxing little arms into windbreakers. From atop the jungle gym, a pudgy boy in fluorescent green knee-shorts hollers that he wants to build a snowman. I know I have only a few more seconds to enchant—or, at least, to disarm—Phoebe Marboe.




"I *teach* here now. At the university," I say. "Whoever would have thought it?"

Phoebe is already looking beyond me, scanning the waves of scurrying children.

"Do you want to have lunch?" I ask. "For old time's sake. We'll celebrate the snow, and I promise not to mention a word about how you shattered my seventeen-year-old heart."

She smiles politely and answers, "I'm married." As though this claim requires supporting evidence, she holds up her left hand and displays the ring.

"Happily?" I persist, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Yes, *happily*," replies Phoebe, but she grins, seemingly more entertained than annoyed. "My husband is the new chairman of the folklore department."

"I didn't even know we *had* a folklore department," I say. "You learn something new every day."

That's when the two children descend upon us like bloodhounds. The girl is wearing a fuzzy, one-piece zip-up with a crimson monster's face for a hood. The boy sports a white bucket hat and carries a plastic spider more than half his size. The pair are arguing about whether the snow showers will confuse Santa Claus—with the boy, Oliver, insisting that their Christmas presents might arrive early. When he sees me, he furrows his tiny brow. "Who's *he*?"

"He's an old friend of Mommy's."

"What's his *name*?"

Phoebe looks to me for help.

"William," I say. "My name is William. Like the Conqueror." I wink mischievously at Phoebe and lie without shame: "Your mother went to the high school prom with me."

"*Really*, William," says Phoebe, laughing. "Too much, already."

"May I walk you home?" I ask.

"What's a prom?" demands Oliver.

"A prom is a party where high school students go to dance," explains Phoebe as she buttons up the boy's jacket."And we live right across the street, William, so you'll have to do your conquering elsewhere."

We're the only people still remaining inside the playground. The snow has let up, leaving behind a hoary varnish.

"So much for global warming," says Phoebe.

"Actually," I answer, "it's planetary *cooling* that we should be worrying about."

She flashes me a look of amused doubt. "Is that so?"

"Trust me," I assure her. "I'm a climatologist."

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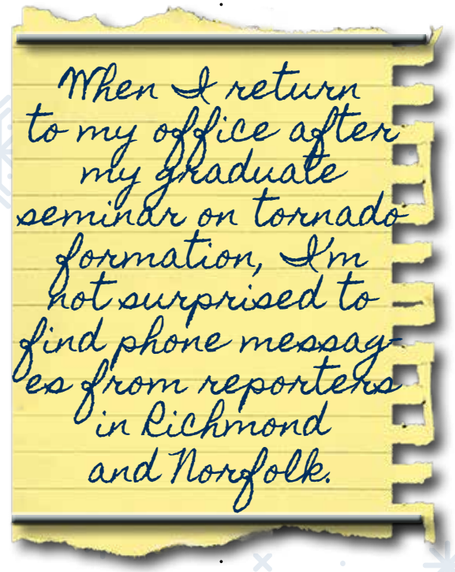
A fast-moving warm-front glides through the next morning, driving the mercury into the low sixties, but then the jet stream shifts and a bitter chill sets in. Records fall up and down the Atlantic seaboard: 34˚ in Savannah, 28˚ in Charleston, 19˚ at Cape Lookout, North Carolina. Here in Laurendale, the cloud cover over the valley traps heat, so we hover around the freezing mark for much of the afternoon. The lead story on the television news is agricultural devastation—how frost damage has wiped out orchards and truck crops from Georgia to New Jersey. Growers predict their peanut yield will be down 95%, worse in some coastal counties; wholesalers estimate that the cost of a bushel of peaches will triple by early June. I'll confess that I derive some unhealthy pleasure from this calamity, as it dovetails neatly with my computer models. I've been warning for more than a decade that greenhouse gases are no match for the aerosol pollutants elevating the planet's albedo and the Milankovitch cycles that have been incrementally tilting the earth's orbit toward an ice age. With these forces already at play, all that's required is a modest decline in solar thermo-magnetic activity—what laypeople call a sunspot minimum—to wreak havoc on farmers across the Piedmont. When I return to my office after teaching my graduate seminar on tornado formation, I'm not surprised to find phone messages from reporters in Richmond and Norfolk.




I spend the next few hours fielding questions on the local radio circuit, serving up my contrarian wisdom in simple and folksy portions. You don't convince anyone of anything by droning on about Spörer's law and Hapke parameters. The interviewers, although skeptical, are far less hostile than usual—and none of the alarmed callers mentions Holocaust denial or the Flat Earth Movement—but as I'm laying out a worst-case scenario for WYNZ's listening audience, forecasting a perpetual daytime twilight and glaciers as far south as the Gulf of Mexico, Phoebe emerges onto the porch of the gabled Victorian opposite the playground. "I have to go," I announce abruptly. "Stay warm." Then I hang up the receiver, scramble through the window and dart across Chickahominy Boulevard.

Phoebe is already inching her hatchback out of the driveway. She appears perplexed when I tap on the passenger window, but she shifts into park and lowers the glass. Her cheeks are flushed from the cold.

"No kids today?" I ask.

"They're with Millard's mother."

"Millard?" I echo.

Phoebe Marboe is married to a folklorist named *Millard*! If I were a schoolyard bully, I could have a field day—but as an allegedly mature adult, I know to hold my tongue.

"Do you want something?" asks Phoebe.

"I thought you might enjoy some company," I answer. "I'm a very good passenger. I can change a flat tire and I pump gas like a pro."

Phoebe rests her forehead on her palm for a moment. "You really are relentless."

"And you're married."

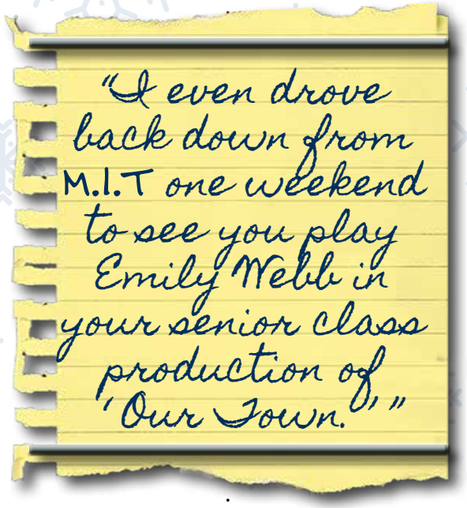
"Happily," she answers—maybe flirtatious, possibly just amused.

"I won't forget that."

She throws me a sharp look. *"Don't."*

Her eyes freeze onto mine for what seems like an eternal winter, and then the power locks pop open suddenly. I'm inside the vehicle with my seatbelt buckled before she has an opportunity to reconsider. The carpet beneath the glove compartment is crowded

with the relics of middle class toddlerhood: talking picture books, and stuffed penguins, and a pair of petite, heart-speckled rubber boots. Phoebe twists the heat onto full blast. We turn down Randolph Street and merge onto the Winchester Pike. Arctic gusts whip the branches of the honey locusts and rattle the road signs. I wait for Phoebe to speak, but she maintains a pensive silence. The cemetery where my mother is buried drifts past on the right. Another ten minutes and we'll reach our old high school in Garnett County, which now houses a satellite of the local vocational college.




"Where are we headed?" I finally ask.

"Shopping," says Phoebe. "They've outgrown their winter clothes." She adjusts the heat to moderate blast and asks, "Were you serious the other day about global cooling?"

"Absolutely. It's not a joking matter," I answer. "But you should probably take anything I say with a few grains of salt."

"Why? Because you're a crackpot?"

"Let's just say the scientific consensus isn't on my side. Yet."

"That's fair enough," agrees Phoebe. "And did I really *shatter* your heart?"

"You don't know the half of it," I say, forcing a cheerless smile.

And she *doesn't* know the half of it. I remember returning to school in first grade—after my mother's final bout with leukemia—and being hugged in the corridor by an unfamiliar, chestnut-maned kindergartener who'd heard about my loss from our art teacher. A decade later, when her own father shot himself to death in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen, I'd already been daydreaming about her for years. By then, of course, Phoebe was hugging boys far more handsome and athletic than I could ever hope to be—but I would pass her at a crowded table in the cafeteria, or spot her wandering alone alongside the drainage ditch beyond the football field, and she always looked so wistful, as though she desperately wanted something other than what she had. When I finally offered something myself—namely *me,* in a handwritten letter taped to her locker door—she responded with a sweet but unambiguous note of rejection. Nineteen years later, I can all too easily rekindle the drowning gloom I experienced as I read her fatal words.

"Maybe *shattered* is a bit strong," I concede strategically. "But I liked you an awful lot. I even drove back down from M.I.T one weekend to see you play Emily Webb in your senior class production of *'Our Town.'*"

"Goodness. Did you really?" she muses. "*That* must have been a disappointment."

"It was the highlight of my freshman year. Pathetic but true," I answer earnestly. "I would have given a kidney to go shopping with Phoebe Marboe back then."

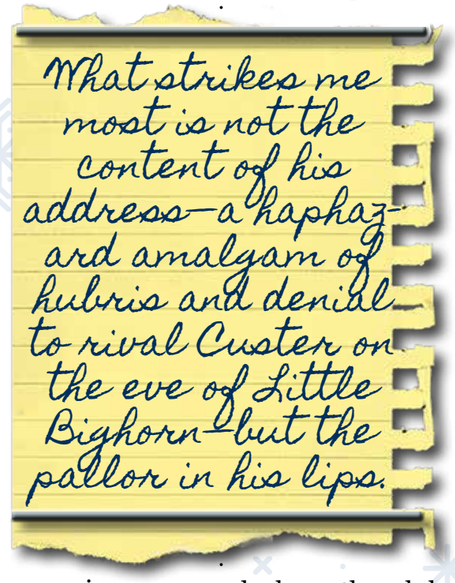
"Phoebe *Alexander* now," she corrects me. "I'm married, remember."

Phoebe switches lanes and pulls into the parking garage of the Sycamore Grove Mall. I follow her across the crowded lot into the Children's Depot and then up the escalator toward the section that stocks winter wear. From the descending stairs of the parallel escalator, a plump, middle-aged matron calls to us, "You're too late," but I don't understand what she means until I see first-hand the depleted racks of jackets and long slacks. I have only witnessed bare shelves like this once before, when I was researching hurricanes in Cuba during the Special Period.

A teenage salesgirl approaches us, smiling apologetically above her navy blue smock. "We're having a two-for-one sale on swimsuits," she says. "First floor, aisle seven." But the girl's pitch is without spirit—as though she knows she might as well be selling magic beans.

"My Papa used to warn us, 'Don't die on one doctor's opinion,'" says Phoebe. "I suppose the same is true with clothing retailers."

Unfortunately, the pickings aren't much better at Creighton's or Kids 'n Things. We do manage to pick up a pair of mittens for Meghan at a boutique in Cloverville and an overpriced hooded sweatshirt for Oliver at the university's bookshop. For my part, I'm not particularly disappointed that there has been a run on warm clothes—that Phoebe will have to phone her divorced cousin in Baltimore for hand-me-downs. I enjoy the feeling of shopping at her side—the familial intimacy of navigating our empty cart through the aisles.




It's nearly five o'clock when we give up our efforts. The air on the arts and sciences quadrangle is crisp with the scent of impending snow.

"So if you're right about global cooling," asks Phoebe, "how cold will it get?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "We're talking about a ten to twelve degree drop in the short term—and then the models become erratic."

"So basically, we're screwed."

Phoebe looks so vulnerable in the late afternoon shadows. Her gentle breaths are visible on the frigid air. I wish I could offer her some reassurance, but I can sense that even a comforting hug is now off-limits.

"I'm not a crystal ball," I answer. "But yeah. You could say that."

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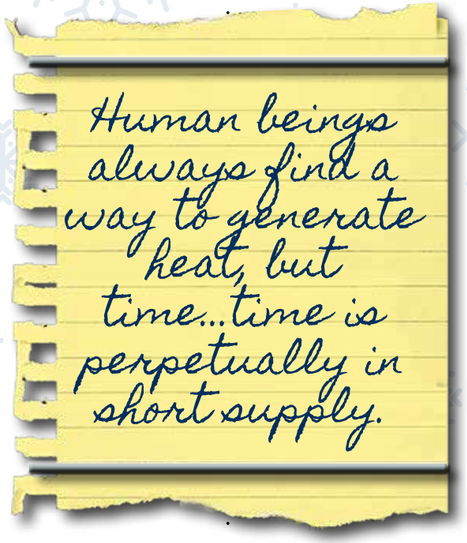
The President appears on television that evening, delivering the first of his Oval Office addresses about the cooling crisis. He assures us that the planet is actually growing warmer, that the precipitous bottoming-out of global temperatures—which he refers to as a *cold snap*—reflects nothing more than natural variation. His speech is peppered with quotations from the National Academy of Science and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. What strikes me most is not the content of his address—a haphazard amalgam of hubris and denial to rival Custer on the eve of Little Bighorn—but the pallor in his lips and the noticeable shiver that he displays when he asks God to bless America—he looks as though he's freezing! At the conclusion of his remarks, the network cameras cut to downtown Washington, where amateur figure skaters are performing toe jumps and lutzes on the frost-sheathed Potomac. For the briefest moment, one can dream that thermal collapse will lead to a winter wonderland of year-round skiing and backyard Ice Capades, much as the passengers on the

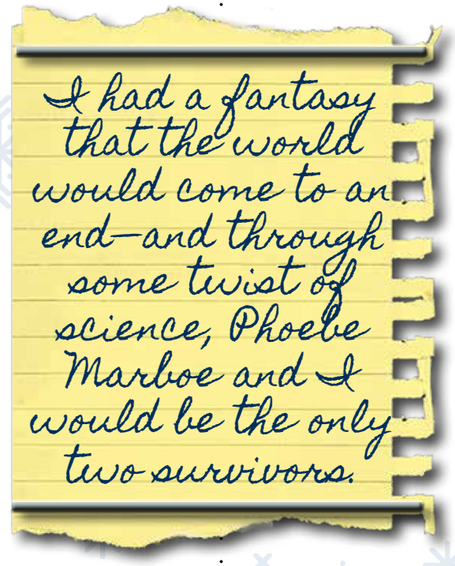
doomed Titanic, closing their eyes, could listen to Wallace Hartley's orchestra jazzing up "Song d'Automne" and pretend that they were reveling in a fashionable Parisian nightclub. This delusion does not last.




It's on the drive to campus the following morning that I first hear about the impending shortages of heating oil and natural gas. Energy providers, anticipating a balmy summer as far north as Canada's Hudson Bay, had cut back drastically on inventories—and we now face a two-to-four-week imbalance before shipments will catch up with demand. I'd made a point of shutting off my cell phone the night before—the only person whom I'd like to hear from is Phoebe, but I realize that's unrealistic—and when I switch the device on again, after savoring two cups of the hottest coffee that Ida's Donuts can muster, the ringing is nearly instantaneous. By the time I've reached the university twenty minutes later, I've been asked on national television whether I believe that the recent cold weather is tied to a rise in the incidence of crop circles or might be the product of fires intentionally lit at Iranian oil wells. Another gaggle of reporters—maybe two dozen, swathed in fleece—shouts questions as I approach my office: Will this deep freeze spell the end of humanity? Do I expect to win the Nobel Prize? Is there anything that *ordinary* people can do to help end the crisis? The journalists pursue me up the stairs of Whitlock Hall as though I'm an indicted felon entering a courthouse. Here is the moment I've long been waiting for: My fifteen minutes of glory. I pause on the neoclassical portico—under the same colonnade where Jefferson once spoke—and I offer my counsel. "Please tell the *ordinary* people, whoever *they* might be, to use their time wisely," I say. "Human beings always find a way to generate heat, but time... *time* is perpetually in short supply." I'm very pleased with what I've said, even more so when I hear myself on the midday news. I also enjoy the momentary surge of Elvis-like importance that I experience as one of the campus security guards, sporting an orange-knit scarf and matching wool hat, prevents the press from following me into the building.

Pinckney Auditorium is packed for my eight-thirty lecture, swelling with undergraduates whose faces are conspicuously unfamiliar. I'm usually delighted if I hit 50% attendance for an early morning course on cloud dynamics—a requirement for geology majors—but now students have brought along roommates, siblings, dates. How these newcomers expect to benefit from hearing me speak about this abstruse subject without any context or background, I cannot possibly imagine, but I should be thrilled to be the focus of such attention. Had this happened last year, or even last week, I'd have relished holding court at my podium until the next professor arrived to depose me—even if this meant answering questions well into the night. But now, what I want most is to return to my office, to sit at the window from which I can watch Phoebe's veranda. I have thought of her sporadically, at most, for nearly two decades, but since discovering that she lives only shouting distance away—so close that I could cross the avenue and ring her front doorbell, if I dared—my feelings for her have taken on a burning urgency.

I wait at my desk until the last rays of pink sunlight vanish behind the mansard roof of the Episcopal chapel. It is nearly nine o'clock: Even though the mercury is plummeting, the days are still growing longer. During the late afternoon, a svelte woman sporting a gypsy kerchief and oversized sunglasses—presumably Millard's mother—arrives at the house with the children in tow and admits them with her own key, before returning to her frigate of a Cadillac and vanishing up Patrick Henry Street. Several hours later, the emperor of the establishment himself appears, on foot, wearing a Stetson fedora and carrying an attaché case. He is handsome—I'll grant him *that*—but his pencil-thin mustache and stubby goatee loan him an aura of affectation, as though he wishes the world to believe him a matinee idol trapped in a folklorist's body. He wipes his loafers on the doormat before entering his castle. Phoebe's hatchback remains parked atop the cusp of the drive. My teenage crush doesn't leave the house. When I finally pull out of the faculty parking lot, the gabled Victorian is shrouded in silhouettes and stands as still as the frozen tombs of Siberia. The thermometer taped to my dashboard reads 14°.

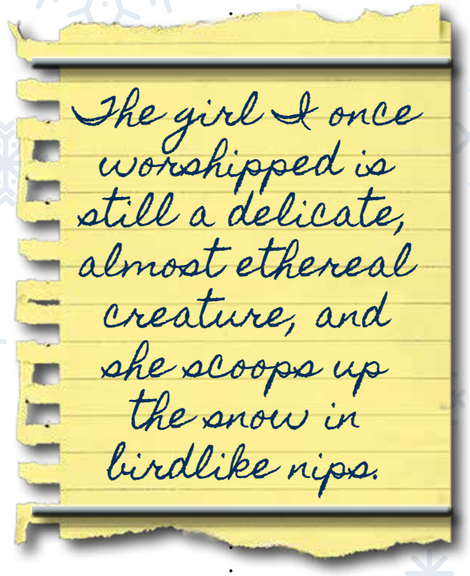



At the age of seventeen, I had a fantasy that the world would come to an abrupt and dramatic end—nuclear winter, germ warfare, collision with a comet—and that, through some generous twist of science, Phoebe Marboe and I would be the only two survivors. To us would fall the responsibility of jump-starting human civilization afresh. I vividly imagined the hours I might pass consoling Phoebe over the loss of her family, têtê-à-têtês that invariably concluded with frenzied bouts of passion. That was before I had stumbled through romances of my own—before I'd lived with three successive women, a trio distinguished as much by their complexity as any seductive charms. So maybe the great irony right now is that I don't want to share an ice-locked and lifeless planet with Phoebe.

What I desire is to live alongside her within a larger community, to savor the warmth of her company among friends and neighbors, to take her waltzing at the Chancellor's ball on graduation night. Like everything else, it seems, the end of the world may arrive too little and too late.

I pull up in front of my own house—and, on impulse, I keep on driving. I recognize that the healthy thing to do at the moment is to rustle up some dinner and to watch the evening news in my pajamas, but a magnetic need draws me back toward Chickahominy Blvd. I doubt I can ever long for any woman today with the intensity that I felt for Phoebe Marboe at the age of seventeen—but if there is one woman I *might* still be capable of feeling that way about, that woman is Phoebe herself, so I park several doors down from her house, trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible. I'm an old hand at idling in front of Phoebe's home. I squandered many nights opposite her

front door in high school, waiting for a sign, although *that* house was a *different* house, on a different street in a different town, and, for all practical purposes, Phoebe was a different person. How different I am from that lonely, love-struck seventeen-year-old boy is not as clear. What I do remember is that the darkness felt as cold and bitter on those chilling winter nights as it does this evening.




So I wait and, shortly after midnight, I receive my reward. The curtains of an upstairs window are drawn back for a flicker of an instant and Phoebe's regal profile is clearly visible in the moonlight. When I was a teenager, I believed I'd recognized in that face the solitude of a princess imprisoned in a tower, but now all that I see is a mellow warmth—the sort of glowing but steady vitality that might power a human heart for decades.

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The blizzard—which we will later think of as the *first* of the great blizzards—begins insidiously during the overnight, dusting rooftops and unpaved surfaces. Whirlpools of fine snow spin like white dervishes along the asphalt. By lunchtime, a manna of large, wet flakes has buried the hedges and weighed the magnolia branches to the snapping point. I've given up all hope of encountering Phoebe, and I am making an effort to concentrate on recalibrating my computer models, when the Alexanders' automatic garage door rises like a proscenium curtain and a petite bundle of shag and faux fur steps into the squall. Phoebe carries an aluminum snow shovel with a crimson handle—at first glance, from a distance, it appears as though her wrists are gushing blood. I resist the urge to brave the drifts beneath my office window.

Instead, I take a moment to admire my neighbor at her labor. The girl I once worshipped is still a delicate, almost ethereal creature, and she scoops up the snow in birdlike nips. (I'm reminded of a particular anthropology professor-turned-outfielder in our faculty softball league who waits for the ball to stop rolling and then picks it up like a sparrow's egg between her immaculately polished fingernails.) At the rate Phoebe is shoveling, she'll be shoulder-deep in flakes before the storm passes. That's my excuse, at least, for offering to help her, even though it's broad daylight and—for all I know—Millard Alexander is admiring her from his own window. I do make a few concessions to societal norms: I retrieve my winter coat, lock my office door and exit Whitlock Hall by the main entrance, watching my steps to avoid the snow-veiled patches of ice.

When Phoebe sees me approaching, she jabs the shovel into a nearby snow bank and rests her bodyweight on the handle. She appears visibly winded. An arc of perspiration plasters her bangs to her forehead.

"Do you have a second shovel?" I ask.

"Here," she offers. "Take this one. I need a break."

I pick up where she has left off, gripping the tool in both hands, lowering my center-of-gravity as though feeding coal into a furnace. The snow is saturated and heavy as mortar.

"Most people wait to dig out until *after* the snow lets up," I observe. "You can save yourself a lot of extra work that way."

"I guess I'm not *most* people," answers Phoebe. Her tone is defensive, almost snippy—not the sort of response that a man expects when he's clearing a neighbor's driveway for free.

I stop shoveling and turn toward her. "Did I say something wrong?"

Phoebe bites her lower lip. "Promise you won't laugh at me."

"I couldn't even if I wanted to," I answer, heaving a chunk of ice-lacquered snow into the hedges. "I think my laughing muscles are frozen solid."

My companion pulls off a glove, exposing her fine pink hand. She watches pensively for a moment as flakes melt against her bare flesh. I am about to say something else—for the sake of breaking the silence—when she finally speaks.

"I *always* keep my car shoveled out *during* a storm in case there's an emergency," Phoebe explains. "What if Meghan has a seizure like my cousin's daughter? Or if Oliver swallows another nickel?" She conceals her face in her palms for a moment, rubbing her temples, and then glances up nervously. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

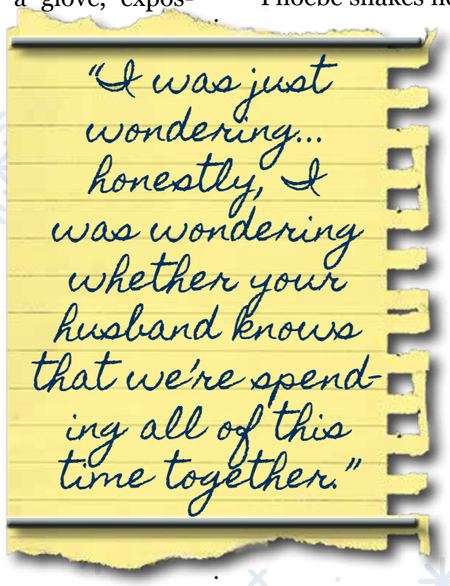
"Not at all."

"*Millard* thinks I'm out of my mind."

*Forget Millard*, I want to say. Instead, I channel my frustrations against the man's house, running the shovel blade along the cascading ice below his drainpipes, generating a high-pitched symphony as I decapitate stalactites, stratum by stratum, all the way up to the eaves. While I am bolder than I was in high school—I suppose that's what happens when you stop stuttering and earn a doctoral degree—I have also grown far more prudent. So instead of yielding to my reclaimed teenage exuberance and urging Phoebe to throw her husband to the polar bears, I am determined to broach their marriage far more cautiously.

"You're not saying anything," says Phoebe. "You must think I'm ridiculous."

"Not at all," I reply. "I was just wondering...honestly, I was wondering whether your husband knows that we're spending all of this time together."




Phoebe shakes her head. "I haven't felt the need to mention it. We don't have that kind of relationship."

I make an effort to sound supportive. "Is it *that* bad?"

"That's not what I meant," answers Phoebe quickly, clearly flustered. "What I meant was that Millard and I trust each other...*implicitly*... we don't tell each other everything because we don't need to."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"It's okay," she replies. "Really."

My instincts tell me that Phoebe isn't sharing the whole truth—that she and Millard are not nearly as happily married as she lets on—but I also recognize that I have pushed the matter far enough for one afternoon. I continue shoveling, and after a respectable pause, I ask, "So what's with the spider?"

"What?"

"I realize that it's probably none of my business, but your son carries a giant plastic spider with him everywhere he goes," I say. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

I could care less about spiders, of course. But I have learned that nothing soothes—or distracts—a woman more than talking about her own children.

"You know how it is with kids and phases," replies Phoebe, but she is gazing into the low-hanging sky, as though her son's arachnid obsession is a manifestation of divine will, and I sense that her thoughts are entirely elsewhere. "Oliver is a good kid," she muses. "Smart too. He takes after his father. Both of my children do." Then—without any warning—Phoebe asks, "What are your plans for the summer?"

> Phoebe does not smile. "We're not staying here," she announces. "Millard is arranging a teaching gig in Florida for July."

Now she has caught *me* off guard. Over the past few days, as I've watched the undergraduates sledding down Founder's Hill, I've managed to forget that classes will let out in three weeks and the campus will once again drift into slumber. At one time, I had been planning to spend my months off cultivating daylilies, and driving out to my sister's lake house on weekends, but Ellen's unheated mountain cabin now seems far less inviting.

"I suppose I'll do some sunbathing," I quip. "Maybe I'll host a barbecue for July 4th."

Phoebe does not smile. "We're not staying here," she announces. "Millard is arranging a teaching gig in Florida for July. He has a close friend at Tampa State. If they really do shut the university down early, we might leave by the end of next week."

"But you're coming back in the fall."

Phoebe shrugs. "It was forty-two degrees yesterday in Tampa. Not exactly beach weather, but better than permafrost."

"You can't be serious," I say. "You just got here."

"We've been here *all semester*," she says—which is apparently the truth. "It's not as though I didn't exist before you ran into me." Phoebe takes a deep breath and clasps her bare hand inside her gloved one. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you like that," she adds."It's just that I'm reaching my breaking point. I shouldn't be telling you this, but I was too upset to get out of bed yesterday."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you have a private stash of heating oil," says Phoebe. "Last night, the temperature *inside* my house wasn't even forty-two degrees. If we don't figure something out soon, I'm going to have to send the kids to stay with my mother-in-law so they don't freeze to death while they're sleeping. Do you understand how humiliating that is?" In an uncharacteristic burst of scorn, Phoebe hisses like a feral cat and makes an aggressive, clawing motion with her naked hand—as though she wants to gouge blood from the atmosphere. "The woman appeared in two B-movies fifty years ago. *Two*. But from the way she issues orders, you'd think she was Greta Garbo."

I bite my lower gum to keep from smirking: So now I know where Millard has acquired his Hollywood airs. What I really want to ask Phoebe is why she married this pretentious folklorist with the overbearing mother? What did *he* have that *I* didn't? Was it all about his imperial forehead and unyielding jaw-line? But I suppose that's like explaining why some tropical waves swell into cyclones, while others ripple to harmless spray, and even if Phoebe could explain her choice, experience has taught me that women grow uncharacteristically evasive when you pry into the mechanics of their marriages. Since I have no insights to offer on the subject of in-laws—that's one of the few humiliations I have yet to suffer—I confine my response to a benevolent frown and a sympathetic nod.

"The snow is letting up," I observe hopefully. "Maybe we're in for a warm spell."

I lean my shovel against the retaining wall and admire my handiwork. I've cleared more than enough space for a car to pull up the drive. All around us, the world is white and still and cold—a planet swaddled in a vast and lifeless silence. Only the occasional chatter of chickadees in the basswoods holds out any promise of renewal.

> Is it true that the cattle on the agriculture campus are all facing west for the first time in modern memory?

"This was fun," I say. "We should do this again tomorrow."

"Should we?" asks Phoebe—her spirits apparently lifted. "What happened to that warm spell you just promised me?"

"On the off chance it snows tomorrow," I correct myself, "we should do this again."

"Tomorrow, *on the off chance it snows,*" she answers, shaking her head as though admonishing a wayward child, "I'm going to hire a high school kid with a snow-blower to do the entire job in ten minutes...and you're going to be too sore to scratch your own nose."

She has a point. I can already sense my forearms stiffening. I think of the teenager who will earn twenty easy bucks for clearing Phoebe's driveway in the morning—who may yet have an opportunity to escort his own Phoebe Marboe to the senior prom—and I yearn to be that adolescent boy so much that my eyes sting from the tears.

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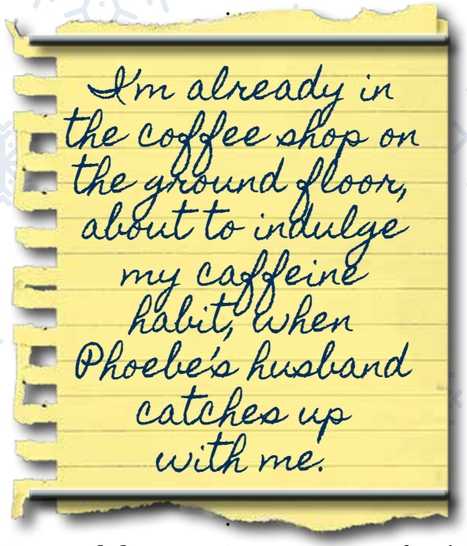
The warm spell that I have promised Phoebe does not come to pass. What greets us the following dawn is a vicious Alberta clipper that seals the snowpack beneath several inches of slick and impenetrable ice. Chancellor Endicott had called an emergency meeting of the tenured faculty for ten o'clock—to discuss pruning the final three weeks off the spring semester—but conditions are so poor that even this summit must be postponed to the afternoon. When the hour for the rescheduled conclave finally does arrive, Trask Amphitheater is filled to capacity. I see faces I haven't laid eyes upon since I was a post-doc, including one wizened member of our own department, emeritus for decades, who I'd honestly believed to be dead.

While we wait for the provost to upload his computer presentation—the man has fifty slides for us on the economic dangers of keeping the university's doors open—the buzz among my colleagues is confined to only one subject: The weather. Will temperatures really stay below zero for the remainder of the week? Did the halo around last night's moon mean we're in for more storms? Is it true that the cattle on the agriculture campus

are all facing west for the first time in modern memory? And what should be made of the sudden influx of ravens?




I find these conversations indescribably refreshing. In the days before professional forecasting, the divining of sunshine and squalls formed the crux of communal life and the basis of countless friendships. I can still remember my own dear grandmother opining, *When windows won't open and salt clogs the shaker, the weather will favor the umbrella maker,* which is conditionally true, and, *Cats and dogs eat grass before a rain,* which is patently false. So while I am grateful for mesoscale modeling—I've spent my entire adult life in its thrall—my stomach flutters when I hear the beak-nosed woman behind me tell her mousy colleague that *if clouds move against the wind, rain will follow*, even though, at a scientific level, this aphorism is sheer twaddle.

After assuring the conclave that an early closing will not affect salaries or benefits, the provost calls for a show of hands. I vote to keep the university open. So does another member of my department, a junior paleontologist from Barrow, Alaska. I spot a third raised hand in the balcony, but upon further inquiry, it turns out the owner is merely stretching. So by a vote of everyone-to-two, the university decides to suspend classes in forty-eight hours. Professors will be responsible for determining their own grading schemes in the absence of final exams. A consolidation of office space will take place at a later date, for those faculty wishing to remain on campus, to save on both heating costs and security. (Looting has already broken out at several New England boarding schools after they've shuttered their dorms for the summer.) After three hundred years of scholarship, education in Laurendale has come to a grinding halt.

I'm already in the coffee shop on the ground floor, about to indulge my caffeine habit, when Phoebe's husband catches up with me. He's sporting a broad-shouldered overcoat, a fuchsia silk shirt with a mandarin collar, and an aviator scarf, all of which combine to give him the petty, buffoonish appearance of a civil servant in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

"Professor Deutsch, right?" he asks. "The global cooling fellow?"

"I like to think of myself as a climatologist," I reply dryly.

"Sure, a climatologist," he agrees. "Millard Alexander. Folklore."

"I didn't even know we *had* a folklore department," I say.

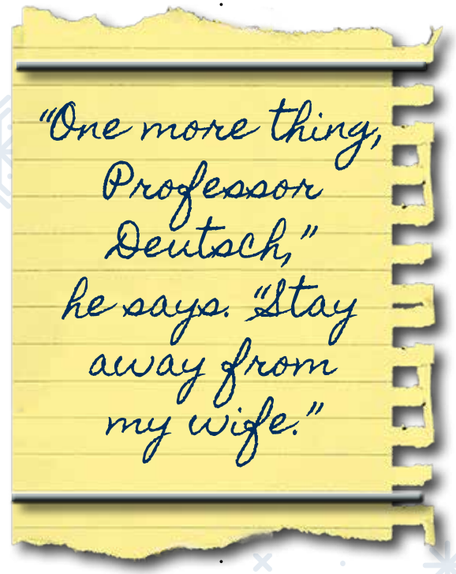
"We *do* and I teach in it," he answers, not even remotely flustered."Which is why I wanted to have a brief word with you. Do you have a moment?"

"Actually," I lie, "I'm late for a conference."

I wish I could slide past Alexander and vanish, but I haven't yet paid for my coffee. Under different circumstances, I would drop a dollar bill on the checkout counter—escaping Phoebe's husband is worth fifteen cents change—but this afternoon the clerk is the blind work-study student who relies on the good faith of her clients. I'm afraid that if I try to sneak away, the other patrons may think I'm cheating the helpless girl. All I can do is inch my way toward the checkout line while keeping my eyes on the folklorist.

"I assure you I won't take much of your time," he says. "Here's my question: Nearly all of the cultures of Europe share a common myth—not so different from our Groundhog Day—that the weather on a particular date can be used to forecast for the weeks to come. Saint Swithun's Day in Britain. Saint Médard's Feast in France. Saint Godelieve's Day in Belgium. The Celebration of the Protecting Veil in Russia. So I couldn't help wondering, Professor Deutsch, since so many different societies profess versions of the same myth, whether these prophecies might have some grounding in scientific reality."

If a hidden agenda lurks within this inquiry, I cannot decipher it. I had expected the folklorist's request to be overtly allegorical—maybe an inquiry about Icarus soaring too close to the sun, or a sermon disguised as a query about the links between moon cycles and infidelity—but Phoebe's husband comes across as earnest and ineffably polite. Still, I find Millard Alexander's company intolerable. He strikes me as a man who has never truly suffered in life—not as Phoebe or I have suffered—and I've always felt it was internal torment that separates a society's wheat from its chaff.




"I doubt there is any empirical basis for those myths," I say. "Human beings have been trying to explain the weather for a darn long time—and, if we've learned nothing else this past week, it's that most of us still aren't very good at it."

"I suspected as much," he says, "but I had to ask."

"Of course, you did."

Alexander extends his hand and I shake it—but he does not immediately let go.

"One more thing, Professor Deutsch," he says. "Stay away from my wife."

The folklorist's hand—strong and bony—is still clutching mine. He could easily break my fingers with more pressure.

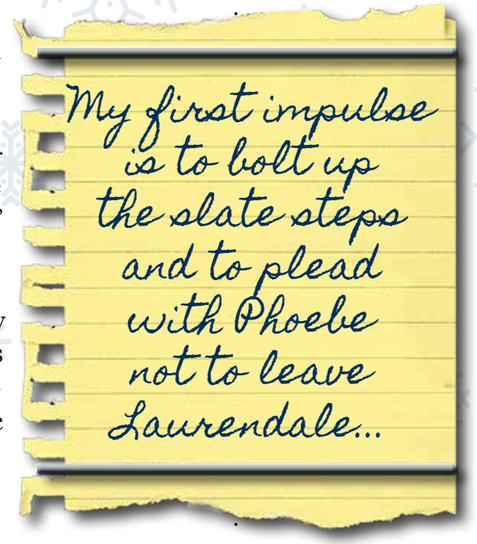
"I am sure I don't understand," I say.

*"I'm sure you do,"* he says icily. "I am warning you, Professor Deutsch. If I catch you anywhere near Phoebe, I won't be responsible for what happens."

---

That night we set the all-time low for Laurendale. Not the all-time low *for the date*, but a bone-snapping -31° that marks the second lowest temperature ever recorded south of the Mason-Dixon Line. We're at the point where children lose fingers after thirty-second exposures and automobile engines freeze solid on public streets, so I am grateful that the ignition in my Buick turns over on the first attempt. Far more challenging is the drive across town, because all of the traffic lights have succumbed to the chill—and, even in a Southern college town, what good Samaritan is going to risk frostbite to direct traffic by hand? Fortunately, I don't have to lecture this morning—nobody does anymore—so there isn't any need to be at the university at an early hour. The truth of the matter is that there is no need to visit campus *at all*—I could easily run my computer simulations from home—except that I'm hoping to reap another

improvised encounter with Phoebe. Needless to say, I cannot adequately convey the intensity of the sinking throb that I experience as I am cruising up Chickahominy Boulevard, when I spot the Steinhoff & Son moving truck parked at the head of the Alexanders' block. Two ski-masked creatures in chin-to-toe coveralls—you can hardly discern that human beings hide beneath these shapeless husks of synthetic fiber—are hoisting a credenza up the vehicle's plywood gangway.




My first impulse is to bolt up the slate steps and to plead with Phoebe not to leave Laurendale, but as long as Millard Alexander remains inside the house, or until I am certain that he has already departed, all that I can do is burn through my fuel reserves while the movers cart off loveseats and bureaus and sheet-draped wall-mirrors. The spectacle reminds me of the grainy footage of World War I refugees that we watched in high school, so many years before, the Belgian families crossing the Marne Bridge with feather beds loaded atop horse-drawn wagons.

My dashboard thermometer is worthless these days—it bottoms out at -5° Fahrenheit—but a white sun breaks through the cloud-cover around noon, and rays of pure light glisten off the rolling, drift-skinned lawns. By this point, I've already been waiting three hours, so I'm seriously thinking about jettisoning what remains of my good judgment and ringing Phoebe's doorbell—although an uninvited house call, especially with her husband at home, will raise the stakes between us multiple notches. Hour by hour, I throw down proverbial gauntlets for myself in the snow: I'll ring the bell when three more cars pass on Patrick Henry Street, when the Evensong service concludes at the Episcopal Chapel. But much like I did as a teenager—when I repeatedly promised myself that I would ask out Phoebe on a certain yet ever-sliding date—I now allow one deadline to melt into another. Then around four o'clock, shortly after the postman makes his rounds on cross-country skis, Millard Alexander steps out onto the veranda. The folklorist surveys the block like a whaler scanning the horizon for flumes—and for a fleeting moment I'm certain his gaze locks me in its sights—but he must be staring right past me, I think, because he pulls his jacket tight around his neck and strides rapidly toward the main quadrangle.

I suppose this is the sign that I've been searching for: I take a deep breath and—as soon as the folklorist disappears behind a stand of lindens—I mount the porch of the Victorian.

Phoebe answers the door in an angora sweater, insulated cargo pants and plush earmuffs. She does not appear at all surprised to see me. "Come inside quickly," she urges. "Before the warm air escapes." I want to ask: *What warm air?* The Alexanders' foyer has been stripped of all furnishings, except for a child's rocking horse, and my professional estimate places the temperature south of twenty-five degrees. Before I have time to ask about the heat, Phoebe leads me into a second room—an equally barren parlor where an active fireplace generates just enough warmth to make its occupancy tolerable—and she shuts the door firmly behind us. I make instant note of the unusual kindling: splintered table legs and bookshelves, a supply of which remains stockpiled around the hearth. My companion sits down unceremoniously on the shag carpet, so I do the same.

"You've been watching the house, haven't you?" Phoebe asks.

"Only for a little while," I lie. "I've been waiting for your husband to leave."

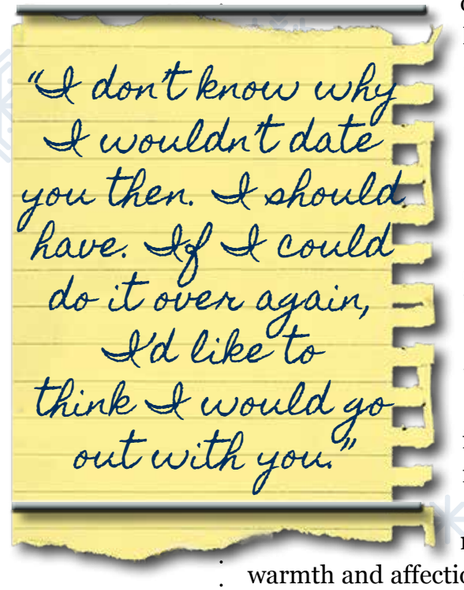
Phoebe nods. "Millard cleared out intentionally. He said he wanted to give me a few hours on my own, before we left, to take care of any private business that I had," she says. "I have no idea what you said to him yesterday, but he came home last night insisting that we couldn't spend another weekend in Virginia."

Phoebe folded her arms across her chest, rubbing her shivering sleeves for warmth. "I've *never* seen Millard so worked up."

"Where are your kids?"

"At their grandmother's," says Phoebe, in a high-pitched voice dripping with mimicry and sarcasm. "Grandma Eve's building has enough heating oil to roast an iceberg."

She clears her throat and adds, "In case you're wondering, *we* ran out."




The flames behind the grill reflect off the floor tiles around the edges of the carpet and cast lambent tongues over Phoebe's pastel cheeks. We are sitting only feet apart—so close that I could easily wrap my arms around her waist, sheltering her warmth with my own—only I fear that she will push me away, that she might prefer to remain alone in the cold. I can't help thinking that she's still a stunning beauty, even packaged in mohair. That's when I realize the miniature cavalry charge in the background is the chattering of her teeth.

"You're freezing," I observe. "Where's your coat?"

"I gave it to Meghan," she says. "Millard's mother invited me to stay with her too, but I didn't have it in me. Now I'm having second thoughts."

I would give her my own coat, of course, but I don't think she'd accept it.

"I was thinking about you last night," she says. "And it finally came back to me. You were *Billy* with the stutter—and you used to park that ancient Plymouth of yours across the street and stare at our house on weekend nights." Phoebe doesn't sound upset, or even amused—merely matter-of-fact.

"I guess I blocked all of that out. I don't like to think about my childhood very often—*at all*, really—not if I can help it."

"I was a ridiculous kid, wasn't I?"

Phoebe smiles. "I think it was sweet. Adorable, really."

The look she offers me is one of genuine warmth and affection.

"I don't know why I wouldn't date you then. I *should have*. If I could do it over again, I'd like to think I *would* go out with you."

I can tell by her tone that a door is closing, not opening—but I've already come so far.

"And now?" I ask. "It's not too late."

"And now," says Phoebe, "I'm moving to

Tampa, Florida. I have two children who depend on me, and a husband willing to let me take care of my private business without throwing any plates or phoning a divorce lawyer. My husband isn't a bad guy, William. After growing up with a father like mine, there's a lot to be said for a man who steers with an even keel."

She stands up suddenly and adjusts the burning "logs" with a poker, generating a flurry of sparks. "I heard on the news what you said about time," she says. "I found it very eloquent."

"I heard on the news what you said about time," she says. "I found it very eloquent."

I stand up and step behind her. "So this is goodbye?"

"I guess it is," she says.

I know that if I remain so close to her for another moment, I will reach out for her, and there is the possibility she might reach back—even though this is not what she desires. Instead, I unbutton my coat and quickly drape it over her shoulders. She turns, but already I'm retreating toward the entryway.

"You'll get sick," she cries.

"I have another one," I answer. "At home."

I cross the foyer without looking back and step out into the frigid summer air. A solemn peace blankets the white landscape. The sun hangs low in the sky, but it is not yet gone.

I do not have another overcoat at home, of course, but I am determined to acclimate to the chill—to prove myself a match for the cold. Enough time will pass, I assure myself, and even the memories of mild springs will fade.

We will no longer speak nostalgically of the golden era before the temperature dropped, of the balmy days preceding those first May flurries or the joy a man once felt climbing through his office window into an afternoon festooned with snow.

The frost will be all we've ever known, all we've ever had, so we will manage to endure it, convincing ourselves that life could not be any other way.

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***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, "Miracles and Conundrums of the Secondary Planets" and was used by permission from Jacob Appel. His books can be found on Kindle and other online bookstores.*



# A BURNING Brush With the Law

by Dusty Bettis

**Well, the fire marshal finally left, along with those nice guys who were kind enough to bring by their shiny new fire truck. And it was quite an event, but now all the neighbors have gone inside. The show's over folks, now get along home.**

We eventually got everything cleaned up and all the tools and implements of destruction all put away, so I thought it would be appropriate to collect my thoughts and put them into the form of a thoughtful observation.

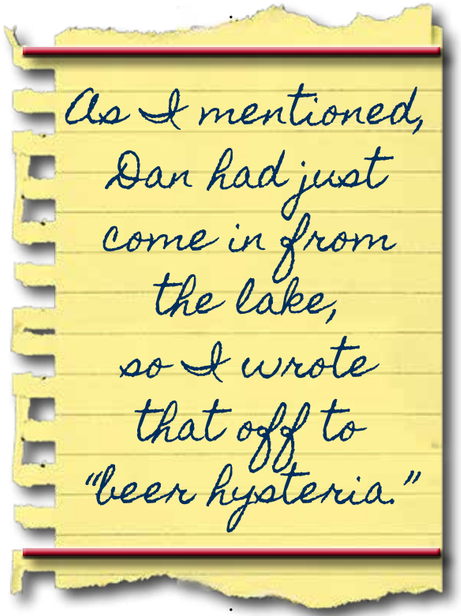
*Note to My Friends and Neighbors: It is ILLEGAL to have a brush or trash fire in this county after April 15—especially without a permit.* However, it is LEGAL to have a "recreational fire"—that is a campfire—provided it is less than 3' wide by 3' tall.

The county fire marshal wouldn't tell me if the "3' tall" meant the fire or the wood. I suppose it's up to interpretation. So be it. It's just one more loophole to throw on the blaze.

That being said, nothing could keep me from pushing my luck, not even the possibility that the woman up the ridge (the one I called the cops on back in December because her cur dogs were barking all night) most likely carries a heavy grudge. Actually, come to think of it, after living here as long we have, most of our neighbors probably have some sort of hatchet (if not an ax) to grind, and would love to see me in some sort of hot water, legally or otherwise. I suppose they figured that our little brush burning would be the perfect chance to seize the opportunity to


make their little vindictive dreams come true.

As my own personal "recreational" fires go, it wasn't that large—maybe 10' or so high at the peak of the flames. Okay, well, maybe 15'; it was too large and too close to measure with a tape measure. However, it was well-managed and discreet, and always restrained by the rake and the high-pressure water hose I keep handy.




It wasn't my intention to smoke up the whole area, but my buddy Dan, who lives across the street and had come in from the lake a few minutes after the peak, told me that the "word on the street" is that there had been a house fire in the neighborhood. As I mentioned, Dan had just come in from the lake, so I wrote that off to "beer hysteria."

What saved me was the brevity of the fire, along with my little camping table with the hot dogs and the buns all laid out. And number two son, Andrew, who was innocently loitering off to the side in the near-dark, conveniently obscuring the 5' pile of brush which represented the rest of our fire materials.

By the time the fire officials got there, the fire WAS (barely) three feet wide. They asked me if I was aware that it was illegal to have a brush fire after April 15, and I responded that I was, but this was a hot-dog-cooking fire. The fire marshal gave me an "Oh, sure it is" look, and then asked to see the alibi. I politely directed him to exhibit "A" and "B"—a pack of Oscar Mayer hot dogs and some buns. We even offered him (as well as the seven fireman in the fire truck) a sizzling dog fresh off the grill (as it were), but they declined. They also declined our offer of beer—though I think at least some of them might have accepted under different circumstances.

Anyway, they all drove away and so we had our cookout, just to make it official.

And Andrew learned a valuable lesson: "While ignorance of the law may be no excuse, knowledge of the law can be a GREAT excuse."

And, a well-thought-out investment (hot dogs) can reap great rewards. As my beloved Boy Scout leader, Dr. Evans always said, "Be Prepared." Thank you, Dr. Evans. And especially—thank you, Oscar Mayer.

***(Norris) Dusty Bettis*** *is a talented and well-respected citizen of a major Southern municipality which shall go nameless to protect the innocent.*

# When New Wave Music Got to Carolina

by John Marshall Lancaster

In the summer of 1983 in Aurelian Springs, NC, with a newly-minted license to drive and a desire for freedom, I started to view the world, what I knew of it, through new wave lenses. It was a whole new way of viewing the world.

Maybe I was too easily indoctrinated. Those synthesizers, that percussion, and those space age guitars were just too much. We had never heard anything like them. It seemed that we all collectively and in lock-step placed our CCR and Eagles tapes and albums in storage bins indefinitely, and I don't really know why. The sound that MTV and *Friday Night Videos* were trumpeting was something new. You could even hear playful brass elements at times.

It was often said that important news and fashion trends were late to arrive in this rural part of northeastern North Carolina, where I grew up.

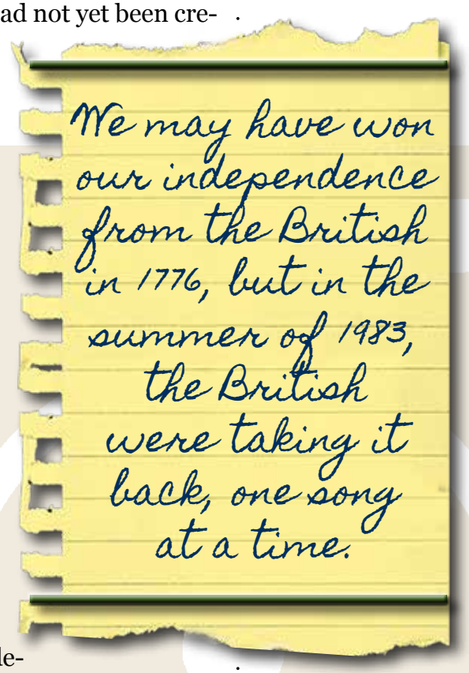
There may have been rumblings that this new wave of music was afoot in the Tar Heel state. After all, the Human League, Haircut 100, and Soft Cell had given a couple of warnings that previous summer. We could imagine walls being torn down, familiar ones.

My first car, a red Pontiac Le Mans, screamed "American," but the tape collection in a tan vinyl case shouted, "British New Wave!" The Eagles sang about witchy women, heartache, and infidelity—things we had not really experienced yet—but these new wave synthesizers promised something new, something stimulating to the imagination. But you couldn't really put a finger on what that something was; you could hear it, though.

It was often said that important news and fashion trends were late to arrive in this rural part of northeastern North Carolina, where I grew up. Unencumbered, however, new wave music

arrived in a nanosecond and held great sway, knocking down doors, especially in the summer of 1983. Immediately, we ditched the familiar and opened our ears.

We satisfied our new musical longings by playing K-94, a classic rock station that was hip to this new genre, and popping in the local Musicland to score the newest new wave cassettes. The compact disc had not yet been created. Sure, .38 Special, Jackson Browne, and The Rolling Stones tried to make themselves heard that summer of 1983, but they could scarcely get a word in edgewise for the persistent thump of Duran Duran, The Fixx, The Eurythmics, ABC, Big Country, Naked Eyes, After the Fire, Madness, and The Police.




Something seemed to announce escape, freedom from the mundane. We may have won our independence from the British in 1776, but in the summer of 1983, the British were taking it back, one song at a time. We teenagers were helping them! Take the Police song "Every Breath You Take" as an example. It was the number one song for eight weeks that summer.

While this was going on, songs like "Sweet Dreams" (Are Made of This)," "Rio," and "Is There Something I Should Know?" were claiming our attention and making strides for the top of the charts, along with "King of Pain." There was very little Americana on the dial, for Americana had mostly gone to the dogs, taking the dated 8-track player with it. A Sparkomatic car stereo which Santa brought me was a catalyst for this new escape. This stereo boasted an equalizer that I could barely operate. I only knew that I was crazy about treble and generally frowned on bass. I could attempt to explain this changing of the musical guard, but you honestly had to be present to really grasp it.

I had been mostly a dutiful and down-to-earth teenager. In the summer of '83 my father issued stern warnings concerning my comings and goings and my weekly allowance:

"Did you notice that the trash is about to overflow out of the trashcan? You do want your allowance this week, right? If you don't take out the trash soon, I'm cutting you off."

"It's 6:00. Marshall, get out the ice and pour the tea. I'm serious. No gas money if this keeps up."

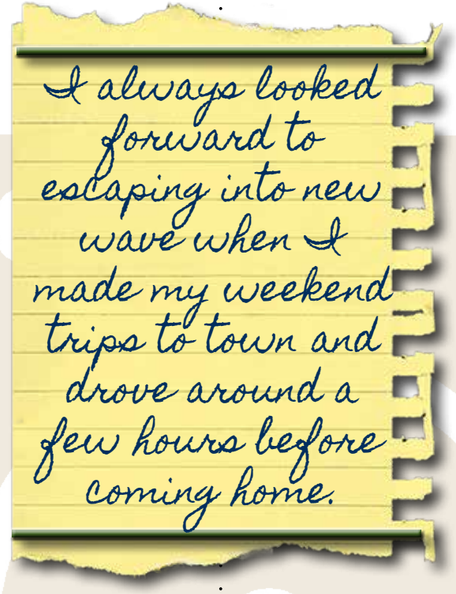
"I need you to bring in 5 or 6 pieces of wood for the woodstove. You want to stay warm, right?"

"You and that vehicle are to be back in this yard by midnight. You hear me?"

"You can go but only if the grass is cut."

Far too often, I ignored some of these warnings. But if you had seen my dedication to new wave music, you would have witnessed a boy with an unflinching desire to learn every lyric, every beat, and every facet of a band's long-winded history. My father, had he heard us go on and on about bands, would have considered this ridiculous balderdash. This was all foolishness, and it did not put food on the table. As for personal outlets, I always looked forward to escaping into new wave when I made my weekend trips to town and drove around a few hours before coming home.

All teens did this to pass time. I would fill these outings with new wave music. In town, the mission was to drive out the gas that I put in the tank, which was often three dollars' worth, and it was surprising how long that gas would last. I continued to play these cassettes. I understood new wave, and it understood me.




It was new wave that turned us all into dreamers. After all, according to Big Country, dreams would stay with us like a lover's voice. Was this not straight out of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's wheelhouse? It was like "Kubla Khan." We had officially been encouraged to dream our way to contentedness. That was the world I wanted to live in—of dreams, the magical, and the creative. In a land where the guitars sounded like bagpipes you may as well pledge allegiance to Scotland. Similarly, that desire to dream—the passion for making sweet dreams happen—was not lost on Annie Lennox, lead singer of The Eurythmics. She sang about sweet dreams and what they were made of and traveling the world and the seven seas, so who was I to disagree?

So that hunger was there in the lyrics in the way that they spoke to the listener. You would not always understand this desire as a palpable thing, but it was there. For example, you really didn't know what dreams Annie Lennox was referring to, yet you knew she was right, that these dreams were somehow important. The way teens hung on every word was your evidence. We had been swept away and it did not take very much, just the music. You would think Taylor Swift had spoken, but that would not happen for another thirty years.

New wave had also created this black and white world that was no-nonsense. After the Fire and Falco had warned us about the dangers of turning around when being pursued by an authority figure wielding some threatening power.

This was a stern warning to watch your back and be aware of situations that call for increased vigilance. And that is what we did. If you ever looked back, you would be giving your pursuer an advantage of sorts. Teenagers of that era recall the reverberating warning to "not turn around." There was no subtlety in that.

Likewise, The Fixx's song "One Thing Leads to Another" reminded us of the problems created by lying politicians who made promises but never delivered on them. Lies have ripple effects. Your word is extremely important.

More importantly, though, The Fixx offered

some of the more prescient insight pertaining to the nuclear unrest of the 1980s with warning to the survivors of the unthinkable.

Meanwhile, The Fixx were writing and singing about leaders who were screwing us rotten. In new wave, you knew what you were getting. Palpable lessons abounded.

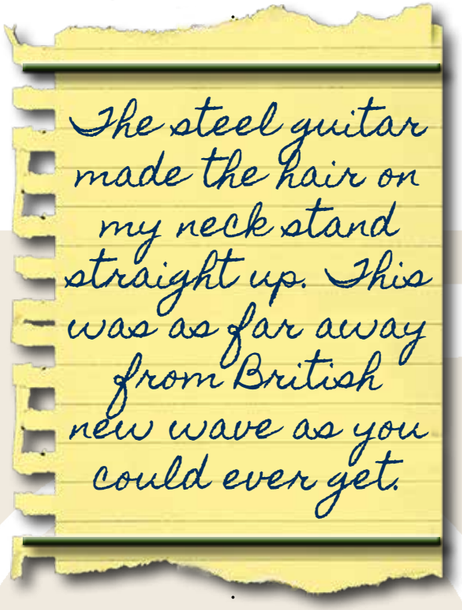
New wave could even be adamantly emotional when you needed it to be. While it encouraged the feelings of "Fascination" (perpetual if possible), it placed emphasis on honesty and sincerity.

Many a man went forward with the song "True" to do his wooing. The singer insists that it was the sound of his soul. That was honesty.

"Listening to Marvin all night long" painted an utterly romantic scene. New wave could go places like this. It could establish moods. It could also call out the dishonest, such as when the Thompson Twins warned about "Lies, lies, lies."

New wave might even dwell at length on the importance of memories and holding someone dear ("Always Something There to Remind Me"). That seemed genuine to me. Later that summer, Naked Eyes also reminded us of "Promises, Promises," the notion that your word should be kept at all times. After all, you made a verbal commitment. This journey toward adulthood was fraught with such new wave lessons—some literal, others more subtle. One could safely come of age to the sound of new wave, and many of us did. It spoke to us directly, no middle men.

Be that as it may, a rather curious thing happened as the calendar burned halfway through August of 1983, and my junior year was about to start. I had an Uncle Jimmie whose mission it was to reclaim my American roots for me. He would often disparage my new wave music:



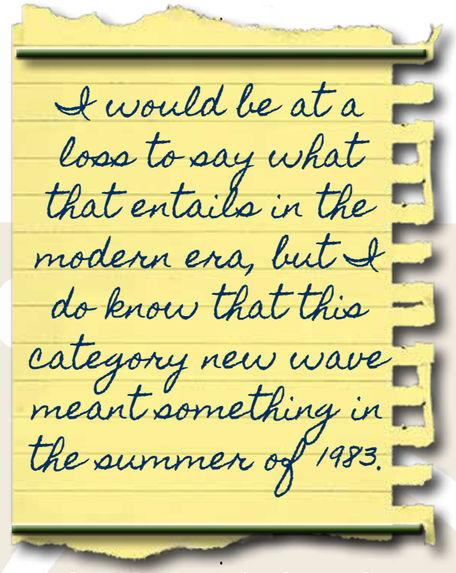

Jimmie: *"What is that stuff you are playing in the car? It sounded like your timing belt was about to go. Come in here and listen to this."*

Then he cued up Willie and Merle and made me listen as they sang Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty."

And, I have to say I was immediately won over. The steel guitar made the hair on my neck stand straight up. This was as far away from British new wave as you could ever get. This song had me temporarily giving up on synthesizer beats for the riffs of steel guitars and powerful lyrics about the plight of outlaws.

Days later, of course, Lionel Ritchie sang "All Night Long," Billy Joel crooned "Tell Her About It," and Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton spoke of "Islands in the Stream." Surprisingly, I had been released from new wave captivity/abduction for that moment, but I will never forget the amazing natural highs that the music made possible for me. It is not as if the radio stopped playing new wave altogether or that such bands stopped making this kind of music. To be sure, many soldiered on in 1984 and many are still playing today, but their impact for me was greatest in that magical and escapist summer of 1983.

And it was not as if I really stopped listening to new wave on purpose. I just reopened my mind to the endless possibilities on the dial. This was an era when muscle cars roamed the earth, many of which were handed down from the previous generation, and three dollars was a generous addition to the gas tank for a night of chasing dreams and desires, as hypothetical as they seemed to be.




Life revolved around Galaga and Pac Man at the arcade and teen clubs that played 80s disco. We'd wake up on Saturday morning and hope to do it again Saturday night.

That new wave summer of 1983 was like a British abduction of American culture, taking its listener on a journey, the details of which were not to be revealed. However, listeners embraced this journey and there was little rebellion. Something different was surely in our midst. I would say that it ended in the last part of that summer, but others I am sure would claim it never ended.

This new wave genre continued to influence my purchases at the record store, but the charts would go on to be dominated by Prince, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, and Genesis. There was a new wave undertone that this sound developed in the years after that famous summer of 1983. It took the form of CD collections, new wave stations on Sirius and I-Heart Radio, and multi-band new wave concerts. When I hear music today that I feel has been influenced by 80s new wave, I typically speak up in excitement, but I realize that I am referring to something which to others might be unintelligible.

For all I know, teenagers continued to recognize a so-called new wave in modern music. Is it possible that all that is required to have new wave is a variation on the norm? I would be at a loss to say what that entails in the modern era, but I do know that this category new wave meant something in the summer of 1983.

Of course, in modern times, I try to explain to my literature students why a British poem is from the Romantics era and not the Victorian era. It's not easy!

Maybe we should just be content that students are reading these poetic lines, grappling with their meaning, and music lovers are exploring the sound and lyrics of this once-ubiquitous genre of music.

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# The Bait Debate

by Anthony L. Holt

This year we got rid of the cannas and elephant ears in the front flower beds because it simply costs too much to water them on Van Buren County Water. We planted an assortment of wildflower seeds in the two main beds alongside the side want up to the front door and then left the large, slender bed to the East side of the front port and along the front of the house to the end of the garage.

The granddaughter and I planted some heirloom tomato seeds in empty contains from the spring tomato and pepper plants in some "super soil" that we had left over from the load that we had bought from Bonds Septic Service at Clinton for Camille's "little garden" between the shop and office building. Just about every seed came up and so we planted some of them in the skips in Camille's Garden where the early batch had been frosted on.

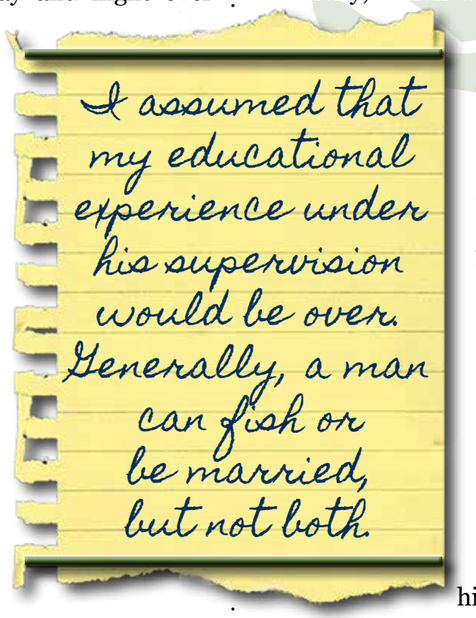
*Doing without worms is about as bad as it comes for a "Hills' Brothers Coffee" (okay, Maxwell House) can fisherman.*

The others I kept watered in their little plastic pots but hated to see them go to waste. *The most logical solution was to put them in the flower beds!* I did that, put baskets around them, and have kept them watered for a few weeks and they grew to nearly three feet tall. As I watered them, a crisis from decades ago came to mind back in the New Home Community.

I first began my fishing career with cane pole and freshly dug earthworms that my grandparents and I dug from there on the farm. In time, I could dig my own bait just fine and soon added a Zebco 33 to my arsenal and often hit the Hollandhead Creek Bottoms on my own on my old bicycle, with fishing pole, tackle box, worms in a can and somewhat secured in place.

1980, the year of the "Heat Wave" in the Mississippi Delta, was a devastating year for us. It rained on the 10th of June and then did not rain again until the end of September. The soybeans and grain sorghum (milo to us) all completely burned up, except for a few small patches here and there that we could irrigate. The lack of foresight by my people when the USDA opened up the "rice base" for government

agriculture programs sealed our fate, while most farmers around us built up huge rice bases upon which they capitalized until they could retire. It was the beginning of the end of "life on the farm" for me, though a thirteen-year-old can't see that far ahead at that age. I earnestly saw the repercussions on my parent's faces and prayed incessantly for rain that did not come, while the B-52s from Eekar Air Force Base drilled day and night over head for the impending nuclear war sure to come soon. During the daylight hours, you could see the eyes of the pilots as they scraped the tree line coming up out of the Black River Bottoms. At night, when the huge beacon of light on the nose of those planes woke you up from a deep sleep on a nightly basis, dreaming about a big crappie or blue gill down where Black Roll Creek and Running Water Creek converge, one just wanted the war to hurry up and get here. My immediate crisis, though, was a *lack of bait due to the drought*.




Doing without worms is about as bad as it comes for a "Hills' Brothers Coffee" (okay, Maxwell House) can fisherman. The grasshoppers, though available, were hard to catch and required a tremendous amount of effort to acquire! Those Catalpa Worms were too unpredictable!

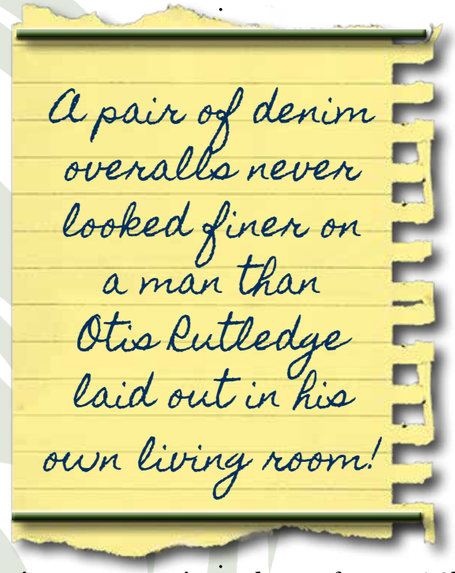
Time passed and I began my tutelage under my older, 30s-something friend, Dwight Bradley's influence and, though we did fish the creek on our place from time to time, with him was the concept of "tonnage" fishing on the Black River. It didn't matter if it was carp or buffalo, though we preferred the flathead and blue catfishes, he wanted a haul each trip. In time, I would learn that the best fishing trips of my life were when we caught little or nothing but loved the experience! When he married Elwanda Hamilton, being the old bachelor that he was in his late 30s, I assumed that my educational experience under his supervision would be over. Generally, a man can fish or be married, but not both. To my happy surprise, Elwanda loved to fish more than we did!

Though Dwight and I mainly fished trammel/gill nets and trotlines (which require a lot of bait!), we did go and fish off the bank and out of the boat quite a lot with Elwanda with rods and reels and many a can of worms. Those hot summer days into the '80s, after my parents' farm enterprise had ended, I would work for him on his farm and that often meant my job was to get the bait ready so that we could go bait lines right before dark. That meant we had to have worms.

Nowadays, when I water the tomatoes, I remembered the "worm droughts" of my youth. Nearly everyone's sink and washing machine drains back on the farm rain out separate from the "cesspool" drain and so those would at times allow for a few worms to be dug. I remember getting a dozen or so worms with my grandfather this way one time and thinking that we had hit the lottery! The number of worms that Dwight and I needed for such a fishing business as ours, though, would always require much more than a kitchen sink drain.

On a side-bar, I would add that some neighbors, though they did have a septic tank of sorts, and that their septic tank drain and kitchen sink drains were separate, they often did not have a lid over the septic tank.

Either, the lid had collapsed years before my time, or they just didn't put one on it in case they had to dig it out and clean the grease out later. Either way, you had to learn which neighbors had which! Young Nathan Bradley, of the nearest neighbors to our South, once had to make the trip to the ER at Newport and take antibiotic shots one time because he forgot that the septic tank in his own back yard did not have a lid! The grass is not always greener over the septic tank, in some cases it is entirely absent!




Our worm crisis was ended one year, though, when Annie Rutledge, one of the local "residenters" shared with us the secret to always have summer bait. She had grown up in the Black River Bottoms during hard times and knew how to make it through them. Her Father, "Red" Moscop had helped build the original ferry boat that the Smith Family ran at the mouth of the Strawberry River there on the Black. Annie would marry Otis Rutledge, professional carpenter and fisherman.

Over several decades, Otis would help build most of the houses and barns in our part of the county. I fondly remember him stopping by my grandparents' house in his old, red '63, or so, Ford truck on Saturday mornings with a washtub full of buffalo fish. My grandfather would buy a five pounder many times, and Otis would clean it on the tailgate for my grandmother to cook up for lunch. Annie, was every bit as resourceful. When Otis died, Annie had him brought home to their living room, where we all stopped by and paid our respects. A pair of denim overalls never looked finer on a man than Otis Rutledge laid out in his own living room! That is the only time that I ever saw this practice.

Annie told us to how to find bait in the hot summer time—go down into the edge of the Bottoms, just past the small wooden bridge there at the bottom of the Gene Hayes Hill, and off in the woods under the giant ragweeds would be plenty of worms! She was right.

Some times you might have to dig away a 10-by-10 spot, a full shovel spade deep in order to get to them but they were always there.

For the remainder of my days in the Black River Bottoms, that was the go-to place for earthworms in the hot summer time.

It is amazing what your "crisis" is at different times in life. Though huge when I was a cotton-top kid growing up in the New Home Community, now it simply brings a smile to my face.

Oh, do I wish that life was complicated at only that level today!

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