

CHRONICLES **by Cosmic Rat**

The following story is true.

January 1946, Somewhere in Florida

Michael was conceived on New Year's Eve, the culmination of a celebration. There was a lot to celebrate. The war was over, the sailor was ashore in warm, sunny Florida, and he'd met a dark-haired beauty. It would be his second marriage, and her third

It was time to be happy and carefree, walking barefoot on the beach, waves lapping at their toes, laughing and holding one another, never wanting to let go. It was right and good that they enjoyed one another to the fullest, full of love and hope for the future in a world again at peace. They did not know how short their time together would be.

September 8, 1946; St. Petersburg

Michael was born. Four hours later, his mother, Virginia, died. She was a beautiful woman, only 33 years old.. Her hair was long and black, as her son's would be in time.

He had a half-brother, Keith, who was 8, and a half-sister, Sheila, 4, though he would not meet them until 1958. Virginia's mother, Mynette, offered to raise him, along with his half-siblings, but his father, Nolan, had no intention of losing his son. He had just lost the woman he loved, with whom he had hoped to spend the rest of his life. The child was but a small compensation, but he was all he had. They journeyed to Hannibal, Missouri, where he had grown up, and he joined his father's real estate agency

October 1946; Hannibal

L.T. and Sarah met their son at the railroad depot. It should have been a happy reunion; after all, Nolan was returning whole and apparently healthy from the war. And, he had given them a grandson.

A damp, chilly wind blew across the railyard. Drizzle specked the windshield as they waited in the warm car. Nolan looked bigger, stronger than they remembered, but weary. His thin jacket was too light for the weather, but the baby was invisible inside a huge bundle of blankets. He got in the back seat and began to loosen the blankets. In a moment he held up the month-old boy. He said it without smiling, but there was love and pride in his voice; "This is Michael".

Michael's mother, the vivacious dark-haired Irish beauty named Virginia, was dead. Nolan's beloved bride who had filled him with hope and soothed his war-weary soul, whose sparkling eyes and gentle smile made peace and joy more real

than the brutality of battle that haunted his dreams, died four hours after she bore his son.

The baby was all he had now, and though he seemed to resemble his father, Nolan knew he would always see traces of Virginia in the young face. He would love him all the more for that, but the love would be mixed with sorrow.

So, Nolan had come home to Hannibal, needing help to raise a child, and the familiar environment of his youth, a safe haven in which to mourn.

Michael would grow up in the hometown of Samuel Clemens. In a way, they grew up together, though a century apart; never the Twain would meet.

He learned to read, and to love reading-- not just the words, but the ideas and ideals they could convey. He embraced the ideals that felt solid and right; it would be some years before he learned how incompletely those ideals were fulfilled in the world around him.

Who would have imagined that 100 years after the slaves were freed and recognized by law as equal citizens and human beings, that their descendants were still often denied their rights? Who would have thought that our own country, having fought to defeat German and Japanese aggression, might wage needless wars for illegitimate reasons?

These things, and many more, are doubtless learned much younger now in this age of easily available information. Michael's generation may be uniquely able to appreciate the wealth of knowledge, having grown up at a time when we could be kept in the dark.

Some, as we all know, choose to stay in the dark, dimming deliberately the illumination that might otherwise reach their minds. They make progress harder and slower, but they don't stop it. They do, however, manage to create some tragic events, full of death, destruction, and inhumanity. Wars like the one in Vietnam are much easier to get into than they are to stop.

September, 1950; Hannibal

Michael turned 4, able to reason and remember significant details. Four is the age when a child can begin to learn to read and write, to speak other languages, to learn art and music. He had to wait another year before kindergarten, though

He was eager to learn and explore the small world, the home of his grandparents and father, a red brick house on 5th Street in Hannibal. Later, they moved to a house at 2814 Bird Street, which isn't there anymore.

Kindergarten was his first exposure to other children. When young we are not surprised by much, because almost everything is new. Later, when we've had time to build up expectations, it gets a little harder to learn something new, because first we have to unlearn its nonexistence. At five, he discovered there were others his age, and that about half of them were girls. Those who claim that children are not sexual simply don't remember. He was very attracted to a girl who called herself Brian. Her real name was Virginia. She had long blonde hair. Michael had no idea how to express his attraction, but he thought it would be great if, at nap time, their floor rugs were adjacent.

* * *

Author's note: You will not see the words herein "pun not intended". My firm policy is to let the puns fall where they may. If it happens that you perceive one that I didn't, rest assured that if I had seen it, I would have pushed it off the table and into your lap. Life demands that we smile upon it.

I have in my house several clocks that tick, not in unison. They are cheap clocks. When it is quiet, I can hear them echo one another. I did not intend it, but sometimes they remind me of the relentless passage of time, or perhaps its stillness as we ceaselessly pass through it until we stop. I hope to finish before I do.

* * *

One evening in 1951 Nolan announced "We're going to Sue's house". Michael didn't know who she was or why they were going there. She fed them dinner.

There were 27 acres about 5 miles outside of Hannibal, with an old farmhouse, a barn, a shed, a garage, and a big beautiful Black Walnut tree in the yard near the house. Nolan had found it and determined to buy it and make it home. He had also decided to marry Susan Strode

He had known Sue before he went off to college in Liberty, took a job in Chicago for a few years, came back to Hannibal and married Hazel, divorced Hazel, joined the Navy, fought World War 2, and met Virginia in Florida. Sue was to be his third wife.

My Baptist grandparents were relieved. It least this one wasn't Catholic, as the first two had been. In those days, the older generation saw the different sects as a different kind of people. They weren't enemies, but they didn't usually associate. The Baptists didn't dance. Nolan didn't care much about that.

It had been five years since Virginia died. It was time for a new start. He and Sue worked hard on the old farmhouse. It needed a new roof, indoor plumbing, electricity, and propane gas heating. At first it was surrounded with jimson weeds taller than Michael. By the time they finished, the place had joined the twentieth century. They married in 1952, moving to the house in the country. That fall, Michael entered the first grade. In November, Nolan died of a heart attack. He was 44.

Sue was pregnant, and at the end of March, 1953, she gave birth prematurely to Patricia, who weighed 2 pounds, 9 ounces. After some initial incubation she became a normal child.

In 1954

Michael transferred to Clear Creek School, a nearby rural, one-room one-teacher eight-grade school. His first two grades had been spent in Mark Twain elementary school in town, which was conveniently near his grandparents' house, though the rural school was closer to home. For the next six years he had the same teacher, Mrs. West, a large woman of middle age who had been a schoolteacher since she was 16. Before school she would go to the basement and shovel coal into the furnace and light it. On cold days it would be warm enough for the class to take their coats off in an hour or so.

There were about 40 students divided among the 8 grades. For efficiency the grades would be taught in pairs: 1 and 2, then 3 and 4, etc. When not actively being taught, they were free to read from a small but adequate library including 2 sets of encyclopedias, and several novels by Albert Payson Terhune about heroic collies. For a curious and avid reader, there were advantages to that.

At 11, in the summer of 1958, Michael visited his maternal grandparents in Madison, Wisconsin, spending most of the summer there, his first and only opportunity to know his grandfather, a dedicated fisherman, retired from a job with the Chicago telephone company, his grandmother Mynette, Uncle Joe, an alcoholic podiatrist, his half-sister Sheila, then an attractive teenager, and his half-brother Keith, nearly 6 1/2 feet tall and just back from the navy. They were an interesting bunch of relatives.

The Owens were Black Irish: not light-skinned and freckled, but light brown with dark hair. The legend is that the Black Irish were descended from Moorish pirates who raided the coastal towns of Ireland, seducing and impregnating Irish girls. The truth is probably more complicated and less romantic.

Madison was a new experience, learning to navigate a city by bus, learning to swim in one of the lakes, and interacting with new people. He became more aware of the mother he had never met.

Apples grow too close together. Someone needs to remove some of them so the others could have some elbow room. Michael's first paying summer job, for 60 cents an hour, was as an apple thinner in 1963.

He graduated high school in 1964 and began a summer career as a gandy dancer for the CB&Q Railroad, in the freight yard near the river in Hannibal. It was hard work, but it paid \$2.18 an hour, about twice the minimum wage, because of the union. Every time the Mississippi flooded, the tracks would sink into the ground, and they had to be raised up again and fresh gravel tamped underneath the ties.

For the first time Michael had a chance to get to know black people, which about half of his co-workers were. Though Hannibal schools were integrated, hardly any blacks were in his classes. He had no reason to think of them as any different. He knew history, and knew there was prejudice, but that seemed to be elsewhere, in places like Little Rock.

One evening at dinner he was casually telling his stepmother about a car he was thinking about buying. One of the younger black guys he worked with had it for sale, and he had given him a ride in it to show it.

And Sue said, "You know those people are all right as long as they stay in their place."

That seemed odd-- she had never really talked about "colored people" before. Hec asked "Where is their place?"

She didn't have an answer to that. Instead she started talking about the black housekeeper her family had when she was a child, a woman who helped raise her and who she "loved just like family". So she didn't hate black people; they just had their place.

He was surprised and disturbed by her attitude, suddenly becoming aware that racism was not just a problem in the deep South, but one lurking beneath the surface within much of the older generation. He still remembered that moment with absolute clarity over 50 years later. It was an important awakening.

A crack had appeared between generations-- one of serious principle, and it was time to move on alone in the realm of ideas.

He didn't buy the co-worker's car. but a cheaper one for \$75, a pale blue 1954 Ford. It leaked lots of oil from a bad rear seal, but it had a V-8, a step up from Sue's slow 6-cylinder 1951 Chevy. . Eventually he gave up on the leaky '54, after

replacing the rear seal and finding it still leaked, trading it for a '57 Ford, red and white, with tail-fins.

Transitioning from the rural environment and the small Clear Creek school to one year of junior high, then high school, Michael was not socially experienced, and a bit shy. Other students recognized his intelligence, but they didn't know him. Friendships didn't come easily. The mating instinct overcame his shyness somewhat; his first high school girlfriend was Phyllis Cross, a dark-haired girl a year older. They met in chemistry, where he voiced his first public pun.

Mr/ King was explaining that, under a microscope, molecules don't retain their color. That comes from the way they reflect certain frequencies of light. Michael asked "Does that mean they are pigments of the imagination?"

He dated Phyllis casually for a time. She was fun to be with, but they eventually drifted apart.

His first real love was Carolyn Lugering. Michael was not a bad-looking kid at 16, but had little self-confidence when it came to girls. When he managed to summon the courage to ask out the pretty blonde girl who smiled at him after class, he was both surprised and elated when she said Yes.

Carolyn had German genes; she was a real blonde with a voluptuous figure and a dazzling smile. She turned out to be pleasant to be with, cheerful and fairly intelligent, though not too imaginative. Michael grew to like her a lot, not just because she was strikingly attractive, but also because she was remarkably positive. She never complained about his stepmother's '51 Chevy, his '54 Ford, or his '59 Studebaker Lark-- or his limited funds. He had no social status or popularity, yet she seemed not to mind. They went out as often as possible throughout their senior year and first year in college, though their colleges were in different cities. They had a good time together-- movies, dances, kissing and hugging. He knew nothing about love, but thought he must be in it,

One afternoon Carolyn and Michael went swimming at a lake outside of town. On the way home early in the warm sultry evening they drove through Riverview park, stopping in a secluded place. Carolyn looked delicious in her bikini. So much of her creamy smooth skin was available to be touched. They sensed one another's excitement. The ease with which something new could happen was evident. But Carolyn had been taught to fear this moment, and the fear won. She uttered the four most dreaded words in teenage experience: *Don't touch me there!*

If he had been more confident or smoother or more persistent, the story might have ended differently, but we will never know. We are who we are, *when we are*. He took her home.

They continued to date after that, but it was different. Perhaps there was love, but the possibilities of their relationship had been closed off. She had said *No* to an expression of love, and he couldn't bring himself to try again, or to talk to her about it.

If he wanted more physical affection, he'd have to look elsewhere. That seemed the only clear lesson to be learned. But, for years afterward, he remembered his first love, and thought if only she'd chosen differently, they might have had a lifetime together.

Yolanda was a couple of years younger, short and cute and sensuous. She was more enthusiastic about physical affection than Carolyn. One day they went to the lake to swim, not knowing that Carolyn's sister was there. A couple of days later Carolyn confronted him with cold anger, and with seeming finality, broke up with him.

They were both victims of the anti-sexual attitudes that were so often taught then. They still exist today, of course, but they are countered by more enlightened ideas and information.

Years later, while on a motorcycle trip to Hannibal, Michael wrote a fantasy:

"The throbbing Sportster stopped outside BJ's Bar in downtown Hannibal. The mysterious rider backed it to the curb and cut the engine. Hanging his goggles on the mirror, he entered, walked to the bar, and ordered a beer. Peering about the dim smoky barroom, he spotted her, at a table alone in the corner. In his smiling gaze, her eyes widened, her mouth opened in astonishment, and then that familiar dazzling smile lit up her face. He walked over and said, 'Hi, Carolyn.'

'Michael', she sighed, 'I could never forget your eyes.' He grinned. His eyes lowered to the gold chain that disappeared between the tops of her milky white breasts, then to her hands pressed upon her lap. Only the right one bore a ring. She whispered, 'Oh, Michael...I've missed you all these years.'

He took her hand and squeezed it tenderly, looking into her sky-blue eyes. 'Don't worry, beautiful. I'm here now.'

'Can you ever forgive me?' she whimpered, her wide eyes and moist lips telling him silently that she'd earn that forgiveness, and then some. Smiling again, like a woman imagining ecstasy, she purred, 'Please come home with me. I want you.'

Ah, well...past fantasies can be as much fun as future ones."

He continued to date Yolanda. One night in the back seat, parked in front of her house, clothing was loosened, though not entirely removed, and passion guided their hands and bodies into new sensual territory. A diabolical article of clothing known as pantyhose was an obstacle to overcome. The pantyhose inched downward, but then they were in a position to tie her thighs together, Impatient desire and inexperience led Michael to plunge ahead, between nylon-bound thighs, probing for paradise. The experience was intense for him, but didn't last long.

Afterward, Yolanda got dressed and went inside right away. The first time doesn't always go perfectly. Today, with easily available internet instruction, the course of young love is often improved.

Off to College

Michael's choice of college seemed pre-ordained. He was one of several Hannibal High grads who received a "Curators' Award", which paid a portion of the first term's tuition fees at Missouri University. It wasn't a lot of money, but it would have seemed ungrateful to turn it down and go elsewhere.

Electronics interested him, and without thinking too much about aptitude, he had decided to be an electrical engineer, soon to find that college level calculus and engineering math were a great deal more challenging than anything in high school.

This was back in the age of slide rules, and no pocket calculators. He did fine in liberal arts courses, and found a computer class fascinating. The computer filled much of a room, and spoke Fortran, typed onto punch cards. In the years since, seeing it evolve in power while it shrank in size has been amazing.

Having discovered that his aptitude favored such subjects as literature, history, and philosophy, he changed his major and decided to pursue it at one of the state colleges where fees were less, Central Missouri State in Warrensburg.

The first year at CMS, Michael lived in a dorm, with roommates from Massachusetts, two Irish guys and a Polish one named Malinowski. They weren't bad guys, and their accents and East-coast attitudes were often amusing. In the spring they proposed a trip to Mardi Gras, offering to buy the gas if Michael, the only one with a car, would drive. All piled into his 1959 Studebaker Lark, and off they went.

The sights and sounds in New Orleans were a new experience for all of them. Crowds of celebrants wandered everywhere, and buying beer and wine from street vendors was easy. At one point in the evening, as was traditional at the time, someone raised a Confederate flag on a balcony, and a band played "Dixie". The Massachusetts guys thought it would be clever to loudly chant "Who won the war?" over and over. They were quickly confronted by a mounted policeman who rode up next to them, pointed at them with his baton, and ordered them to stop. Fortunately, they did; that chant could have sparked a brawl in which the Yankees were far outnumbered.

Author's note:

***A million Earths would fit inside the sun
Crispy Earths, of course.
But a sun pregnant with a million Earths
That would be a mother.***

Mary Ann A story of higher education

“Oops. It just slipped in.”

It was about time, they both knew, just as it was soon to be time for other penetrating changes in their lives and in the world.

Changes; transitions, seemed as smooth and slippery as the sudden switch from sliding over it to slipping it in. There was newness, but it was wrapped in sufficient sameness that no shock ensued. It was time for an unknowing search for the new.

She was a pleasing, plump freckled curly redhead, mischievous in nature, sensually awakened, playful yet serious. He was skinny, horny, and shy; long-haired and bearded ahead of that time and place.

The setting was Warrensburg, Missouri in the winter of 1966. Warrensburg was years behind New York or San Francisco. It probably still is. Radical acts involved painting Old Drum's testicles red. Old Drum's statue stands in the town square, commemorating a sheep-killing dog, the town's only famous citizen: the “man's best friend” from the famed speech given in his defense.

At Central Missouri State College there was perhaps a glimmer of a doubt about a certain Southeast Asian conflict, igniting an occasional discussion among thinking friends. Political awareness and organization had not yet taken root.

Religion was a more engrossing subject for debate and serious thought than politics. To free one's mind and body, one must first banish the witch doctor; the shaman. The sweeping away of mystical cobwebs from his mind was accomplished with the ease of curing the clap with penicillin. He was not bred into a mold.

He read, and was briefly enchanted by, Ayn Rand, but it became obvious upon reflection that her ideals were out of touch with reality. To work, they required capitalists to behave with virtue that they have never possessed.

Hair and beard, soon to be common, were then rare. It was not following a trend, nor was it yet making a defined statement. The college said nothing, but glowered silently, wishing it had thought of a rule on that subject. Sex and sexism were far older than nonconforming hirsutity, so the college rules locked women in their dorms at night, forbade them from smoking while walking, and allowed them to wear shorts or slacks only on Sunday afternoons.

Men were forced to live in dorms or approved housing, either of which were intended to prevent sexual activity in one's bed. Michael stayed in the dorm the

first year there, but for the second he found a room in the home of a 90-year-old deaf lady. It was cheaper, and he hoped that deafness might make her unconscious of loud music and groans of passion.

In the days of sliding over it, of the passionate almost-sex that Michael and Mary Ann invented as a close compromise, there came a night when she seemed nervous and moody, prompting our unsuspecting hero to ask, "What's the matter?"

That classic question can induce any number of responses. The classic reply it elicited on this occasion was, "I'm afraid I'm pregnant."

Silence followed. Thoughts of a super-sperm crawling off the mattress, up her leg and to her egg, stood before the court of his mind. Case dismissed. Too improbable. But how?

Her high school sweetheart, home from Vietnam. They were just talking over old times. It was an accident.

An accidental fuck? An amusing concept, What was important was that Mary Ann's period was late. Every writer knows the importance of punctual punctuation. "Don't worry," he said.
In a few days she was blessed with the curse.

The deaf lady became ill and ceased renting the room in mid-year, leaving our hero out in the proverbial cold. Mid-year rooms were hard to come by. Michael checked in at the local hotel, telling no one, and obtained a post office box and a false approved address. The hotel was the scene of several pleasurable nights. It was not too expensive for a few nights, but not sustainable in the long term.

Michael had become the proud owner of a 1959 Triumph TR-3, a great-handling little car, but clearly he needed a van to live in. He traded for a Corvair Greenbrier, which became home as well as transportation.

On the way to a dark country road on the outskirts of Warrensburg. they approached a gas station. "Stop here," Mary Ann said. He waited for her to head for the ladies' room. Instead, she pressed a quarter into his hand. He looked at her, puzzled, while she looked slightly embarrassed. Then the light dawned. He went to the men's room for a vending-machine condom.

Mary Ann was not his first. That honor went to Yolanda, back in Hannibal. It was a brief but passionate event in the '51 Chevy in front of her house. On another summer evening, after the Chevy had been traded for a Corvair, there was

Christine. But Mary Ann was his first extended relationship-- a full sexual semester.

One day he drove Mary Ann to work, to a small building on the edge of campus where she had a part-time job. He pulled into the driveway and kissed her goodbye. Suddenly a fat-necked burr-headed man appeared at the driver's window, screaming incoherently.. He seemed irrational, someone best avoided. Mary Ann got out on the other side, and quickly walked into the building. Michael rolled up my window and locked the door.

It was unclear what this strange person's problem was, who had then gone to the back of the van and tried to open the rear door. Fortunately, it was locked. The man then stood further back, appearing to be writing something on a note pad. The license number? That didn't seem to make sense. The best course was clearly to leave. Michael began very slowly to back out of the driveway, watching the man walk backwards at first, then step out of the way. Once clear of the driveway, he drove away.

Three days later he was summoned to meet Hollis L. Chalquist, who held the incongruous title of Dean of Men. While over 6 feet tall, Chalquist appeared to weigh about 120 pounds. His short hair was parted in the middle and greased to his pointed head. He wore a baggy tweed suit with pants four times the circumference of his spindly legs. He was an anachronism, and a caricature of himself.

The first question of the inquisition was "Why the strange costume?" Michael was wearing an ordinary pair of jeans and a plain polo shirt. I asked, "What are you talking about?"

This Dean was a veteran of the Marines and of a German POW camp, one or both of which had irreparably damaged his mind. He had been known to chase a student's car on foot to try to make a 'citizen's arrest' for some traffic infraction, real or imagined.

Chalquist finally revealed what this meeting was about. It seems that the irrational antagonist of three days ago was actually a professor at the college, and a friend of Chalquist's, whose complaint was that, according to him, he had to walk around the back of the van while Mary Ann was being dropped off. He had become angry at being unable to assault the offending driver, so falsely accused Michael of attempting to run over him.

Despite a calm explanation of what really happened, Chalquist had already decided to believe his friend, or at least that the truth was irrelevant when it came from a bearded student. The verdict was suspension.

Work was hard to find in the small college town. Michael had a job at a hamburger shop for a few evening hours, but it was not enough to live on. With no money and no school, he needed to find full-time work. Kansas City, 60 miles away, seemed to be the best option. He called Sue, his stepmother, *who refused to even send money for gas. He pawned a portable radio for ten dollars and set off to seek his fortune.*

The first available job was picking mushrooms in an unheated shed for \$1.40 per hour. It was February. The cold work might not have been so hard to endure with had a warm place to sleep. The van, even with the electric heater plugged in at a small friendly trailer park, was not an ideal winter home.

A few weeks later, Mary Ann also got suspended from Central Missouri State College. The charge: throwing a pair of panties out the window during a panty raid. She might have escaped her fate if she hadn't admitted doing it.

He saw Mary Ann a few times after leaving Warrensburg, but the distance was a hindrance. She took a job in the office of the state highway patrol. In time, they lost contact. They had learned a great deal from one another, experiencing important transitions together, changes that would affect the rest of their lives. The love affair may not have been destined to last, but they had shared good times; passionate times; times to remember.

Kansas City

Mushroom picking, in February, is not as pleasant as it sounds. The unheated, drafty sheds were much too cold. Gathering fungi growing in soil-filled shelves was not hard work, but it was barely tolerable, even wearing multiple sweaters under a jacket. At the end of his shift, he drove his home, the Greenbrier van, to its appointed spot at the trailer park on Highway 40, plug in an extension cord, and bask in the warmth of the electric heater.

One day he met a resident of the park who offered to let him stay in his trailer, along with him and his roommate. It was not a large space, but it did provide more warmth and a place to shower. Soon afterward he found a better job at a McDonald's. The pay was only \$1.25, but there was a food allowance and it was warm inside. Those were the days of the 18 cent hamburger.

It was at McDonald's that he met Kay, who would become his first wife.. She and her sister Sue were frequent customers. They attended a nearby junior college. Michael began dating her, and also a red-haired Catholic girl who was fun to dance with, and had a passionate personality, but was afraid to use it fully. His

relationship with Kay was more satisfying. Things progressed, and they married in September.

He got a second job, at the IRS processing center, weighing bundles of tax forms. It was faster than counting them so each accountant would get an equal number.

Later that year he was hired by the Missouri Highway Department as a “rodman” with a survey crew. One of the tasks was to stand in the middle of a highway holding a stop sign. The pay wasn’t bad, and fortunately he was never run over.

Dodging the Draft

Michael married Kay in September. They moved to Hannibal, partly because he had an appointment in St. Louis later that month. Selective service had requested his presence.

When he boarded the bus in Hannibal, bound for St. Louis, he had no particular plan, except a willingness to do whatever necessary to not be a participant in the meaningless killing and dying in southeast Asia.

His strong opposition to the war was not based on religion. Right and wrong was not to be determined by mythical beings. Morality evolved long before religion tried to incorporate it in some of its writings.

There have been justifiable wars, but they have been few and far between. Most of them have been avoidable and unnecessary, and the one in Vietnam was one of the worst.

Not having a religion made conscientious objector status unlikely. The government's attitude at the time was rather hostile toward CO's. Given the growing opposition to the war, the supply of new troops could slow to a trickle if a belief in nonviolence would suffice.

It was chilly on the bus. Michael had worn only a pair of cutoffs, and an old white shirt that had the sleeves cut short. If he were forcibly deprived of civilian clothes, they would not be a great loss. Few words were exchanged among the riders. No doubt even the more warmly dressed felt the chill of the draft. Most seemed resigned to their unknown fate. None were enthusiastic about it.

The assembly line nature of the medical inspection was predictable. After all, draftees were spare parts for the war machine, needing only to be checked for major defects.

An ingrown toenail was dismissed as not debilitating. Some answers on the forms resulted in an interview. When Michael said he'd rather shoot American officers than Vietnamese, they responded "No problem".

One claim got more serious attention: being a 'latent homosexual'. In those unenlightened days, gay men were the military's biggest fear. A naval doctor interviewed him, seeming skeptical, but sent Michael to the psychologist, who seemed to be a civilian. The story, created on the fly,, was "repressed homosexual tendencies" which he was trying to overcome. Being married was part of the overcoming process, If trapped into an all-male environment like the army, Michael claimed, he might not be able to resist.

The psychologist evaluated the story and the reasoning, and then contrived a "test" of sorts. "Drop your pants", he ordered, and attempted stimulation with a the tip of a key on Michael's thigh. Neither the doctor nor his key were sexually exciting, but that evidently proved nothing, since he checked the proper box to classify Michael as "1-Y", the next best thing to a 4-F. It meant "only draft him in case of a national emergency".

Michael walked out of the chilly air-conditioned building into the pleasant warm air, elated at having won his freedom. Escaping to Canada, hiding as a fugitive, or accepting prison for refusing might have felt like honorable martyrdom to the cause, but the effect, saying "No!" to the war, was accomplished. Life could go on.

Each individual can only do a small part, but those of us who spoke out, marched in the streets, and refused to kill or die in needless carnage should remain proud. Numbers grew and minds were changed. The war ended. We can wish that could have happened sooner, before 58,000 Americans and 2 million Vietnamese died.

Needless wars can be ended, or stopped before they start, if we remember our past mistakes and refuse to repeat them.

The Honeymoon

Michael and Kay first headed east in his red Chevy Biscayne. Kay had friends in Pennsylvania, so they stopped by their rural village and sipped some of their home-made dandelion wine. Then, on to New York to look at tall buildings and listen to folk music in a Greenwich Village bar.

They decided to trade the aging Chevy for a new Volkswagen Kharman Ghia, in Newark. Driving south through Maryland, around midnight, a Highway Patrolman pulled them over. The Missouri plate, transferred from the Chevy, was not yet registered in Missouri. Though one might think that could wait until they returned

to Missouri, it was a technical violation. They had to follow the patrol to “court”, a shack in the back yard of the judge, who sat unshaven at old wooden desk in a dirty white T-shirt who collected a \$20 fine.

On to California

Back in Hannibal, they stuffed the Ghia with everything they owned, including Samantha the cat, preparing to Californicate

On the way to Los Angeles they stopped to see Death Valley. There were sand dunes; mounds of fine-grained desert sand formed by the last wind that shaped them. Your feet would sink deep into them. The landscape was vastly different from the tree and grass-sprouting damp soil of Missouri; the newness and difference were welcome.

As they left, having parked a little too much into the sand, the wheels spun a little before gaining traction. Worries were only momentary; the rear-engined Ghia was good on such terrain, and they continued westward.

Having arrived in the City of the Angels, their first task was to find a residence. At that time, rents were not a great deal higher than in other parts of the country, outside of the luxury neighborhoods. They found a pleasant 3-story apartment building with a vacant studio for \$85 a month. A couple of months later a one-bedroom became available for not much more. It was only a couple of miles from downtown. Michael had received a modest inheritance from his deceased grandparents at 21. They were not at risk for starvation while getting started, but they would need an income soon.

Michael took a Federal civil service exam for office work. While waiting to hear of openings, he tried a temporary job at a Postal distribution center. He was assigned to the task of dragging huge sacks of mail across a large wooden floor and tossing them in the appropriate cart at the edge. After 2 or 3 days of this, he decided to wait and see what the Civil Service might offer.

US Army Audit Agency in Pasadena called for an interview. It was a file clerk job, easy enough and reasonably pleasant. The auditors were civilians, tasked to make sure Army personnel were not wasting their budgets. After all, napalming Vietnamese was an expensive undertaking. It wouldn't do to waste money in the business of wasting human lives.

The job was full-time but temporary until the office was to be moved to the San Francisco area. As that time approached, a permanent job came up at the Civil Service Commission itself. It was in downtown L.A. in the Eastern Columbia Building, 9th Street and Broadway. This was the office that tested applicants and

filed applications for everyone applying for Federal jobs in the area. It was before the computer era, so all was done with paper, kept in row after row of steel file cabinets in alphabetical order. Michael's co-workers were mostly younger and friendlier than the Army Auditors, and he enjoyed the job.

Kay also took the civil service test, and before long she was hired at the V.A. Regional Office. They became a 2-income couple, secure in Paradise.

One day they drove by a sign advertising L.S. Dexter Real Estate. He said, "How could we go wrong with L.S.D.?" They stopped by his office. He had no houses for rent, but one for sale for \$10,000. \$1500 down and \$75 a month payments. That seems incredibly cheap today. It was affordable even then. They bought it. The house at 2814 Coolidge was in a pleasant neighborhood not far from the L.A. River.

It needed a coat of paint. Barn red, and some interesting colors inside. It was home. L.S. Dexter was too old to be a hippie, but he was a decent human being. His office seemed to be part of his home. A year or two later he called again, with another deal, this one with two bedrooms, a full basement, and a garage.

It was in the same neighborhood, closer to the L.A. River (an unusual river, having been tamed and urbanized by the Army Engineer Corps, and given a concrete bed. Unless it rained a lot, the flow was more like a creek down the center of its large paved channel.) The new place was also reasonably priced at \$16,000. Payments were \$200 a month.

Michael and Kay moved, and put a "for rent" sign on the Coolidge house, and soon got a tenant-- John George, his wife Joya and their young daughter. They also became friends. John was a different sort of person, originally from Texas, with an outgoing, larger-than-life personality. He learned his trade as a cook in the Navy, and worked at a Denny's. He liked to play chess, and taught Michael how to play. He seldom beat John, but learned to play defensively, enough of a challenge that John wanted a game whenever they got together.

In 1971 Michael decided to resume formal education. His credits were just shy of junior status, so the plan was to do a year at Sana Monica College, which was free for residents, then on to UCLA. He needed to move to Sana Monica. There was a basement apartment on 4th Street, part of a house divided into 3 or 4 units. SMC was quite good, with some interesting professors. Michael did well, improving his GPA considerably, while working part time at his job with the Civil Service Commission.

At UCLA, his best history course was taught by Fawn Brodie, a historical biographer, who wrote several best sellers, biographies on Thomas Jefferson,

Joseph Smith, Thaddeus Stevens, Sir Richard Burton, and Richard Nixon (which she was working on at the time). She believed that the course of history was strongly determined by certain influential characters, and sought to understand their minds and motivations when writing about them. She was a fascinating lecturer and a very perceptive analyst of her subjects.

Michael graduated UCLA in 1974 with a BA in history. It's not a degree that brings opportunities He continued the government job, and, in partnership with Jim Beckner, a friend he had met through John George, he went into the business of making and selling terrariums, which had become a popular item, being a miniature ecosystem in a glass jar. They used the basement at Newell Street, the second house Michael and Kay owned.

Divergence

Both houses were rented out; Michael and Kay stayed in an apartment in Westwood. Why they didn't move back to 2820 Newell is uncertain. Kay had become pregnant. That was not a problem, but when she began to insist that they leave California and move back to Missouri, the first serious rift in their relationship began.

To Michael, the idea of leaving was like a slap in the face. They had arrived in the city at a good time, when the cost of living there was still affordable, and together they had achieved success in a place with delightful weather, plentiful entertainment, interesting people; beaches. They hadn't sought exceptional wealth, but they were comfortable there. Until then, he had thought the happiness was shared by both of them.

A move back to Missouri would feel like failure. How could Kay want that? Maybe she didn't understand how it felt to her husband. Maybe he didn't try hard enough to find the right words to explain it to her. Even if he had, he couldn't be sure it would matter; the harmony was quickly fading away.

That harmony, the sense of oneness in a relationship, doesn't disappear all at once. It fades gradually, until one day it ceases to guide our choices.

Sometimes Michael would drive the short distance from work, downtown, to the Newell house basement to make terrariums, and later go home to Kay in West L.A. I could be that he did that more often, or stayed longer, than he needed to, though he didn't think about that.

Under the Flowerpot

The upstairs house tenant had moved out, so it was advertised with a sign in front. One Saturday afternoon Michael was in the basement planting terrariums when he heard a voice from the top of the basement stairs. He looked up. There she was, the sun glowing behind her, descending the steps, a vision of beauty. She had come to rent the house. Her name was Corinne Estrada

He rented her the house, of course. She had two children, a boy about 7 and a girl who was younger. She also had a husband who was not with her at the time. He was on a trip to Mexico for a reason that was never mentioned.

Not long after she moved in, she and Michael began talking, sitting on the steps. Her husband, she said, was half Irish and half Mexican, and had abused her on occasion. She did not seem anxious for him to return from his trip. Her son had emotional problems, and needed to be taken to therapy sessions.

Soon the friendship with Corinne turned romantic. She was a delightful, funny, open, generous woman, as well as beautiful. Neither consciously set out to seduce the other. They were both lonely in different ways, needing someone; needing to feel.

One evening she joined him in the waterbed, shyly she revealed her perfect light brown body, the softness of her skin; her exotic spicy flavor. If he did not love her already, he surely did after that. And love tends to ignore obstacles, and consequences. Humans in love often think irrationally

We humans probably evolved that tendency back when we were struggling to reproduce enough for group survival. If there's too much thinking, there might not be enough fucking. That adaptation does have its occasional drawback in the 20th century (and the 21st), but it's part of what makes humans interesting.

Michael began spending more and more time in the basement terrarium workshop, often sleeping there after "working late", maximizing the time he could spend with Corinne. There was a flowerpot on the kitchen windowsill where they would leave one another love notes and other messages. They shared a single phone line with an extension. To converse, he would tap on the ceiling, or she on the floor, and dial a single digit to stop the dial tone.

Corinne had a Great Dane, a friendly and playful dog. He would stand on his hind legs and rest his front paws on Michael's shoulders, looking down at the top of his head.

Kay never said that she suspected the affair, but one afternoon when he thought she had overheard something, Michael confessed it. He was relieved to have told her; he got no pleasure from deception. She seemed less surprised and less

angry than might have been expected. No doubt she was sad that they had grown apart, though perhaps less clear about the reasons. While it lasted, it had been a good marriage. The two of them were just heading in different directions.

The eventual return of Corinne's abusive husband was a concern. Michael needed a place away from the basement where he and Corinne could meet. That is how he met Bill O'Reilly-- not the misinformative Fox News commentator, but a different con man from Long Beach. He had placed an ad offering free rent for doing interior remodeling in a house in Altadena. The house was quite livable, though in need of painting and paneling. O'Reilly was what is now called a house-flipper.

The anticipated romantic getaways didn't happen as planned. Corinne had two kids to care for. Michael had bought a 1949 Ford panel truck, painted orange, leaving his Datsun pickup for Corinne to drive, but she wasn't coming to visit. When the Altadena house was sold, O'Reilly had Michael house-sit a rather nice place in eastern Hollywood. Michael had a phone installed under the name of Harry Frog. He had once told Corinne about a species of hairy frogs, which she found hilarious, so it seemed the ideal secret identity. In many of the notes under the flowerpot, he called her "Princess" and signed them "your frog".

Despite long conversations and love letters, the affair was going nowhere. He wrote:

"When one is frequently asked, "Why?", one sooner or later asks oneself that question as well.

"Why me?" queries Corinne. "Why do you love me?"

"How dare she ask such a question?" I wonder to myself. How can she, with the classically beautiful profile, the smile that Mona Lisa wished she had, the perfect body, the perfect soul...how can such a woman, modest though she may be, wonder why she is loved? I can only answer with the question, "How could I not love you?"

Yet, when I ask myself the question, I must go deeper than that, because I know there is something more basic than the love for another human being. It is more primal than the need to be loved. It is the love for life itself. I love her because she IS life.

For the first time I am living my own existence. I had watched it, like a drama (or a comedy) that was performed for my amusement and edification. That viewpoint is a vital tool at times, to hew a sane path for oneself through the jungle of existence, but life is not solely a spectator sport. Its meaning cannot be deciphered by analysis, but by participation. Through the skylight in the roof of aloofness one sees the fascinating homo sapiens, self-named, as they laugh, cry, hurt, writhe in ecstasy, maim one another in body and spirit, love one another in body and mind, perform their self-cast roles on Shakespeare's world-stage. What matter that one might have the best seat in the house, sitting invisibly and invincibly center-stage? The actors in a play perform for themselves. The audience is only necessary to pay their bills.

Who would choose to be the audience, rather than the player? Many do, it seems, but I, no longer.

--February 9, 1975

Corinne...

Well, here I am in our second new house, listening (more or less) to the radio and watching my lamp burn red oil softly. It glows with a warm light, as you do. I think of the fire of your love; the gentleness of your smile; the softness of your skin. You want to know why I love you? Read all my old notes to you. It is hard to tell you all the reasons at once. And when I tell you one or two, you doubt that you have the qualities I mention, as if you were doubting your own name. I love your name, too. Its sound is like you: soft as a breeze; firm as a tree. I could listen to you talk for hours just for the sound of your voice. But, I don't-- I listen to you for what you say. Whoever you speak about, you do it with an awareness and thoughtfulness that is uncommon. You are as intelligent as I, and perhaps more so. I have the advantage of a few years of college, but that is only knowledge, which anyone can acquire. I value knowledge for its usefulness, but I value understanding more, and for itself, because it is a quality, not an acquisition. To love you for your mind may seem unromantic, but it is part of my feeling anyway. To me, adoration must include admiration. I have no desire to feel superior to anyone, especially not to the one I love. Rather, we should feel equal in our respect for one another's thoughts, ideas, and feelings. We have much to learn from one another. We will have plenty of time to explore one another's minds and bodies. The rest of our lives."
--August 12, 1975

However much we believe that, if only we can express our love clearly and well, we will live happily ever after, sometimes it isn't enough.

Michael's marriage to Kay was still ending, though. He filed for divorce.

Meanwhile, O'Reilly asked Michael to collect rent for two houses he owned in south L.A. He began talking about the profits he made buying and selling houses, and invited Michael to his home in Long Beach, where he met Mrs. O'Reilly and his son, a deaf teenager a bright but mischievous boy who liked to cruise around on his golf cart and throw eggs at houses after dark. At one point O'Reilly loaned Michael a car he had acquired, a Triumph TR3 with an 289 engine and automatic transmission from a Mustang. He had owned a stock TR3 in the past. They are quite responsive even with a 4 cylinder. This one was much faster. It was a clever ploy by O'Reilly. When you appear to extend friendship and trust to someone, they are likely to reciprocate. Trusting O'Reilly turned out to be a mistake.

He offered the chance to invest in his real estate acquisitions, and share the profits when they were sold. Michael took second mortgages on his houses for a few thousand to invest. Then, O'Reilly came up with a new proposal. The story was that his wife had property in Majorca, Spain, and, for some reason, they needed to transport some jewelry there without declaring it. Michael was to get a passport and make the trip, becoming an unsuspected smuggler. Naturally they would pay for his flight. He got a passport and waited to hear from them. Nothing happened. He had nothing invested in the Majorca scheme but the fee for the passport. It was merely a distraction from the real estate con. The O'Reilly's disappeared, along with his money.

Normally, Michael would have been more wary of doing business with someone like Bill O'Reilly. For years he had made careful decisions, lived economically, and finished college. But the life of steady progress turned to disappointment when his wife sought a different, contrary future. Perhaps, he thought, life should be an adventure, decisions spontaneous. Thinking and planning could hardly compare to the delightful smile of his new-found love, and the anticipation of her embrace.

Michael's Civil Service job remained part-time even after he finished college. He found a more interesting one at a place called Le Sex Shoppe, an adult bookstore and movie arcade in Hollywood. Working there provided a new perspective on people and their passions. There are magazines, books, and devices for any kink you can think of. The one titled "Water & Power", for example, is not about municipal utilities. Michael wasn't into the kinks himself, but he enjoyed being aware of them.

One evening a customer named Doug Wise struck up a conversation with Michael. He was friendly, intelligent, and smiled a lot. He said he was from Colorado. A couple of days later he returned with a young blonde. He introduced her. She was Andrea, from Erie, Pennsylvania, cute, energetic, and shapely. She was 18, she said.

Doug needed to find Andrea a new place to stay, and a new man for her to be with. She had been fun, but he had a wife. From their previous conversation he'd decided Michael would be suitable. Andrea seemed to agree, stayed until closing time, and went home with Michael. They explored a mutual enthusiasm for sensual activities, and began a relationship.

Delightful as she was, it wasn't exactly love. She did help soothe the loss of love, though, and they formed a bond. Sometime later, after the divorce was final, Kay was ready to move back to Missouri. She asked Michael for help. After all, he had the Datsun pickup. Naturally, she wanted to take a whole apartment full of furniture, so more space was needed. Michael gathered some lumber and built a shell about 7 feet high on the truck to hold all the stuff in.

Her sister Julie had flown out to help. They loaded the truck and set out, Kay and Julie in her Volkswagen; Michael and Andrea in the truck. All went smoothly for a time, though in a few hundred miles they had to replace the rear tires. It seems that radial tires didn't hold up with extra weight and higher pressure-- they needed bias-ply truck tires. Heat caused the steel to melt through the rubber and turn the tire into a ball of steel wool.

They cruised down the highway, Michael leading the way in the truck. Andrea was being affectionate and playful, snuggling next to Michael and using a vibrator on herself. It was a little distracting, and the truck weaved a bit. Kay noticed.

They were passing Grand Canyon, and decided to stop for some sightseeing and a driving break. Andrea, who was taking her turn driving, turned into the parking lot. She wasn't going fast, but with the wheel turned sharply to the right, she grazed the curb at the entrance. The high-stacked load tilted, broke the wood frame, and tumbled onto the lot. To put it mildly, it was rather upsetting. Michael assessed the damage. Some of the boards were broken, but the frame could be nailed back together. Kay went to find a hardware store to buy nails and a hammer. Repairing the frame and reloading all the stuff took half a day.

It wasn't really Andrea's fault. She wasn't used to driving a heavily loaded pickup with a high center of gravity. They drove on to Lee's Summit, completing the delivery. Michael and Andrea headed back to California through Colorado, stopping at Glenwood Springs for a sensual dip in a natural hot bath.

Back in Los Angeles, they moved into the Coolidge house. Foreclosure was approaching, but there was still time. One day the forecloser, impatient, decided to harrass Michael by sending the police, who pounded on the door, waking Michael and Andrea. There was paperwork showing the eviction was still pending, which the police acknowledged. However, they spotted a baggie of weed on the coffee table. The good news was that California had recently reduced marijuana to a misdemeanor. They issued a citation, which eventually resulted in a \$50 fine.

In a few days Michael found an apartment not far from the Sex Shoppe. Life with Andrea was a pleasure. She was not Corinne, but very affectionate and fun to be with. One morning, though, Michael woke up and found her gone, leaving a letter saying that she was going back to Erie. She also revealed that she had exaggerated her age by three years. She had seemed both physically and mentally mature enough that Michael had never suspected she was younger. That was a shock, but mostly he missed her; wished she hadn't left.

Meanwhile, John George had left Joya, and was with Terri Krauser, a younger woman, the daughter of a psychiatrist. She was shapely, pretty, and energetic. They seemed to have a good relationship, though John was a bit on the male-dominant side. He wasn't abusive, but he had the old attitude that the man made the decisions and the woman obeyed. Away from home, he would flirt with other women any chance he got.

Since Michael was alone they invited him to stay in their spare bedroom. He accepted. It was a pleasant apartment in Santa Monica, a friendly situation, and cheaper to pay for a bedroom than a whole apartment. John got a job opportunity at a restaurant near San Francisco, which meant that he would be away for a week or two at a time. He was glad to have a friend there to watch out for Terri.

To be continued