

Cosmicron 4 1989-2002

August 20, 1989
Shari and share alike

She was sitting at the end of the bar by the back door, with intense seductive eyes that seemed to be looking at Michael rather than at the short gray-haired man who was talking to her and buying her drinks. After Frankie's closed, they met again at an after-hours party. Her name was Shari Lightfoot. She was nearly as tall as his 5' 10", not round, but far from slim. He took her home with him where they enjoyed the rest of the night.

Shari lived with her parents in Scottsdale, and had been taking nursing classes at the Community College. In the evening, though, she enjoyed the company of regular people who drank beer and rode motorcycles.

May 15, 1990

On May 1, our protagonist moved from 9644 to 9606, on 11th Avenue. He moved from an environment of unsupervised screaming brats and irritating neighbors to pleasant Harley-riding people, with the musical beat of V-twins. The old landlord practiced 18-century capitalism, and the new one seemed relaxed and reasonable. It was a good one-block move.

Captain Cab Fends off Assault

A crazed drunk began behaving inappropriately in Cab 203 shortly after the start of a 4-block ride. When asked to leave the vehicle, he responded by striking the driver, the first such occurrence in his 7-year career. At this, the Captain seized the assailant by the throat and forced him back against the seat. This blocked any further attack. Then he asked the dispatcher to send the police. The misbehaving passenger fled on foot.

Shirley

Shirley had an injured leg from a motorcycle accident, and Michael sometimes gave her a ride and helped her out, like a damsel in distress. She was attractive and likable, a spirited personality, though she could sometimes be insecure and moody. She was a talented tattoo artist, and rewarded Michael with a mermaid and sea monster on his thigh.

Friday, May 18

Michael had met **Brat**, as she called herself, 6 months before when she was out of jail on a work furlough, which had been granted due to a computer error. Finally, she was out on parole. She never mentioned what her crime was, and he didn't ask. She remembered him, and wanted to fuck. She was quite enthusiastic at that activity. Brat lived up to her nickname, usually in a fun way, but the affair was brief.

Jody was a very interesting lady; extremely pretty, a great body, and a nice person with a friendly smile. She was attracted to men who seemed to need her, whose lives needed "fixing". Unfortunately, they were often ungrateful, using her affection but failed to return it, and she was devastated.

Helping others doesn't always produce gratitude. We often forget that. Though we usually help others because we want to, it enhances love in the giver more than the givee.

Doesn't love conquer all?

Love between sex partners is the force that makes human society possible. It is the glue of civilization. Yet, we understand it even less than gravity, which holds the universe together. Like gravity, love does tend to act according to certain natural laws, but we don't always know what they are.

Change

Although the young are the natural leaders of change, when things improve, they may think they have done all they could, because they don't know how good it can get. When things get worse, they may become apathetic because they don't know how bad things can get.

A Taxi Tale

It was early on a Thursday morning. Michael had been driving all night. Wednesday night had been even slower than usual. He pulled his taxi into a North Phoenix driveway and started to get out to knock, but a woman waved out the door and said "Just a minute", so he sat back down and started to roll a cigarette.

Shortly, two Phoenix fuzzmobiles pulled up in front of the same house. A tall slim young man with one bad hand emerged from the house to confer with the cops. Michael overheard him tell the boys in blue that he had been threatened at gunpoint over some money he owed. No, he didn't want to make a report. No, he couldn't identify them. He just wanted protection getting into the cab.

The man got in, accompanied by his dog, white with black spots. "This could be interesting", thought Michael. Visions of skillful tail evasions, and a generous tip flashed through his head. Once the trip was underway, headed to Scottsdale, the true story was revealed.

“The reason those guys held me at gunpoint was I’ve got 2 pounds of good crystal, and they wanted it.” Michael commented, “Then I don’t think calling the cops was a good idea.”

“I didn’t tell them about the crystal, and they don’t know my name”, he replied. “I just wanted them to scare off those guys.” A little further down the road, he asked, “Can you have your dispatcher make a phone call for me?”

“No.”

“I’ll pay you extra.”

“The dispatcher won’t do personal phone calls.”

“It’s not personal-- it’s business.”

“It’s not cab business. I can stop at a pay phone if you want.” They stopped at the Central and Coulter Circle-K. After the call, he said, “A woman in a white Ford is bringing me some money. We have to wait.” The meter was clicking 40 cents every 80 seconds. The driver had no complaint.

“If you see a blue bug or a red truck, go, and don’t stop.”

“OK.”

“Let’s go do a line.” They drove to a residential area and parked by a hedge. “Ever heard of green kryptonite?” Sure enough, the white powder had a greenish tinge. It was potent, too-- eye-opening, nose-burning, teeth-clenching speed. They went back to the corner to wait for the white Ford. The bad-handed man watched each passing car tensely for 20 minutes, mistakenly spotting it several times. Finally he said, “We can’t wait any longer. Take me to 30th and Thomas, but first stop at Western Union. As Michael smoothly wove his way down the busy streets, the Dalmatian occasionally looked at another car and barked. Perhaps he shared his master’s paranoia. Michael kept a sharp eye on the rear-view for tails, but there were none, except on the dog.

The Snake Lady (some constrictions may apply)

She appeared to be with someone at Frankie’s, so though Michael noticed an impish attractiveness in her expression, interesting tattoos, and a pleasant slim body, he didn’t pursue her.

Later, her companion disappeared. She seemed amused by Terry’s wry humor as the clock hand reached to close the bar. Terry didn’t react to this encouragement; he left at closing. As Michael walked out to his bike, he heard her say something about hitching to 20th Street and McDowell. He asked her if she’d like to come over for a beer, and he would give her a ride home later. She readily agreed, as if that’s what she wanted to do all along.

She proved to be talkative and bright, a good conversationalist. Michael and Terry had some tapes of lesser-known artists-- Tom Waits, Ken Nordine, etc., and she seemed to enjoy them.

She said “They call me the Snake Lady.” She took to Monte the python right away, and vice versa. She had a balled python of her own, she said, and revealed that Monte is a female, while hers is a male, so they discussed intertwining their snakes-- object, snakelets.

It was not yet clear who she wanted to intertwine with-- she wasn't notably flirtatious with either Michael or Terry. . After hours of music and talk, Michael was tired, and thought she might be more interested in Terry, so he went to his room,, undressed, and laid down. Shortly thereafter she came in and laid down next to him, waking him up.. Before going to sleep they made love twice. Her slim agile body was quite delightful, and she seemed to genuinely enjoy herself.

When he awoke, her naked sleeping body still looked good, but he had a dental appointment. He returned later and took her home.

Brandy

Luck with women never hurts, and sometimes fortune comes in spurts.

Just days later, a small, slim “tiny dancer” with a beguiling smile expressed a desire to take a ride on the Ratster...and afterward, on Michael.

Terry Curry was a great roommate in many ways. Michael and Jill had met him in Los Angeles and thought he was interesting. He showed them computer games back in 1982 when they were new. He was a systems analyst for General Telephone, a job he was good at, but he disliked the company's management. He was witty and intelligent.

When they left California he was still living and working in Santa Monica. A year or 3 later, though, he was fed up with GTE and called Michael, who suggested he come to Phoenix, offering him a place to stay. They became good friends. He introduced Michael to computers-- how to program and build them from used parts. He learned a lot from Terry, back when home computers were a new and growing interest.

The only problem with Terry is that he didn't have an income, and wasn't trying to find work. Michael was supporting both of them. Eventually, that would become an issue.

“Oh, Mr. Taxi Driver!”

The teenage girl walked purposefully toward my cab as she uttered those words. It pleased me to hear the tone and form of respect she used. There are those who use the term “cabbie”, which, though not specifically derogatory, usually implies that we are, in someone's opinion, low in status. Such people

refer to bellhops as “boy”, and look down on service occupations, even when they are highly skilled, self-employed professionals.

The girl had left the group with whom she had been hanging out in the Safeway parking lot to approach my gleaming Yellow Cab as it sat under the gleaming Xenon light awaiting my next call. She was long-limbed, immaturely formed, but pleasant to observe. As she drew near, she smiled and politely asked, “Do you have a cigarette?”

I said, “I’ll have to roll you one.”

Her eyes lit up. “Roll a cigarette? Oh, wow, how do you do that?” She really seemed to have never heard of such a thing.

“Like this”, I replied, and opened my tin, withdrew my rolling machine and papers, and prepared her a perfect Zig-Zag cigarette as she watched, fascinated. I handed it to her. She held it as if it were a magic talisman or a rare jewel.

“Wow”, she said, “I’ll cherish it!” She turned to return to her friends, intent on sharing her new discovery. She probably didn’t hear me say, “Or, you could smoke it.”

* * *

Dead Stepmother

On December 30, as 1990 was rushing to an inevitable death, Susan Leona Strode Waller, Michael’s stepmother, died in St. Petersburg, Florida.

His half-sister Pat, who had moved her to Florida when she grew too old to stay in the rural Hannibal home by herself, mourned her. Michael, however, had long since lost any affection for her, aware of her broken promises years before.

He was not resentful of Pat, though. He hadn’t seen her for awhile, but he cared and sympathized with her. He wrote her a letter:

“I was thinking that it’s too bad we weren’t closer in age so that we could relate on the same level when we were growing up. By the time we could have, it was time for me to leave. Nevertheless, considering that conditions were optimum for sibling rivalry, I thought we got along rather well. Were you serious about it bothering you that I used to call you “brat”? You should know that nicknames are a sign of affection, especially when it can’t be openly admitted.

I know it wasn’t your fault that everyone thought you were cute and adorable, while I was either ignored or yelled at. Still, I could not openly join your fan club, and I never thought you needed my approval. I often wished you could be on my side, since no one else was, but it didn’t seem likely.

Adversity and solitude in childhood has probably made me a stronger adult. I learned the value of relying on myself for approval as well as material needs. I learned the importance of questioning authority. I value honesty and integrity much higher than money, so I will not pretend to be someone I’m not for material gain.

It is said that he who tells the truth should have one foot in the stirrup.”

THE SHARI ERA

Shari Lightfoot, who Michael met in Frankie's in late 1989, gradually began to spend more and more time with him. It wasn't yet exclusive, but she would spend the night more often than not. Working long hours in the cab, it was good not to have to look for a new woman every few days. She was a talented graphic artist, and experimented with sculpture as well.

Shari and Michael decided to cohabitate, and needed a place with more space. The apartment on 11th Ave. near Vogel was fine for Shari's frequent sleepovers, but for 3 full-time residents it would be a bit cramped. He didn't want to abandon Terry as a roommate.

There was a house for rent in Glendale, small, but with two bedrooms. The property had two houses, and the owner, an older Harley-rider named Barry, lived in the rear one and had the front house for rent. He was generally pleasant and fair as a landlord. So, the house on West State became home.

Shari had painted a picture of a dragon, and she wanted to have it tattooed on her back. Michael introduced her to Jill, and the two of them got along well. Jill offered to do the tattoo, and started working on it. It took several sessions to complete, and turned out nicely.

Jill had divorced Michael and married her former boss, John, but she and Michael were still good friends. That Jill seemed to like Shari was a point in Shari's favor.

There was a tattoo convention scheduled in Anaheim. Jill wanted to enter Shari's dragon in a contest, so the four of them decided to attend.

April 4, 1991

According to the plan, Jill and John arrived to pick them up at 7:00 am. By 7:30 they were on the way to Garden Grove, an Orange County suburb of Los Angeles near Anaheim. They arrived at the Hyatt at Harbor and Chapman in good time, before registration began at 2:30. Driving up the stone-tiled drive past the giant pink flamingos, they could see illustrations on strategically bared skin.

After an overpriced cocktail in the hotel bar they stood in a long line to register for the convention, getting badge pins, ballots, and schedules. A brief fight erupted nearby, cause unknown. A party of sorts was next, for the tattooed to see and be seen. The video camera wouldn't cam; the battery was dead.. After viewing hundreds of moving pictures walking around, they found a motel nearby.

In their room, Shari and Michael gave the video camera a battery charge and tested it by making their own sex video. Next day was the tattoo competition, when the conventioners voted to choose the best tattoos in various categories. Shari's dragon, done by Jill, was entered in *best back or chest*. Each tattoo was paraded on stage, accompanied by the person whose skin it was on. Michael recorded the events on videotape, which was not as easy as it looks on TV.

Nearby Michael saw a channel 5 news reporter interviewing several artists and contestants, so he taped him taping them. Later, the 10:00 pm news showed that the TV reporter had taped Michael taping them. Pointing the camera at the TV, Michael taped the reporter's tape of Michael taping him. If he had been there to tape Michael doing that, it might have led to an

infinite regression, leaving objective reality to enter a spiral of mutually dependent electronic symbiosis. If a tree falls in a forest unwitnessed by Eyewitness News, does it make an unconfirmed report? Chances are, the other trees will leave, refusing to bark about it.

The news report was quite positive. Sometimes the media are snide or snooty about tattoos, or anything outside their narrow suburban lifestyles. Even the Arizona Republic had a well-written 2-page article with color pictures. The second night they went to Venice, taking late night and early morning walks on the beach.

Saturday there were tattooing booths open to the public for a \$5 admission, an opportunity to choose from among the best tattoo artists from all over the world. The planners hadn't expected the size of the crowd. It was so packed that it was difficult to move or even stand, and videotaping was a real problem. More than 4000 attended Saturday and Sunday. Despite the congestion, it was interesting to watch.

There was a lecture by Jack Rudy on the history of black and grey tattooing. He is considered the originator of fine-line work, and specializes in doing portraits. The fine-line single-needle style began mostly in prisons, where self-taught artists with lots of time on their hands built their own machines from cassette-recorder motors, toothbrush handles, and guitar strings, many of whom did very good detailed work at a time when professional artists were using a much heavier line style. Rudy's contribution was a synthesis of the two.

They left Saturday evening, since Sunday would be a repeat of Saturday.

If anything happened between 1991 and 1994, it should be inserted here

9407.15

Bright and early, around 2:00 PM, after loading the sky-blue Escort, inside and top, with everything conceivable, Michael and Shari headed north for Oak Creek Canyon. After a strenuous, sometimes snail-like hill climb, they found the \$10 campsites full, so they continued north toward Flagstaff. In the tall pines of the Coconino Forest, 13 miles south of Flagstaff, they found a free and relatively isolated campsite. They erected the tent and the shelter

Michael set out to hunt for food and drink. He marked the spot with a red strap and a yellow stake. Soon he discovered a Safeway, bought supplies, and headed back to camp. They

subsisted on steak, beans, potatoes, bananas, coffee, bread, fruit juice, hamburger, rum, birthday cake, and other assorted survival rations.

Eagles, hawks, and owls sang their bird songs, and three wild bovines foraged nearby.

February 1995 Geoff's first marriage

Michael's son Geoff and his girlfriend Carrie had a daughter, born in December of 1994, making Michael a grandfather. A couple of months later they decided to get married in Kirksville, Missouri, where they had been in college. Michael was invited.

Michael and Shari, with a choice between his taxicab and her pale blue Escort, decided on a 3rd option-rent a car. It turned out to be a late-model Thunderbird. They didn't have to worry about a breakdown, and the car was smooth and comfortable. As they crossed Kansas on I-70, Michael was passing a truck, and not wanting to pass it too slowly, sped up a bit, doing about 5 mph over the limit. The Kansas Highway Patrol swept in, pulling them over. Usually patrols on the interstates aren't that exacting, especially when nothing unsafe was done. But that wasn't the reason for the stop. It was the out-of-state plate. They wanted to search for drugs. They requested permission, and Michael asked, "What if I say "no"? They could keep them on the side of the road while waiting for a search warrant. Discussing principles of law with the police seldom bears fruit. After the trunk search, they were able to continue to Kirksville.

The wedding was unremarkable. It was a typical ceremony, not notably romantic. As it happens, the marriage wasn't destined to last too long. It was, however, an opportunity to meet the baby granddaughter, and contemplate the concept of being a grandfather.

9511.18

Michael married Shari Lightfoot, thinking perhaps a third wife would be the magic number. (There are no magic numbers.) He had proposed while walking with her on the beach at night, after tattoo convention.

He still loved Jill, and always will, but the romance had been replaced by a long-distance friendship. By tattooing Shari, she had given her an informal stamp of approval. It wasn't something he thought was required, but it made the move more comfortable.

The wedding was done outdoors at a campground area called Seven Springs north of Phoenix, accessible by an unpaved stretch of road full of large loose

rocks and deep pot-holes. That was part of its charm, keeping the unadventurous public going elsewhere. Michael and Shari had enjoyed the spot several times before the wedding.

Shari had an interesting history. She was adopted by the Lightfeet, who thought at the time they were unable to have a natural child. All she was able to find about her birth mother was that she may have been a bank teller, but not her name. She was curious to know more, but did not spend much time searching. A few years later, DNA might have helped with that.

For a time she had a romance with a man who ended up in prison, wrote and visited with him often, and got in some trouble for smuggling drugs to him. That relationship had ended, it seems, before she met Michael.

Her adopted father, Bob Lightfoot, had been a successful pharmaceutical salesman, and retired with wealth. He and his wife enjoyed international travel regularly. In telling stories of their travels, he seemed to be obsessed with the kind and quality of toilets in different countries. After adopting Shari, the couple had two natural children, Heidi and Bill.

Shari had a talent for art, some drawing and painting, but her preference was sculpture, using plaster and metal. She wanted to learn welding, so Michael bought her some gas-welding equipment which she used to create some abstract pieces from scrap steel.

1996

Once upon a time, a woman worked for a church, trying to convert native people to her religion. She became disenchanted with this, and became a pet groomer for show canines. She had gone from a missionary position to doggie-styling.

9608.31 Labor Day Weekend

Mingus mountain between Prescott and Jerome-- highway 89A. Tall pines, short fat rocks, whistling winds, but mostly quiet enough to hear a fart at 100 yards, and smell it if the wind is right.

Sunday Michael and Shari took a hike and found a camp fireplace with the remains of an occult ritual, perhaps native American or Wiccan. There was a stick carved into the likeness of a snake, not detailed but suggestive, with several notches along it, and a sharp point at the tail. There were several wooden dowels, sharpened on one end as if by machine, some with square notches in the other ends. Some had been tied in pairs with cotton string, together with pouches, perhaps made of corn husks, containing some blue powdery substance. There was also a small bag of the blue powder, a corner of a plastic bag, tied but left in the fireplace. There were also some large bird feathers in the area.

Their campsite was the last that was reasonably accessible to a vehicle without 4-wheel drive; they drove over some large rocks to get this far. While they were camped, one Jeep Cherokee went further down, and returned later that day. The road in went south. They camped west of the road, facing east. To the west the land sloped down toward a valley, with another rise on the other side of it, all covered with pines, some cedar, and the occasional succulent and cactus.

To the east, on somewhat higher ground, stand several radio/TV towers, broadcasting and/or microwave relay. TV sound, mostly religious and home shopping, came in on several scanner frequencies. Glendale PD's trunked 856 to 860 megahertz frequencies came in just as clearly as in Glendale, though other Phoenix frequencies did not.

Though rain was reported to the north, there were only moderate breezes there, which of course continued to whistle-roar through the pines in a strange but pleasant almost surf-like sound.

A Future Holiday

Once an anonymous date on a calendar on which Labor Day might occur occasionally, September 8 was declared a national holiday by a unanimous vote of Congress in 2146, and a world holiday by the UN General Assembly in 2149. Designated Cosmic Unity Day, it was the birthday of Michael Owens Waller, also known as Michael Alonzo Walker, whose writings, transmitted toward space, became the basis of interstellar understanding between Earth and three extraterrestrial civilizations contacted so far. Although he was never paid for his work, Michael won a lottery, and was able to afford cryogenic preservation in 2049. After his scheduled thawing in 2196, he will be the first person able to celebrate his own memorial holiday.

9610.12

On the spur of the moment, a whim out of the blue, they loaded the Ranger with camping gear and headed to Laughlin just for Laughs. Due to the Pat Benatar concert every room in Laughlin was booked, so they had to stay on the more expensive Arizona side in Bullhead City, \$55, about \$25 more than prices in Nevada. The room was spacious enough to throw a sizable orgy, as long as most participants didn't require a bed. The motel style was more practical for moving things into the room so they didn't disappear, and rides across the river were free.

The road, US 93 to I-40 to AZ-68, was scenic but 2 lanes most of the way, lined with white crosses commemorating those dead from unwise passing. If you don't pass wisely, you may pass on. While visually they seemed to go up and down hills, the Ranger knew there was a long climb. It did not complain, though, keeping a cool head and pumping its 4 pistons with smooth powerful strokes all the way to the peak. Joshua trees, iron-tipped mountains, shapely rock piles, precariously balanced boulders, hills dotted with spears of saguaro.

They stopped at Nothing. A cage of rattlers, a gift shop, convenience store, towing service, and gas station, all in one. It was efficiently run by the town's population of 4. Asked about a bumpersticker, the old man said, "They've been ordered, but they're gone now. They were right here," pointing to a bumpersticker-sized empty space in the glass case. Clearly, they were gone. Michael bought a Nothing hat.

Kingman is notably treeless, except for a very few obviously planted and watered, standing in ruler-straight evenly spaced rows. On the outskirts is a golf course, and its bright green watered grass contrasts like neon with the dry rocky sand that is the norm. Perhaps such harsh desolate land alters the

mood of the precarious tilting mind of such as the Oklahoma City bomber. How appropriate that he used fertilizer as bomb material.

Of course the desert, even in its extremes, has a natural beauty that, left unmolested, can be admired by anyone who can separate the pure aesthetics from the question of whether the area would be a good place to live.

The Colorado river is so picturesque one might suspect the casino moguls of tinting the water and hiring actors to boat or ski it. Folks are mighty friendly and helpful to a public which continues to, by the laws of chance, lose vast amounts of money to be spread among the smiling providers of hope for lucky wealth.

They took time out from the pursuit of major coin return to cover themselves in olive oil and test their lubricated skin friction. It had a beneficial effect on the experience. Sunday, they crossed the Colorado to the other Riverside, where a room in the high-rise was \$17.95. Parking varlets, boys of the bell, and punoramic views. The original Laughlin casino/hotel began in 1966 with 8 rooms by Don Laughlin. If you can get lots of people to give you a quarter, it adds up.

Though the settings are luxurious, there seems to be no snobbery or affectation as is often the case in big hotels, where a pretentious staff tries to impress pretentious guests to justify huge rates. All the Laughlin casino hotels seem to recognize that it is not the self-indulgent rich who make them successful, but the hundreds of thousands of regular people who come for a day or two of fun.

9611

Ken Devries, the classic dispatcher (the Ken-bird), died on 9611.09 at age 53. He was dispatching when Michael started driving in 1983. His voice was perfect for the job. It came through the radio loud, clear, and authoritative, when the signal was good. He never had to actually shout when delivering his lectures on cabdriving as he saw it, or criticizing a real or imagined error by a driver. No one could infuriate like he could, especially when he accused wrongly, jumping to conclusions when a customer was not picked up. But he was one of the few who actually cared whether calls were covered and drivers played by the rules. Though he often picked on drivers, he was not contemptuous of them as management often was. He dispatched with the confidence of one who knew his job and his ability. May he 10-7 in peace.

*Tongue may speak,
Bold or meek
And the ears, of course, they listen
The tongue, it slips
Across the lips
And moistened, they will glisten.
Words may entice
And melt the ice;
Her hands are on his ears
His tongue aims true
She guides him, too,
And he will let her steer.*

Shari had been working for some time as a driver for Hertz car rentals, moving the returned cars to where they were cleaned and inspected, and then driving them back to the available lot at the airport. It paid reasonably well, but was not especially challenging.

Then she had an opportunity to work as a home health care aide for Hospice of the Valley, a nonprofit run by the widow of Barry Goldwater. She had taken some nursing assistant courses at Scottsdale Community College, and was interested in the profession.

As it turned out, she was good at the work, able to treat the dying patients with compassion without becoming excessively attached to them. The job was no longer simply going to work and returning, but driving to homes, often two or more in a day, being paid for her travel miles. Work times varied from day to day. Some of the patients saddened her more than others; some of them had longer before their expected end than others, and those with pleasing personalities, or younger than average ages, would be missed most.

Michael had been a Yellow Cab owner-operator for several years. The advantage to owning the car was that the amount paid to the company each week was less, not leasing the car itself, but still paying a fee for dispatching, insurance, and the company name. He selected his relief drivers and charged them a lease for each shift. He could set his own schedule, and pick his own cab number. That was 203. He called it the Cosmic Cab.

He made car payments to Yellow Cab until the purchase was paid off, usually 2 years. If the car lasted longer, there would be an extra cost savings for a while before another had to be bought.

The disadvantage was having to do his own maintenance, which most of the time was routine parts replacement. He was adept at doing that. He made a habit of saving about \$50 a week toward a repair fund, so it would be available when needed. There were nights he had to spend under the car in the driveway in the rain turning wrenches, and hot sunny days leaning over the engine, but he had good luck with the first 2 cars he owned.

Yellow bought cars from rental companies, usually with about 40,000 miles on them, and sold them to their owner-operators. That was the most affordable system for most. The 1984 to '86 mid-sized Fords and Mercuries were quite well-built and dependable.

The third 203 was a different story. It should have been an upgrade, a full-sized Crown Victoria that looked and felt more luxurious than the first two. For a time it was a pleasure to drive, and appreciated by the customers. But the company mechanics had done a sloppy repair before selling it to Michael, and the engine began to wear prematurely, getting worse by the week.

About this time a habit that Shari developed began to hamper Michael's cab maintenance seriously. She would dip into his saved repair fund when she needed extra money, promising to pay it back, but never doing so. When cab problems got expensive, there was too little left to pay for them.

She believed her own needs were more important, seeing herself as a provider of meaningful compassion to the dying, which was surely better than giving rides to the living. Having to drive to patients' homes, she traded her Ford Escort for a new Ranger. It was indeed a better vehicle, but it came with a steep monthly payment that strained their budget.

Shari had been able to handle working daily with dying people, probably better than many would. Then, her adopted mother died. The death of strangers, even pleasant ones, was nothing to compare with that of a mother, adopted or not. The combination depressed her. When she finally agreed to seek help, she was diagnosed with clinical depression and prescribed an antidote. By that time, though, the behavior the depression had caused had become hard to reverse.

Michael had to finally give up on the smoky Crown Vic and managed to get a mid-sized Olds. He had used some creative innovations on the Ford. It had worn rings and poor compression, resulting in the odd habit whenever it decelerated of spewing crankcase oil out the dipstick tube and all over the engine, including the hot exhaust manifold, causing clouds of black smoke.

Michael's solution was to attach a hose to the dipstick tube, the other end into a half-gallon can. The oil would squirt into the can on deceleration, but when accelerating the oil would be sucked back in. It was brilliant: less oil consumption, and no smoke. That worked for a few months before he had to park it in the back yard and buy the Olds.

Most of the calls a cabdriver gets are dispatched over the radio. A skillful and courteous driver like Michael could add regular personal customers too. They could request him through the dispatcher, or call him on a pager. Then, someone invented the cellphone. The early ones came in big bags with heavy batteries and were quite expensive, but they could be worth the cost for a driver with personal customers. People would rather just call a driver than wait for a callback from a page.

Four drivers who worked the north side of town began a scheme to corner all the airport runs out of 2 or 3 hotels. Yellow would disapprove, but they didn't have to know. The main schemer was Bob Frost, who was always looking for an angle. Michael participated and made good money for a while. Then Frost bought a van and started taking most of the fares for himself.

Before long, Frost the finagler had started his own company, using his van and a number of owner-operators with Lincolns or other semi-luxury cars. He continued paying bellhops at hotels to call him rather than a cab or other transportation company. Eventually he had enough drivers and trips to rent a dispatch office. He asked Michael to work for him as a dispatcher. About that time, Michael's fourth 203, the Oldsmobile, had become unusable. He had been driving various other owner-operator cabs that were less than optimal. The opportunity seemed worthwhile. Michael knew Greater Phoenix very well, and had been self-publishing his Cosmic Cabdrivers' Guide for several years, selling it to other drivers. It contained lists of bars, restaurants, hotels, and other places of interest, as well as useful navigational information. So, in September of 1997, he took the job.

Michael enjoyed dispatching, using his years of driving experience in a new way. Frost was not easy to work for, though. He was easily angered when things didn't go as planned, and liked to blame anyone but himself for his mistakes. And he was never able to pronounce the word, "specific".

Frost also made the mistake of contracting to transport airline flight crews to and from hotels. Other companies have tried that as well. It seems like a steady business, but causes constant scheduling problems and invariably conflicts with regular customer calls. In addition, airlines are notoriously slow about paying their service providers.

9-97 to 3-98 *Frosted*

Finally, in March of 1998, Michael and Frost parted ways. Instead of returning to Yellow, Michael discovered a new cab company to drive for-- TLC, located in Glendale. The "TL" stood for Tom and Laura, not Tender Loving, but they did seem to emphasize better customer-friendly service than Yellow, Courier, Discount, or Ace. The cars were older and more varied in kind. At one point they acquired several compact cars-- Hondas, Hyundais, Kias, and even one Daewoo. They were fine for most trips, economical, and pleasant to drive. TLC's base was close enough to Michael's house that he could usually bicycle to work.

What do Juneau?

July 1 - 13, 1998

Suddenly, one summer, there was a cruise to Alaska. The Lightfeet decide it would be a good idea to take the entire family on a Princess cruise to the 49th state. This included Michael and Shari, as well as Heidi and Bill and their spouses and their children.

7/1-- They flew Alaska airlines, an MD-80 plane. It was crowded and seemed noisier than most. The flight stopped in Seattle, then Anchorage, where they changed planes to a B-737 for the flight to Fairbanks, where they checked in the Wedgewood Resort. The rooms were actually apartments with fully equipped kitchens, but they wouldn't be staying that long. Fairbanks, in the middle of the state, has 84,000 people.

7/2-- It was a gold mine. A tourist version, where they set up a sluice system, using astroturf to catch the gold. Everyone panned about \$5 worth of gold flakes-- planned panning. Then came the riverboat. It was a large modern sternwheel with a hydraulic drive, that took them on a pleasant trip up the river. With 22 hours of daylight in the summer, there's time to get everything done before dark.

7/3-- A bus took them to Denali Park, to check in the Denali Princess. Visible from there is Denali, the correct name for Mt. McKinley. President McKinley never even visited Alaska, and didn't deserve the honor.

From there an animal tour began, boarding an old school bus that followed a loop, looking for moose, caribou, grizzly bears, and other photogenic wildlife. An occasional critter reared its head, but most went into hiding when the bus approached.

7/4-- After resting up from the safari, enjoying the jacuzzi, they toured the famous oil pipeline. Part of it runs above ground, so as not to melt the underground permafrost. The sections are supported on teflon slides to allow for expansion and contraction. The pipeline could deliver over 2.1 megabarrels in a day, moving at 5.4 MPH for 800 miles.

7/5-- Riding that train from Fairbanks to Anchorage was one of the best parts. It runs through nearly wilderness area, few roads and villages, and miles and miles of lush green forest. The train had domed

double deck cars, with booth seating on top and dining are below. Then there were open-air observation platforms, with smoking allowed..

The hotel in Anchorage was the Captain Cook, billed as the finest, with a gym, jacuzzi, and internet-connected computer room. They exaggerated. The gym and jacuzzi closed at 10 PM, and the charge for the computer room was \$22 an hour. The rooms were rather ordinary, and to even buy a can of soda one had to leave the hotel and find a vendor down the street.

7/6-- It was time to board the Big Boat. First, a bus ride to Seward, then hop on the Sky Princess, 46,000 tons, and 789 feet long. It holds 1200 passengers. It featured free room service, spas, a casino, stores and bars. The rooms were pleasant and comfortable, though compact, each with a round porthole to see out. The stewardess was Dana from Romania.

7/7-- First the passengers became Fjord Explorers, cruising the College Fjord.

7/8-- They cruised the Yakutat Bay, looking for glaciers, icebergs, and whales. That evening the dining room was "formal only", an anachronistic practice that only made informal passengers like Michael decline to attend. Shari tried to talk him into suiting, but to no avail.

7/9-- The boat stopped at Skagway, which had once been a boom town during the gold rush. Only 800 people remained, earning a living from the tourists. The whores of yesteryear who had pleased the miners were long gone. Skagway means 'home of the north wind'.

7/10-- Juneau, the capital, cannot be reached by auto-- there are no roads in and out. That cuts down on car theft in the town. It holds 30,000 people, making it the third largest city. It rains a lot-- 74 inches a year. It was founded by Joe Juneau, you know. The Mendenhall glacier is 13 miles away, 3000+ years old, 200 feet high, and 3 miles wide

7/11-- The rain can be caught at Ketchikan, 160 inches a year. At 23,700 people, it's the 4th largest city. The original residents were Tlingit Indians. In the early 1900's, gold & copper were discovered; the town became a supply center, and during the mid-1930's it became the major salmon-packing center of the world. There are large collections of totem poles to be seen.

7/12-- From there the ship sailed south on a calm sea. There was a bingo night at the ship's casino, where Michael won about \$600.

7/13-- At Vancouver the voyage was over. They could only get glimpses through the window on the bus ride from there to Seattle, where an America West plane waited to take them back to Phoenix.

September 25, 1998

Not quite 3 years after the wedding, Michael and Shari revisited the scene of the crime: Seven Springs. It was not to undo it, though perhaps it should have been.

They followed once again the long and winding road at the end of Cave Creek, its bumps and rocks easier to negotiate in the Ranger. It would be a temporary escape from daily routine, perhaps to improve their communication. Just gaining an awareness of one another as part of a partnership of love, sex, and practical matters instead of individuals at seeming cross-purposes at times, might have been enough. At that point they both thought the disharmony could be fixed. It didn't seem that serious, and the solutions should not have been too complicated. Time would tell.

January 1999

A new opportunity appeared-- dispatching at a company called Eagle Livery. That referred not to the organ often served sauteed with onions, but a transportation company named with a western flair. It might be a stable employer, Michael thought. It had a fleet of luxury sedans and a couple of limousines with suited drivers, specializing in hotel to airport trips and some regular clients who wanted nicer rides than taxicabs.

The owner, Dennis, had started the company by expanding his father's company, Carefree Cab, which had operated in Cave Creek and Carefree, a pair of residential communities with mostly wealthy retirees. It was a friendly office, run by Dennis and his wife, one secretary, and a couple of dispatchers in two shifts. There were several drivers, but two were more senior, more experienced, named Don and Jed. The secretary was Jed's sister, and Don's girlfriend. Later, it became evident that the best calls were being funneled to Don and Jed, but by then there were other, more serious problems.

For some time, all was well. Business was getting better, and it was an enjoyable place to work. The Eagle was flying. About 3 months later, though, a crisis became known. Its cause was none other than the scam artist Bob Frost. Michael didn't know Eagle had any dealings with him, but at one time Frost had claimed he was quitting transportation and sold Eagle his customer accounts and forwarded his phone numbers to Eagle's. A few months later, Bob suddenly changed his mind, un-forwarded the phones, and took his former customers back, including major hotel accounts. He kept the money they had paid him. It was a con he had planned all along.

Suddenly revenue dropped, and Dennis was scrambling to find new accounts, not an easy task. In a couple of months they were unable to afford the office rent and bills. Dispatching got moved to Dennis's home in Scottsdale, and Michael started covering the night shift from home with forwarded phones and emailing reservation data back to base.

Jed and Don were supposed to be helping find new accounts. Instead, they were conspiring to take the business that was left, along with the remaining drivers, and make a deal with Yellow Cab's owner, Arnett, to form a limo/sedan subsidiary of his company called Legacy Transportation. They, with the help of Jed's sister the secretary, actually stole the Rolodex full of Eagle's customer contacts. They also stole 2-way radios, and had Eagle phone lines turned off, and were overheard bragging about their ruthless theft.

Finally, in July, Michael's paycheck bounced. They promised to make it good, but that never happened. Eagle declared bankruptcy. Wages should have been paid anyway, but filing with the court accomplished nothing. Time to move on.

Michael returned to TLC and began driving again for the next 5 months. It was a friendly company most of the time, but its lower meter rates attracted lower-income customers who could not afford generous tips, if they tipped at all. The income from the average shift was meager. Tom and Laura were a couple, though not married, and when one cheated on the other it would affect the atmosphere and management in a negative way.

December 1999

Drivers who had joined Arnett's sedan service began to learn that it was not nearly as good a deal as they hoped. That company was used to exploiting cab drivers, and had no more respect for luxury chauffeurs. One of them, Tony Hermiz, decided to start his own company, acquired a small fleet of Lincoln Towncars and got several other drivers to join him. He bought Legacy Transportation from Arnett. Tony asked Michael to dispatch for him.

In the past, orders were taken on paper tickets, which were then used to dispatch the calls. Computers were used to keep records and for accounting. Legacy began using computers increasingly to enter orders for dispatching. They began trying out a dispatching program called FASTTRAK on a pair of networked computers. At first, it seemed usable, despite annoying little quirks such as required fields in the call-entry form that were often irrelevant. But soon it began to hang up for minutes at a time whenever when entering calls, and the author himself couldn't figure it out. Fast Eddie, the author, had designed his program for the sedate pace of a small limo company, and failed to include any flexibility FASTTRAK had an archiving feature to store everything before a certain date separately. Unfortunately, it refused to RETRIEVE that stored data again. Since it was obvious that FASTTRAK wasn't worth paying \$1100 for, Michael proceeded to write an alternative in MS ACCESS. He called it RD4. Legacy began using it It was much faster and friendlier.

A mistake that some transportation companies have made is to contract with airline companies to take their crews to and from hotels. Though it may seem like steady business, airline crews tend to be rude and demanding passengers, and the companies are notoriously slow to pay their bills, sometimes not for several months. Meanwhile, drivers, employees, and rent must be paid.

Like Frost before him, Tony tried that for awhile. Once he got rid of the crew, things got better. Business steadily increased, and the fleet grew to over 20 cars. Jed, the thief and trickster was still around, and Bob Frost again; there were problems, but things were looking up.

Early one morning, while phones were quiet and there were few calls to dispatch. Michael was playing online computer games on a site called Pogo, that allowed players to chat as well, about sports, news, or life in general. There were several regulars. Suddenly, someone typed, "Oh, my God! A plane just struck the World Trade Center!" The morning was September 11, 2001.

Of course, everyone thought it was a terrible accident for a few minutes, until the second plane hit. Then it became clear that life would be different for some time to come. All flights were grounded at first. When the schedules were resumed, many had lost interest in flying. Conventions were canceled. Dozens canceled reservations for airport pickups. The fate of those four flights was on the minds of many. People who traveled routinely for business or pleasure, stopped.

Legacy didn't last long after that.

As Tony's company trickled down the drain, another was starting up, run by a couple. They were going for more local customers, not the hotels and airport pickups that Legacy had depended on. While intercity travel was at a minimum, the wealthy of Scottsdale and other posh areas were going out, having weddings and parties just as they always had. They called it Star Night.

They had rented a nice office space in a small complex at Cave Creek and Peoria, on the second floor, and they asked the newly unemployed Michael to dispatch for them, and also to set up a small computer network in the office, and configure his dispatch database program for them.

It was an interesting and challenging project, though not that complicated. He enjoyed the prospect of helping a new company to succeed, which it might have. For about 3 months it looked like it would, if they could build up enough customers to pay the bills and Michael's salary. But, by the end of the year they had to lay him off, after he had done all the set-up work.

Then it was back to driving at TLC Taxi for nearly two more years.

July 3, 2002

When they started TLC, Tom, Laura, and Cathy had another partner named Ivan. It was to be called TILC. They all thought this was a great idea until Laura noticed what the top-signs would look like in the rearview mirror. Ivan thought it would stimulate interest, and help them lick the competition. However, Laura would not agree, so Ivan split.

July 5, 2002

From an overheard conversation:

“On the fifth after the fourth, I fly to the Forth of Firth with Fritz and Fitz. I go forth furtively, after a fitting at the pharmacy. My singing coach told me to breathe from my diaphragm. I tried, but he said I was doing it wrong.”

July 16, 2002

Shari turned 40.

This would indicate that she was born in 1962, 16 years after Michael. Did that difference matter? It hadn't, but small incompatibilities seemed to become evident as time passed.

“I'm glad I lived this long, but I'd rather have stayed younger while doing it.”

Filling Up

A sultry summer breeze mussed her hair and billowed the flimsy loose fabric of her blouse, except where it stretched snugly over her round breasts. The fringes on the bottom of her short denim cutoffs danced merrily, tickling her thighs.

Her small hand reached the parked pump-nozzle, lifting it from its cradle. Holding the handle aloft, she unscrewed the plastic gas cap. The tank took a deep breath of fresh air. Carefully, the feminine hand guided the steel tip into the naked opening, pushing back the small round flap, thrusting the tube in as far as it would go.

She squeezed the trigger and sent fuel gushing into the empty tank. The long black hose began to quiver and throb with the flow of the liquid within. She raised her head and brushed strands of hair away from her face, glancing around the station. Several men were pumping gas as well. When she looked, some of them pretended not to be watching her, while others continued to gaze. One man grinned as he stared admiringly, stroking his beard.

She smiled without intending to, suddenly aware of the attention she had innocently drawn. The morning sun seemed warmer now. Perspiration added a glow of moisture to her forehead.

Without thinking, she leaned slightly so that the pulsing hose pressed gently against her upper thigh. It was an intriguing rhythm, but too soon the flow trickled to a stop. With a sigh, she pulled out the drained nozzle and hung it up. Screwing on the cap, the woman looked around for the grinning man with the beard. He was gone. She remembered he was fueling a small white taxi.

There were, in mid 2002, signs that the course of marriage was running less smooth than optimal.